

***To Build or Not to Build***  
***Rabbi Steven Moskowitz***

This evening I begin my sermon with a poem  
    There is a candle in your heart,  
        ready to be kindled.  
    There is a void in your soul,  
        ready to be filled.  
    You feel it, don't you?  
    You feel the separation  
        from your beloved God.  
    Invite God to fill you up,  
        embrace the fire.  
    Remind those who tell you otherwise that  
        Love  
        comes to you of its own accord,  
        and the yearning for it  
        cannot be learned in any school.

A beautiful poem of love, and of love for God. It speaks my language. It re-awakens my yearnings for God. It is not a Jewish poem

These words were instead written by the great 13<sup>th</sup> century Muslim poet, Rumi. It is he who is considered the spiritual father of Sufi Islam, the mystical and contemplative branch of Islam practiced by Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf. This of course is the leader who plans on building an Islamic cultural center and mosque near ground zero.

I exist in a world where I can learn from all, even those whose beliefs don't mirror my own and even those with whom I disagree. I can read as well the poetry of TS Eliot and find myself moved.

    What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
    Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
    You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
    A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
    And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
    And the dry stone no sound of water. Only  
    There is shadow under this red rock,  
    (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
    And I will show you something different from either  
    Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
    Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
    I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

This is from “The Waste Land.” Eliot is an extraordinary poet. I find that he still speaks to my struggles, and my hope for an ordered world in a disordered land, despite the fact that he was most clearly an anti-Semite. I can read the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest, Denise Levertov or Emily Dickinson and learn from all. I can read Hafiz, the great Persian poet, as well as the Tanya, the seminal text of Lubavitch Hasidism and find meaning in both their writings. Such is the mixture of my life and our lives in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

I also live in a world where there are those who believe that they have nothing to learn from others, or from other cultures and faiths. They of course believe they have all the answers, and that they alone have the cornerstone on truth, most especially religious truth.

And I live as well in a world where there are some who want me dead because of their view of truth and because of my embrace of religious pluralism.

Such are my times. And such is our conflict. Such is what we must speak about this Yom Kippur evening.

I promised you that I would speak about the proposed mosque near ground zero, and I will fulfill that promise. This evening I will speak about both the pros and cons of this proposal, and of course in the end offer you my verdict on the project. The nature of a sermon is that I get to render judgments. I hope and pray these judgments and pronouncements are the beginning of your discussions, not the end. If but one of these arguments finds their way into your thoughts then the exercise is not futile.

I do not think that anything so emotional or complex is one sided and easily categorized and labeled. So let me here explore both sides. There is something for everyone to agree with and to disagree with. So hang on. Some advice: if you are con open your ears to the pros and if you are pro then listen more carefully to the cons.

First the pros. I don't very much like labels—liberal, conservative, moderate—but Imam Feisal is one of the good guys in our battle with radical Islam. We would do well to support those Muslims who are willing to stand with us in this struggle.

I quote from his website:

The events of 9/11 were horrific. What happened that day was terrorism, and it shames us that it was cloaked in the guise of Islam. It was inhumane, un-Islamic and is indefensible regardless of one's religious persuasion. Not only Americans but also all Muslims are threatened by the lies and actions being perpetrated by these self-serving extremists and their perverted view of Islam.

The community center will be a platform to amplify the voices of the overwhelming majority of Muslims whose love for America and commitment to peace gets drowned out by the actions of a few extremists. It will become a platform where the voices of those who resist religious extremism and terrorism can be amplified and celebrated.

I don't agree with every word of this statement. My view is that there are more than a few extremists. But one of my greatest complaints is that there is an exceedingly large silent majority within Islam who refuses to denounce terrorism perpetrated in its name. Well here is one who is unafraid and vocal. We would do well to stand by his side.

I don't believe his intention is a victory mosque as some have dubbed it. I believe he wants to expand his present building—which no longer serves his community's needs and purposes (Sound familiar?). Most importantly he wants to create a stage to transform Islam.

I object to some of his statements. I most certainly wish he denounced as forcefully terrorism committed against Israel and Israelis. For me the 9-11 terrorists grow from the same ideological weeds. Yet I am grateful for his public support of the State of Israel. I am thankful that he recently announced that he would reveal the sources of his funding.

My disagreements with Imam Feisal are with someone who is willing to sit at the table with me. Disagreements do not make enemies. We dare not confuse these matters. Our enemies are those who wish us dead.

I need not be friends with everyone. I need not agree with everyone. But we can disagree without calling each other enemies.

The vision of America that I most in love with is one of religious pluralism. We cannot stand in the way of someone who wishes to teach his faith and his beliefs, especially when it is a faith of peace and dialogue—not one of hate and death.

The president is right when he reminds us that we are not at war with Islam. Our failure to make this distinction could prove to be our undoing.

Let's stop circulating emails claiming Obama is really a Muslim. That is shameful! He has told us what his faith is. He identifies as a Christian. Take issue with his policies—there is ample to discuss and disagree with there. Debate his views. Criticize his leadership. Leave his faith out. He is what he says he is; he believes what he says believes. We as Jews should understand the dangers of speaking about secret beliefs. I understand that some don't trust our president. But be careful how that distrust is expressed.

About the Koran and its problematic passages. Imam Feisal gets to pick and choose which verses of the Koran he wishes to emphasize. I expect him to allow me to do the same with my Torah. My enemies are those who emphasize these hateful verses not those who de-emphasize them. I cannot ascribe to him the Koran's verses of intolerance if he does not claim them, just as I don't expect others to attach similar verses of the Torah to me.

We also need to ask: where do the boundaries of ground zero end? The proposed site is only two blocks from ground zero. Does it extend ten blocks? Does it extend to midtown? To the East Side? At a certain block, faith in America ends and bigotry begins. Some might claim,

“New York was attacked—there should be no mosque in Manhattan!” Others, “America was attacked—no mosque in Tennessee!”

Where do the boundaries begin and end? To what block does ground zero extend? To my mind, these boundaries are not geographical, but ideological. When we are fighting radical, jihadist Islam we have every right to prevent such people from gathering and teaching. We do not however have the right to prevent every Muslim from gathering—only those who have made war on us.

But the unfortunate fact is that the overwhelming majority of terrorists who attack Americans claim to be Muslims and attack us in the name of Islam. So we must learn to make distinctions between Sufi and Sunni, Shiite and Wahhabi, Al Qaeda and the poet Rumi.

It was for example known for years that Hasan, the US army major who murdered 13 people at Fort Hood, was becoming increasingly radicalized and flirting with jihadist Muslim ideas. Our inability to deal directly with this and get him out of the army is part of the problem. It is political correctness gone mad. We have to learn to make distinctions between our enemies and their co-religionists, between good and evil. This is our obligation!

It is not all Muslims, even though our enemies do come from this faith. The weeds must be discerned from the green grass.

I assume that by now many of my conservative friends are saying to themselves, “He is so naïve.” You might even be composing your emails to me. So let me beat you to it. Let me now upset my liberal friends, and give everyone equal and fair treatment. And then perhaps by my conclusion maybe all will agree—at least, I hope. But that’s not the point. The point of this exercise is to make you think, and make you say to yourself, “Maybe I don’t have it all figured out.” Of course the gift of giving a sermon is that I get to stand up here and say, “I have it all figured out.”

The cons. Imam Feisal claims that if he doesn’t build his center, then this will give fuel to jihadists. This is a false claim. We should build it or not build it based on what is best for us.

Our mere existence is a threat to Al Qaeda. Who and what we are, is what they hate. It does not matter whether we build a mosque or not.

America was not attacked by Jewish terrorists or Irish terrorists or the Tamil Tigers. We were attacked by Muslim terrorists. While I applaud and thank God for the few Muslims who forcefully speak out against their co-religionists, I remain exasperated that there are not more. I still find it unbelievable that millions of Muslims will protest a cartoon depicting Mohammed, but murder committed in their names goes seemingly unnoticed. I understand and feel their anger at the proposed Koran burning—the Florida pastor is a shameful example of the title clergy—but why are there not more protests of the burning and stoning of Muslims by other Muslims?

In Saudi Arabia, several years ago (in 2002), young girls were allowed to burn in a school because the religious police prevented firemen from rescuing them for fear that there would be inappropriate mixing of the sexes and prevented some girls from escaping because they were not wearing appropriate dress. Only two years ago in Somalia a young girl was stoned to death in front of thousands for pleading guilty to adultery.

As much as our wars and mistakes in Afghanistan and Iraq have led to the deaths of innocents, and as much as Israel has sometimes killed innocent Muslims, there is still far more violence and murder of Muslims by Muslims. By contrast the United States and especially Israel investigates alleged abuses of power by their armies. Far more Iraqis now die at the hands of suicide bombings perpetrated by their fellow Iraqis.

Protest that! While you are at it cut the power to that Gainesville pastor's church and especially to the TV trucks and media crews parked nearby. Don't amplify his hate! In this country he may be able to say whatever he wants—no matter how stupid and hate filled. But let's not broadcast it!

I believe Imam Feisal (and my friend Sultan) that these extreme examples are not representative of Islam. But I want to see more Muslims standing up and calling their brethren to task. Since we ask this of Muslims we better live this each and every day as Americans. We must stand up for our friends wherever and whenever racist remarks are hurled at them. Because this does not represent the US of A and we must loudly proclaim, "This is not America!"

I long for more examples of Muslim tolerance. Why are there not millions of Muslims protesting these many horrific acts done in the name of their faith? Why is there not even mention of the fact that Saudi Arabia bans non-Muslims from entering Mecca and Medina?

I say to the Muslim world (as if they might listen to a rabbi), "Better to look inside than out. Better to examine yourselves than others!"

Another point about liberal political correctness. It serves no purpose to search elderly women at airports. If a young, Middle Eastern looking man is carrying a large back pack and sweating under its weight he should be stopped for more questioning. (Not very pc, rabbi.) Let me tell you a story. That was once me. When I first visited Israel I was a young 21 year old man, sporting a very dark tan (and significantly more hair). I had managed to stuff into my gigantic hiking pack nearly a year's worth of clothes. I was nearly strip searched by Israeli security. Apparently I looked like the Phantom. (That is a Zohan reference to compliment last week's about Pretty Woman.)

I was very upset and nervous at the time. But I did not have anything to hide. I understood that it was done for my protection. It is not racism for TSA officers or the police to question someone who looks or acts suspiciously.

Our failure to call our current war by its proper name makes us unable to make important moral distinctions. It is not a war against terror but a war against Islamic fundamentalism. It is against Muslims who subscribe to this radical and murderous ideology, but not against all of Islam.

Finally the name: Cordoba. Apparently the name has been changed to Park51 but the center is under the rubric of the Cordoba Initiative. So let me tell you a bit about Cordoba.

Cordoba, Spain was once a great cultural center, where Islam and Jewish philosophy, as well as Jewish and Muslim poetry flourished alongside each other. In 1148, the year the great Moses Maimonides became a bar mitzvah (by the way, history does not record who the caterer was), his city of Cordoba was invaded by fanatical Muslims, the Almohades. They presented the Jews, and all non-Muslims, with a choice: conversion or death. Maimonides and his family fled Spain, never to return again.

For the leaders of Cordoba House, they hear in their name the flourishing of Islamic culture in an open, worldly, and perhaps even pluralistic society, one that by the way continues to influence Jewish philosophy and poetry to this day, but one that sadly collapsed in bloodshed, religious extremism and intolerance. To my Jewish ears I hear in Cordoba the trauma of my hero's childhood. I hear him wandering for years before finally settling in Cairo over ten years later.

Cordoba did not start off on a fanatical note. But it did end up there. I have trouble wading through the traumatic ending to find that bright beginning.

But even the beginning is problematic. Because Cordoba represents a view of interfaith relations that flourishes under benevolent Muslim rule. It was a place where a Muslim ruler allowed the flourish of other cultures and religions; these faiths were not on equal footing. And that is not America's vision.

Let's change the name. Let's change the location. The few blocks surrounding ground zero have become sacred ground. They have become sanctified by death and sacrifice. Near ground zero let's only embrace the religious diversity that is the hallmark of America. Only a truly American interfaith center would be appropriate at this place. Only that would be a fitting memorial to those who died on 9-11.

Part of our difficulty is that we do not yet have such a fitting memorial. We have not adequately mourned. The enormity of 9-11 is still difficult to fathom. We have not yet appropriately memorialized this day and event.

Instead we went to war. Going after Al Qaeda in Afghanistan was justified. Passing up the opportunity to root out bin Laden from the caves of Tora Bora was unconscionable. We went to war and failed to rebuild and adequately memorialize. We went to war and in the process forgot to heal ourselves. This is why this Cordoba Initiative is so unsettling and controversial.

In conclusion the only solution to this current controversy is the pope's solution. (Bet you never heard that conclusion for a rabbi's sermon. Start with a Muslim poet and end with a pope. And you will most likely never hear that again.) Here's why the pope has the answer.

Years ago Pope John Paul decided after much controversy to prevent Carmelite nuns from building a convent at Auschwitz. Jews perceived the nuns' desire as an attempt to Christianize the Holocaust. But the nuns wanted to build at Auschwitz I where thousands of Polish Catholics were murdered. Over one million Jews were instead murdered at Auschwitz II-Birkenau. This was Auschwitz II's sole purpose. Several kilometers separated the two camps. (I am indebted to my teacher Yossi Klein Halevi for pointing out these facts.)

Poles saw this difference; Jews were unable to see this distinction, myself included. Auschwitz is Auschwitz—I, II or even III. Ground zero is ground zero. The Polish pope however agreed with his countrymen. He of course did not see the world through Jewish eyes.

Nonetheless he stopped the building of the convent. He told the nuns to move. He felt it was his primary role to be a pursuer of peace. He was sensitive to the feelings of others, even when he felt the facts suggested otherwise.

This is similar to what Imam Feisal should do and say. He should stand up and say, "I am a man of peace. I believe Islam is a religion of peace. It pains me that many of my co-religionists defame the essence of my faith. It pains me that where I see the building of peace, others see pain and suffering. Because of this I have decided to transform my original particular vision for the center into one that truly embraces all faiths found here in this great land. Let us together build an interfaith center."

This is what I hope he would say. My dream for ground zero is a decidedly American dream: an interfaith center that embraces all faiths. Let Imam Feisal even be its leader. Let him invite every leading faith to contribute to its building.

Let it then be a place where people can celebrate the concluding feast of Ramadan as well as a place where others can dance the hora and still others sing Christmas carols. That seems the only appropriate faith center for this decidedly American place of ground zero. Not a new synagogue, or a new church, or a new mosque, but a truly American house of meeting, learning and prayer.

That being said, the only solution is one that comes from Cordoba House's leadership. We dare not manipulate our American laws to prevent them from building. That would be a betrayal of American values. I hope and pray that Imam Feisal hears my pleas and responds to our worries and pain.

But it would be a terrible distortion of everything we hold dear to twist and contort our American laws to prevent him from gathering and building. We believe that all can gather to pray and worship, teach and feast. We dare not let fear of the other creep into our hearts.

I continue to believe that the only way to fight terror is in our hearts. If we allow hate and fear to creep in, then we have failed. Terrorism wins not by inflicting more deaths and even more injuries but by instilling fear into a society, and into people's souls. I don't have to rejoice about this project's proposal. But I dare not work to prevent it. That would be a betrayal of what this country represents.

One final example from Israel. Israel of course does not have everything right. But it has figured out how to sanctify life in the midst of terror and war. On Emek Refaim, a short distance from the apartment I rent, is a memorial to those killed in a bus bombing during the bloodiest of days of the second intifada. When I am there I often walk by this spot. The first time it took my breath away. It stopped me in my tracks.

I watched as the bus pulled up to unload passengers. I turned to see a simple stone, etched with the names of those murdered only a few short years ago. It is piled high with rocks, a few flowers, some notes and yahrtzeit candles. I stopped, touched the stones and then continued on my path to meet friends for dinner. The life of the city continues.

People who have never traveled to Jerusalem struggle to understand how there can be so much life where there was recently so much death.

The war on terror can only be won in our hearts. The war against Islamic fundamentalism must be waged on the battlefield. Confuse the two and we will not succeed. Fear and hatred of the other has no place in the Jewish soul.

We are commanded to love the stranger. Why? Because we were strangers in the land of Egypt and we know the feelings of the stranger. And this is what I choose to highlight in my Torah!

Whether there is an Islamic center or an interfaith center near ground zero is not the essence of our struggle. The real battle will always be won in our hearts.

To paraphrase the great American poet, TS Eliot: Let us not find "fear in a handful of dust."

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