

The Struggle Between Our Hearts and Our Minds
Rosh Hashanah Morning
September 9, 2010 / 1 Tishrei, 5771
Temple Emanu-El, Edison, NJ
Rabbi Deborah Bravo

This morning we read one of the most riveting, disturbing, and yet awe-inspiring tales in our Torah – the Akedah, or Binding of Isaac. In this story, we can visualize as Abraham is being commanded by God to take his precious, long sought after son Isaac, who came to Abraham and Sarah so late in life, to the top of Mount Moriah, where Abraham is to offer Isaac as a burnt-offering.

Now, I'm not going to debate with you whether or not Abraham should have followed God's command, for that would be a different sermon. Nor am I going to discuss with you where Sarah was in this whole story. Again – another sermon. But imagine for a moment the emotion that Sarah must have felt as she wished them good-bye and sent them off on their journey. Imagine the pain she must have had in her heart, thinking she would never see her son, her precious only child, ever again. And imagine the pain of Abraham – being the one to lead his son up the mountain, for the ultimate sacrifice. Any parent, any human being who cares about others, can only begin to imagine the emotion twisted into this act.

And yet, despite their emotions, Sarah sends the two up the mountain, and Abraham does as God commands him. In his mind, Abraham feels this is right, this is just. Perhaps he feels that this was Isaac's purpose in life – I'm not sure. But I am certain that Abraham and Sarah must have been pulled between their hearts and their heads, and they ultimately followed their heads. They were put to the ultimate test, but in many ways, no different from the tests you and I are put to each and every day of our lives.

Making decisions is not easy for many of us. We are often pulled in so many directions. We balance the needs of others with the needs of ourselves. We balance the influences of strangers with the influences of family, friends, Judaism and our greater community. And we, too, like Abraham and Sarah, balance the

pull of our hearts with the knowledge and information in our minds. How important it is for us to understand and recognize HOW we make our decisions.

As parents, teachers or friends, we know this scenario all too well. When our child does something that just makes us crazy, the same something he or she has done one-hundred times before, we either respond instantly, often from an emotional place, and sometimes need to go back and fix it later, or we take a deep breath, step away, and allow our heads to guide our hearts. Neither is necessarily better – but we must know that we will probably get to the same place in the end, and perhaps the later is easier to rectify.

As you all have come to know me over the past number of years, you know that I am rather transparent as a rabbi, and I like to share with you in a direct way. So I share with you this morning that I don't remember the last time I struggled in such a way over a sermon. I have read, discussed, read some more, discussed some more, in preparation for this morning, and I, perhaps like Abraham and Sarah, am struggling to find the balance between the head and the heart, between the emotion and what I know to be right and just. This is not a political sermon – it applies to people of all sides, all backgrounds, and all circumstances. In my mind, this is the heart of who we are as Jews, and the struggle that comes with this connection for thousands of years. I ask of you this morning – try not to respond immediately. Listen to the stories, and the words, and the facts, and then find a way to let your heart meet your head in a comfortable place for you.

I want to share some thoughts with you this morning about the situation with the Mosque near Ground Zero, but really what I want to do is help us all to open our eyes and our ears to our feelings, and then help us make good decisions with what knowledge we have, as Jews and as Americans. I'm truly not interested in convincing you one way or the other as to whether or not there should be a Mosque near Ground Zero. You will gather from my comments that I, like the leadership of the Reform Jewish movement and many other religious leaders in our country, do support the building of this community center and Mosque. As was stated by Rabbis Yoffie and Saperstein on behalf of the Reform movement, “we strongly believe that Cordoba House's presence will reflect our nations' historic

commitment to religious liberty.”¹ But I am more interested in talking about process, and the importance of separating out fact, from fiction, from emotion.

First, when analyzing any situation, especially one that we are taking a strong stand on, I hope we have done our research, and checked our facts. Many people are responding to the Mosque near Ground Zero with pure emotion, and that is understandable. We all remember where we were when we heard that the planes were going into the World Trade Center. I imagine each of us knows someone who died that day, either a first responder or someone who worked in the Towers. And our city, our country, and our world have never been the same since 9/11. The controversy over the Mosque near Ground Zero has ignited in many of us memories that perhaps we have tucked away, or feelings that have been dormant for the past nine years.

However, I have been shocked, a shock I have not felt in many years, by the intolerance and prejudice I have heard and witnessed in response to this situation. As Rabbi Yoffie, president of the URJ, put it so eloquently, “The orgy of hate that I witness all around me leaves me stunned, ashamed, and angry... The principle that, as equals before God, we are responsible for our own actions and not the sins of others is not only a religious value but an American value and a foundation of our democracy. I am not fooled by the rationales of those who speak the language of intolerance. Their real argument is that all Muslims, and Islam itself, bear responsibility for the events of 9/11. But this assertion is an outrage – an affront to our country, our religious traditions, and common decency...”²

We know, I hope, in our minds that all Muslims are not terrorists. We also know that there are many Muslims who died in the World Trade Center Attack, by the hand of Muslim extremists, Muslims who worked next to Jews and Christians and Buddhists alike, in this great place we call America. We know from our history as Jews that time helps to heal wounds, but the wounds never disappear.

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Perhaps what you don't know is that Imam Feisal Abdul-Rauf, the president of the board for the Cordoba House and the leader of building this Mosque in downtown

¹ Press Release, Religious Action Center, New York, August 4, 2010.

² From Responses to Jewels of Elul VI, Letters to Jihad Turk, www.craignco.com/jewels/jewels2010.elul15.php

Manhattan, was the leader of a Mosque twelve blocks from Ground Zero for 27 years, and has chosen this location to reach out to his community and provide not only a space for them to pray, but a place for the entire community to learn and study tolerance together. Perhaps you don't know that the Imam and his wife have always been champions of pluralism and tolerance, that extends well beyond the 9/11 attacks. Perhaps you don't know that the funds for this project are only just beginning to be collected, after a new non-profit organization will be established, following all the guidelines our country has created for such an endeavor.

Perhaps you don't know that the Imam's wife, Daisy Kahn, is the founder of the American Society for Muslim Advancement, and their mission is to help Muslim women and youth to improve their lives within their communities through projects on contemporary issues. And she is, of course, a partner in this project with her husband. Perhaps you don't know that this mega complex, still in its early stages of thought, is designed with one floor to be a Mosque, and 12-14 other floors to be responding to the need in Lower Manhattan for more culture, education, social cohesion, community building, recreation and spiritual opportunities. Perhaps you do not realize that this effort is being supported fully by Community Board 1, which represents the residents of Lower Manhattan, as well as the September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows. And perhaps you did not know that "the name Cordoba House was chosen carefully to reflect a period of time during which Islam played a monumental role in the enrichment of human civilization and knowledge. A thousand years ago Muslims, Jews and Christians coexisted and created a prosperous center of intellectual, spiritual, cultural and commercial life in Cordoba Spain." ³

So once we have our facts straight, and I do encourage everyone to do their own research, and recognize that like every controversy in the United States of America, where we treasure freedom of press and freedom of speech, people's words are often taken out of context and individuals are misquoted and misrepresented on a regular basis, then be sure to examine our sources. If you lead your life by trusting your neighbor, or your family member or good friend, or even your Temple, the Reform Movement or your rabbi, then don't deviate from that path of learning and trust because your heart likes what is being said by someone

³ From Cordoba House website, www.cordobainitiative.org.

you have never trusted or quoted before, someone you will probably never turn to for guidance again.

One of the things that I love about our Temple Emanu-El community is how caring, concerned and sensitive we are. I think, as a whole, we are compassionate and thoughtful. And though we may chose to disagree on issues, we do it respectfully, and I know that your opinions are well thought out and in keeping with the way you lead your life.

Unfortunately, what I have seen, heard and felt over the past number of weeks has not been as representative of that community as one that is responding to pain and emotion, without taking a step back to breathe and gain perspective. Over the past several weeks, I have received numerous emails from many of you, and people in the greater community, turning to politicians and right-wing Christians, whom you would never turn to in any other circumstance, and using their words to proof-text your feelings. All I ask of you is – be consistent. We are a liberal, Reform community, regardless of what side of the ballot we vote for in November each year, and it is what I love about us. Don't let the Newt Gingrich's and Christian Evangelicals influence you today, if they have never influenced you before.

If you have friends who are Muslims, which I wish we all did, reach out to them and talk to them about the situation, their feelings and their concerns. I spoke with my friend and colleague, Imam Moustafa Zayed from the Muslim Center of New Jersey, a wonderful teacher whom many of you have had the privilege of studying with over the past year, and he and I have discussed the issues, and I have gained new perspective from him.

We as Jews wish that others would speak out louder, or with equal volume, as we do. But we are *or l'goyim*, a light unto the nations. We do have a special and unique role in our world, and we must be leaders toward tolerance and in fighting bigotry, racism and prejudice. In order to prevent future Ground Zero's, and future Holocausts, we must treat all moderates differently that the extremists in their groups, for every religion has extremists, including Judaism, and we would never want to be defined by those who are the extremists within Judaism. We Jews know better than most: to make room for peace, our ultimate goal, there can be no room for hatred, bigotry or prejudice.

In many ways, we Jews need to work on our emotions and responses to Jews, for if *kol yisrael arevim zeh l'zeh*, if all Jews are truly responsible for all Jews, then we need to do a better job of respecting and fighting for equality and honor within our Jewish world. We have seen this come to fruition too many times over the past year as we examine what has been happening in Israel and the fight for progressive Jews in an increasingly traditional Israel.

Just as I believe most Americans are good, just people, who want to be tolerant and thoughtful, I believe the same is true of Israelis. Most Israelis would like to live their lives without conflict or turmoil. And yet, the fight for progressive Judaism in Israel has seen more struggle recently than in many years. If you have not kept up on the issues, the quick summary is that we liberal Jews are fighting hard for equality and an appropriate place in a State that has no separation of church and state.

Though the Declaration of Independence written in 1948 when the Modern State of Israel was declared a State by the United Nations is meant to guarantee freedom of religion and conscience along with equality of social and political rights, irrespective of religion, the Declaration is non-binding and can only serve as a guiding tool in legal analysis. The right of freedom of religion and conscience was formalized as a basic right by the Israeli Supreme Court in a course of rulings in the early years of the State.⁴

However, we are all still fighting about what this means and how it plays out in a State run by the Orthodox, but lived in by Jews of all kinds, as well as non-Jews. You may be familiar with a group called Women of the Wall, or *Nashot HaKotel*. This group has been existence since December 1, 1988, when a multi-denominational group of approximately seventy women approached Jerusalem's Western Wall with a Torah scroll to conduct a women's prayer service. As no provision for Torah reading exists in the women's section of the *Kotel*, they brought a small folding table with them, upon which to rest the Sever Torah. They stood together and prayed aloud together; a number of them wore *tallitot*, which is not forbidden by *Halachah*.

⁴ From "Religion and State in Israel", Israel Religious Action Center.

Their service was peaceful until they opened the Torah scroll. Then a woman began yelling. She insisted that women are not permitted to read from a Torah scroll. This alerted some right-wing fundamentalist Jews, men, who stood on chairs in order to look over the *mechitzah*, the divider between the men and women's sections. The men began to loudly curse at the women. Despite the jeers, curses and threats of many onlookers, they managed to complete their Torah reading. They were not stopped by the late Rabbi Yehudah Gertz, of blessed memory, who was then the *Kotel* administrator. In fact, a woman who happened to be standing near Rabbi Gertz heard him tell the female complainer "Let them continue. They are not violating *Halachah*."

Since that first service, the Women of the Wall struggle in an attempt to relive the first service; to once again pray together at that holy site, wearing *tallitot*, and reading aloud from a Torah scroll. Throughout the years, and under different and more right-winged leadership of the *Kotel*, these women have endured violence, spent many years in court, and over the past year, on two different occasions, women were arrested AT THE KOTEL, once for wearing a *tallit* on the Women's Side of the partition, and once for carrying the Torah from the Kotel to another location, where they have been reading Torah more recently. In this case, Rabbi Anat Hoffman, director of the Israel Religious Action Center and a true pioneer fighting all levels of cases on behalf of Israelis from all kinds of backgrounds, was taken from the Kotel with the Torah in her arms. After five hours of interrogation, she was released from police custody and banned from the Kotel for 30 days.⁵

While I studied in Jerusalem, I occasionally would join the Women of the Wall on Rosh Chodesh morning, the New Moon, a traditional opportunity for women to gather in prayer and study. We were typically small in size, and had very few incidents. However, last year, when I was in Jerusalem for a rabbinic conference, I had the privilege of joining with well over 100 women, and men who stood on the other side of the partition, to pray the morning service at the back of the women's section, wearing tallit and being quiet, respectful but noticeable. People yelled at us, threw things at us, but we remained strong, and moved to the Southern part of the Wall for the Torah service. We truly were not the disturbance; it came from those who surrounded us. When I watched recently the YouTube video of Anat

⁵ From Women of the Wall Website, www.womenofthewall.org.il/home-4/history.

Hoffman being taken away with the Torah, still singing, it brought tears to my eyes. How could we possibly not fight for the right to pray in this holy place, respectfully, spiritually, and with full heart?

You may be wondering: what does this group have to do with the Muslim hatred I discussed in America? I think they are very much one in the same. In both cases, we find extremists, the minority mind you, within the religions, speaking on behalf of all moderates, or seculars, as the case may be. I listen to my Israeli friends react emotionally to the situation, suggesting that the women should simply find another home – the Southern part of the Kotel is very holy, they say. But that is not the point. Israel, like the United States, is based on democratic values, and just as all Jews should be allowed to pray as they would like in Israel, all Americans should be allowed to pray as they would like, in America. And in both cases, WE must make our voices heard!

So now come back home to New Jersey. Over the past year, we are seeing that hatred, bigotry and ignorance continue to plague our community. During last year's High Holy Season, and during the approach to today, we have seen an increase in anti-Semitism in the Edison community. We have heard about the swastikas painted on the other synagogue in Edison. We have heard about the slander and yelling at Jews as they walk home from *shul* on Shabbat. And most recently we learned that, at a Lexus dealership in Edison owned by a Jewish man, eight cars were damaged, two of them with swastikas etched into the cars.

And are these incidents any different from the incidents of anti-Muslim acts, including a recent fire at the future site of the Islamic Center near Nashville. This incident comes in the midst of heated protests against the planned Islamic center. And we now know that this act was one of arson. No different, I might add, from the Muslim cab driver, stabbed two weeks ago by a passenger who first asked, "Are you a Muslim?"

Nor is it any different than a drunk man barging into a Mosque in Astoria, Queens and urinating on their prayer rugs? A rabbinic student actually blogged about this horrible display of Islamophobia, and just plain atrocious behavior, and suggested on her blog and on twitter that they try to raise money to help this Mosque replace

their prayer rugs. After only two days of fundraising, over \$1000 were raised, and much of it from unknown and disconnected sources, mainly through minimal donations. The beginning steps to help repair our broken world.

We need to be the activists, the voices. We have a calling as Jews. We need to be a light to the nations, an example on a higher level, perhaps, than others. We cannot wait for them to stand by our side – we must always be the leaders, and they will follow. Here, in America, and there, in Israel, and every place in between.

I want to share a brief story with you, by a colleague who shared his spiritual journey through a recent Jewels of Elul, a beautiful collection of readings produced each year during the month of Elul by Craig Taubman. He tells how his sister, at 16, went into a coma, and when she came out, she had no childhood memory. My colleague, 4 years her junior, has spent his life helping her to rebuild their relationship and her world, with a renewed appreciation of life and its precarious nature. He began a spiritual journey that not only led him to reconnect with God and to value family, but to study as well, all over the world. His journey did not result, he says, in a narrowed view of the world, but one that embraces diversity and acknowledges the Divine in each human being. He has dedicated his life's journey to positioning religion as a force for good in the world.⁶

This story was shared by Imam Jihad Turk, the Director of Religious Affairs at the Islamic Center of Southern California. He recently spoke to a crowd at his Mosque for the need for moderation and compassion during these troubled times. He shared that Muslims must fight racism and hatred with compassion not anger. Imam Turk, and all of our Muslim friends and neighbors, must hear our voices. We, the moderates of all faith traditions, can become fanatics for peace. We can fight for peace with more passion and more energy than those who seek war.⁷

As a rabbinic colleague put it so beautifully in response to the Imam's plea, religion has acquired a bad reputation in this past decade, as the fundamentalists among us have taken positions of intolerance and violence. It is more important

⁶ From Jewels of Elul VI, by Craig and Co.

⁷ Adapted from Jewels of Elul response by Rabbi Naomi Levy.

now than ever before that the moderate and tolerant voices within the world's religions support one another.⁸

In preparation for today's sermon, I read a fascinating book about one young man's journey, called acts of Faith. In it, he states that the issue of the 21st century is the question of the faith line. How beautiful, if this is true, but how challenging as well. As he states, on one side of the faith line are the religions totalitarians. Their conviction is that only one interpretation of one religion is a legitimate way of being, believing, and belonging on earth. Everyone else needs to be cowed, or converted, or condemned, or killed.⁹

On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists, who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together. Religious pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus. It is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing that the well being of each and all depends on the health of the whole. It is the belief that the common good is best served when each community has a chance to make its unique contribution.

This young author is writing about the story of an American Muslim and his struggle for the soul of a generation, and in many ways, his religion is secondary to the lessons he has learned, and the ones he hopes to teach. In his search for discovery and hope, Eboo Patel shares, among other things, how silence IS betrayal, and so we cannot be silent any more.

When they came for Me?

First they came for the communists
And I did not speak out...
Because I was not a communist.

Then they came for the socialists
And I did not speak out...

⁸ Adapted from Jewels of Elul response by Rabbi Shira Milgrom

⁹ From Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, The Struggle for the Soul of a Generation , Location 57-64, ebook.

Because I was not a socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists

And I did not speak out...

Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews

And I did not speak out...

Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me

And there was no one to speak out for me.¹⁰

¹⁰ by Pastor Martin Niemoeller