

An issue that should have been quietly decided by a local zoning board or a historical preservation board has exploded into an argument taking place across America. Now that the construction of an Islamic Community Center in Lower Manhattan is part of a national debate, Jewish ethics and the Jewish experience should have something to say about it.

The arguments against its construction basically boil down to the fact that thousands of people died in a Moslem attack against our country on September 11, 2001. The site of the World Trade Center is for many the focus of their grief and anger at the loss of life. The construction of a prominent building containing a Mosque within a few blocks of the site is a slap in the face of those who were murdered by the Moslem attack. It has been compared to the opening of a convent for Carmelite Nuns next to Auschwitz. Auschwitz is a memorial to the vast numbers of Jews who died there. The erection of a Christian chapel adjacent to the property felt like an attempt to co-opt the story of the Shoah, to turn it from a concerted effort to wipe out Jews into a non-specific memorial to mass murder.

What many who support the Islamic Center's construction have missed is that there are serious underlying causes for the fact that the construction of an Islamic Center arouses such passionate protest, while the construction of a church, a synagogue, or a even a strip club adjacent to Ground Zero would not. The underlying fears are serious and should not be discounted.

We should recognize that every place that Islam is the state religion, human rights violations abound.

- Women are not allowed to go out unescorted or without wearing a burka in public in Afghanistan.
- In Nigeria, a pregnant teenage girl was caned for premarital sex.
- In Malaysia, women drinking beer is a cane-worthy offense.
- Women are not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia.
- In Afghanistan, a couple was stoned to death for adultery.
- Honor killings are on the rise in Turkey for such things as girls befriending boys, and the penalty for such murders, if arrested, may be as little as 2 years in jail.
- Publishing pictures of Mohammed or uncomplimentary descriptions of Islam are potential death penalty offenses in Pakistan and elsewhere.
- A Saudi judge in Cairo proposed sentencing a man convicted of paralyzing another man to have his spinal cord severed as punishment.

There is good reason to fear a religion which handles power as poorly as Islam. Once upon a time, Christianity wasn't so good about the ethical exercise of its power. Consider the Inquisition, the Crusades, systematic anti-semitism, and forced disputations, for example. However, the experience of being dragged through the enlightenment, even kicking and screaming, disentangled Christianity from power. Jews had not had serious political power until the 20th century, but the experience of watching the State of Israel wrestle with moral decision making demonstrates that most of us live in the modern world. Certainly, the modern streams of Judaism embrace secular knowledge along with religious faith. Even the Orthodox Yeshivah University carries the motto of Torah u'Madah, "Torah and secular knowledge."

Political Enlightenment was a Western phenomenon. Islam is only beginning to have enough contact with the West to challenge its medievalism. Islam needs a Reform movement, a Conservative movement, an orthodoxy with the motto, Koran umada, Koran and secular knowledge. Until that happens, we are justified in fearing Islamic power.

However, one of the voices within Islam with the vision to challenge Islamic medievalism is Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf of the proposed lower Manhattan Islamic cultural center. I don't know Imam Feisal personally, but I do know Rabbi Irwin Kula, the President of CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, a well recognized organization devoted to outreach and dialogue. He wrote:

Two of [Imam Feisal's three books] were written well before 9/11 and ... clearly articulate what we might call [the] "Conservative Judaism" [of Islam], the beginning of an American ... Islam in light of an Islamic Orthodoxy. It even has the tortuous sorts of theological ... arguments Americanizing [and] westernizing [Sharia law,] that will sound so familiar to ... Conservative [Jews].

... [H]is three books ... clearly condemn violence in the name of Islam. [P]eople can reflect on why there was no problem with Imam Feisel over the past 27 years in running a mosque in Lower Manhattan, and why under George W. Bush he was used by the FBI and our State Department post 9/11...and why ... I remain proud to call Imam Feisel my friend By the way, Imam Feisel is a seriously practicing Sufi – the same brand of Islam whose major mosque was [recently] blown up in Pakistan by Sunnis.

Some who oppose the construction of the Islamic Center suggest that it would be acceptable if only it was not so close to Ground Zero. Rabbi Kula wrote:

How is it there was no problem with this community and this Imam and this mosque ... when it was twelve blocks from the World Trade Center but at two and a half blocks it becomes a problem. If they are dangerous they are dangerous. If they are a front for terrorists what's the difference between twelve blocks and two and a half?

In fact, the lower Manhattan Mosque is as likely, or as unlikely, to be a launching point for terrorist attacks as any other Mosque in the country. It's existence or non-existence does not change the potential for bad things to happen.

The protests against the lower Manhattan Islamic Center have sparked a series of protests against proposed Mosques in other communities having nothing to do with the feelings of those who lost loved ones in the World Trade Center -- Murfreesboro, Tennessee; Temulca, California; and Sheboygan, Wisconsin. This suggests that there is a feeling that Mosques are a breeding ground for terrorists and that we should oppose their construction anywhere.

So here's our dilemma - we have reason to fear the rise of pre-modern Islam. We have no reason to think it will be any better for non-Muslims than the Inquisition was to non-Christians. Yet, the way out of this dilemma might just be illuminated by the very Islamic center that has become the focal point for our fear.

Jewish wisdom, I believe, has the following things to consider:

At the very moment of the Torah's introduction of Pharaoh's genocidal plan against the Jews, we are introduced to Moses, the future savior of the Jews; and God-fearing Egyptian midwives and Pharaoh's daughter, saviors of Moses. At that point, the Torah might have demonized all Egyptians. Instead, it urges us to evaluate people by their behavior, rather than as a collective. Even if we are convinced that 10's of millions of Muslims are hate filled potential terrorists, we would do well to following the Torah's example, and evaluate the individual based on his or her record of action.

Many are familiar with Reb Nahman's saying, *Kol ha-olam kulo gesher tzar me'od v'ha-ikar lo l'fahed klal*, "the whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to be afraid." We live in a frightening world, a bridge across the chaos leading to the world to come.

Our gut instinct is going to lead us to make decisions based on fear, but Reb Nahman is urging us to make our best decisions from a place of calm and rational love, trusting in God to guide us. Our duty is to evaluate whether the fear is realistic in the given context. In the case of the Islamic Center, our fear is leading us to see any Muslim who commits an act of terrorism as personifying the faith as a whole and we are beginning to create guilt by any type of association. Is this really where we want to go?

מְבָרַךְ עַל הַרְעָה מֵעֵין עַל הַטּוֹבָה וְעַל הַטּוֹבָה מֵעֵין עַל הַרְעָה.

Mishnah Berakhot 9:3 teaches: One says a blessing over evil even though good may come from it; and a blessing over good, even though evil may come from it.

The Mishnah suggests that something which appears good may ultimately bring a bad result, and something which is initially painful may eventually result in increased goodness.

Reb Moshe Hayyim Ephraim, taught that sometimes we don't know whether something is good or bad, and therefore we run away from from it because we are afraid that it will be painful. Thus in Psalm 23 we read, טוֹב וְחַסֵּד יִרְדְּפוּנִי, may goodness and love pursue me - let the blessings of goodness and love run after me and overtake me even when I don't know to pursue them myself.

We might wish that Imam Feisal had foreseen the controversy and had chosen a different location from the start. However, that decision is out of our hands. At this point we can protest or we can try to build something positive.

I think we as Jews ought to support this Islamic Center because if we consider it objectively, it is no more a threat than any other Mosque; because within the pain of those affected by 9-11 is the potential for the blessing of a better relationship between the Islam of Imam Feisel and non-Muslim America; and because its high profile existence gives it the perfect platform to initiate a new age and a new kind of Islam.

This is not the same thing as the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz. Auschwitz is a cemetery, a memorial to the murdered. A strip club across from Auschwitz would have been protested just as vigorously as the convent. The World Trade Center site has been cleared of remains as thoroughly as possible, and is being rebuilt as a commercial building. While the memory of what happened there will never go away, and while there will be a memorial on the site, it will be a far cry from the way that Auschwitz has been preserved down to the ashes in the crematoria. One may wish that the Imam had been as definitive in every one of his public statements as he has been in his books about how he rejects Jihad and the tactics of suicide bombing. It is not enough to say that Islam is a religion of peace. We need to hear specifically, what are the teaching of classical Islam that he is going to repudiate in the name of peace. We need him to repeat, over and over again in every one of his public opportunities to comment on the matter, how he is going to handle Sharia law in order to make it consistent with modern treatment of women, non-Muslims, and humane criminal law, if he is going to be a beacon of light in the Islamic world. He has a tremendous opportunity - We can only hope and pray that he takes advantage of it, and that others follow his example.

עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרוֹמָיו

May the Maker of peace in heaven,

הוּא יַעֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בֵּין בְּנֵי יִצְחָק וּבֵין בְּנֵי יִשְׁמָעֵאל

bring peace between the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael

וְעַל כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי תְּבֵל,

and to all Israel and to who live on this planet.

וְאַמְרוּ אָמֵן