

Late August 2010

Dear friends,

I was going to avoid writing about the Islamic Community Center being planned for New York in an old Burlington Coat Factory building several blocks from what is called Ground Zero. I wanted to pursue the Elul work we are supposed to be doing in preparation for the High Holy Days. However, as each day passed and I hadn't yet begun to write, I started to realize that if ever there was a topic to work on at this time of year, it is the incredibly blind bigotry against the Muslim community that is becoming an acceptable part of the American (and Jewish) mindset.

As a people, the Jews have spent 65 years uttering the mantra of "never again." I am horrified that they/we seem unable to make the connection between what is happening to the non-violent Muslim-Americans in this country and what the Jews underwent in Europe prior to World War II. We can argue that it isn't the same... that the "Final Solution" will never take place in America. I do agree. But I also must argue that the attitude toward Islam in this country is taking both an un-American and non-Jewish turn that chills me.

America was founded, quite literally, as a home for those who suffered discrimination in the way they practiced their various religions. As the quote on the base of the Statue of Liberty tells us (written by a Jewish woman), America is a refuge - a place for the masses to be free. The terrorists who destroyed so many hopes and dreams on September 11th happened to be Muslim. They do not represent the Muslim religion however, they represent terrorists. If I accepted responsibility for all evil done by people who are Jews, and if all my neighbors and friends also believed Judaism taught that evil... I would be living in the terror that the Reverend Martin Niemoller wrote about in 1945. Niemoller initially supported Hitler, but early on he began to realize the horror of the Nazi plans and began to organize clergy to oppose the regime. He ended up imprisoned until the end of the war. He is most famously known for the following poem written in 1945:

*First they came for the Communists and I didn't speak up -- because I wasn't a Communist.  
Then they came for the Jews and I didn't speak up — because I wasn't a Jew.  
Then they came for the trade unionists and I didn't speak up — because I wasn't a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Catholics and I didn't speak up — because I was a Protestant.  
Then they came for me — and by that time no one was left to speak up.*

As Jews we are taught to welcome the stranger, since we were strangers in the land of Egypt. As Americans, unless we are Native Americans, our ancestors (or parents, or grandparents) came to this country to find the freedom our founding documents demand. All are created equal (a goal, unfortunately, not a reality yet) and we are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. No one can have their religious

practices denied. The stranger becomes the American... the mix of our melting pot must accept all or America will lose its honor and also its strength.

There are those who argue that we have already lost our honor. Our treatment of Japanese-Americans, of African-Americans, and yes, of Jewish-Americans, does not generate pride. Those hyphens are telling. The vision of our founders had no hyphens. When people who rage on about all Muslims being terrorists and the Koran is a holy book encouraging violence, I want to know how many Muslims they know. I want to know if they've ever talked to a Muslim. I want to know if they've ever been to a mosque, talked to an Imam (a Muslim leader) or read the Koran. I want to know if they have a clue about what they are talking about.

Fear of the unknown can be deadly.

However, I want to be hopeful. We slowly learn as Americans. We slowly change our attitudes. We slowly turn toward the way we are supposed to be. Our Constitution underpins our turning. Our Torah does the same. The Koran, not surprisingly, is equally committed to walking a path of righteousness. What we do with these teachings is where the power lies. Teshuvah, turning towards the holy, the honorable, the righteous, is available to all, whatever their beliefs.

We are in the month of Elul, approaching the great turning. We are preparing our souls for examination. We cannot enter the holy days with our hearts full of hatred. We need to distinguish between individual acts of hatred and the millions of people who pray, care for the needy, speak out for the silent, and follow the teachings of peace. Those people are Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and all others who know they are here on this earth to make it a better place.

I close with a meditation from *The Book of Jewish Sacred Practices* published by Jewish Lights:

*Help me to take a good look at my life and give me the courage to make changes I want to make.*

*Guide me on my journey as I strive to make good changes, in myself and in the world in which I live.*

We are called to holy work - to care for each other - to speak up for those without a voice - and to feel the inner power that good works, prayer and turning can inspire.

Bigotry is not a value.

Still dreaming of peace,

Barbara

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