

Rosh Hashanah 5767/2006
Rabbi Andrea London
Sukkat Shalom

For more than four years, a debate has raged over what to build at Ground Zero, which architectural design to use, how many skyscrapers to erect as a memorial to the dead and as a tribute to our strength as a nation. Daniel Libeskind's Freedom Tower measuring 1,776 feet is slated to be one of the soaring towers, alongside two reflecting pools dubbed "Reflecting Absence". But the designs have spawned debate from many quarters, with architects, investors, and politicians all trying to put their stamp on a new World Trade Center. Yet it seems to me that reflecting pools will fail to capture the sense of loss and despair, and a Tower measuring 1,776 feet strikes me as more kitsch than profound symbol.

I am reminded of an article that Rabbi Art Waskow, director of the Shalom Center, wrote in the weeks after the attacks. He called not for the building of a Freedom Tower at Ground Zero, but of a simple sukkah. "It will fall apart in every rainstorm," he wrote, "and we will put it up again. And again. And again. It will teach all of us the truth about the world we live in." Skyscrapers denote our strength and fortitude in the face of our enemies. A sukkah is a reminder of our vulnerability and our need for one another. Instead of memorializing the lives of those lost on 9/11 by building Towers of Babel that signify our dominion over our environment, a sukkah would remind us how small and frail and vulnerable we are. That is the first step toward peace.

Five years since 9/11, we are still debating whether our country's war on terrorism has been successful. Although it's necessary to bring people to justice who commit acts of terrorism, I'm more skeptical than ever that we can eradicate terrorism by military means. While I'm not a pacifist and believe that military intervention has its place, I also believe that the only way to reduce the rift between peoples is to build bridges of good will and understanding among diverse communities.

I don't need to remind you that our nation has focused enormous resources on the goal of eliminating terrorists. Yet the Talmudic sage Bruria told the following tale: A gang of hoodlums lived in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood and they used to torment him endlessly. Rabbi Meir prayed for their death. His wife, Bruria, said to him: "How did you reach such a decision?" He replied: "The Book of Psalms says, 'Let sins be obliterated from the earth.'" (Psalms 104:35) Bruria answered: "Is it written 'sinners,'? The verse says 'sins.'" She added, "Look further to the end of the verse: 'And the wicked will be no more.'" (Psalms 104:35) Since all sins will be obliterated, then, of course, 'the wicked will be no more.'¹

The single-minded focus on eradicating terrorists belies this truth. Killing or capturing terrorists cannot eliminate terrorism any more than destroying spinach can eliminate e-coli if the source is in the ground water, not the plant. In fact, many have argued that our ongoing war in Iraq has created a breeding ground for the cultivation of new terrorists.

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 10a.

As one ominous bumper sticker declares: “We’re making enemies faster than we can kill them.” Yet, the spinach alert has prompted a critique in the media about the root (pardon the pun) problems in our farming methods. Terrorist attacks on the other hand seem to have elicited little soul-searching among our policy wonks about the root causes of that scourge.

If we hope to make our world a safer place, we need to eliminate the conditions that allow sin to prosper. As religious people, in particular, we have an obligation not only to evaluate our country’s policies, but also to address the conditions that give rise to violence. This means living up to the ideals laid out in Torah: treating the stranger with dignity and respect because we know what it was like to be humiliated and abused as strangers in Egypt; feeding the hungry in our midst; pursuing justice by just means (*Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof*)² – not with means that contravene our notions of justice.

The evils of our world will only be lessened when we recognize that we are all linked in a fragile web of connections that need to be strengthened by being in relationship with one other and working to find peaceful solutions to our conflicts.

In our evening liturgy we pray, *Ufros aleinu sukkat shalom* – Spread over us the sukkah, the shelter of your peace. This is ironic considering the value of a sukkah as a shield against anything is nearly nil. Can you imagine being protected by a sukkah? The sukkah is flimsy by design. It doesn’t shield us from the elements; it exposes us to them.

Rather, the sukkah symbolizes the frailty of all the structures we erect. “*Ufros aleinu*” reminds us that only when we recognize our common vulnerability can peace be realized. Powerful armies with advanced weapons systems may keep us safe for a time; they cannot bring lasting peace. Steel and concrete will not shield us, oceans will not buffer us. Phalanxes of troops may limit entry to our country, but they do not bring peace.

Our world will only become a peaceful place when we realize that we all dwell in sukkot and cannot wall ourselves off from danger. “We need to confront the truth about our world. We are vulnerable. And the more vulnerable we feel, the more motivated we are to take action to prevent violent conflict.”³

Rabbi Art Waskow teaches that “love your neighbor as yourself” is not a command but a statement about how the world functions. What we do to our neighbor, whether good or evil, comes back to us. Wherever there is injustice in the world, there is hatred and vengeance. And where there is vengeance in the world, surely, surely, there is injustice. When we violate our own basic sense of justice and right conduct, we cause the world to disdain us and view us as hypocrites. When we espouse the lofty ideas of freedom and democracy and then treat people inhumanely, we undermine our goal of spreading these ideals to the rest of the world.⁴

² Deuteronomy 16:20.

³ Ury, William, *The Third Side: Why We Fight and How We Can Stop*, p. 101.

⁴ See addendum 2, “Do Unto Your Enemy”.

Developing relationships and recognizing our need for one another, understanding that we are all connected, these will ultimately protect us. We may not see the results immediately, but eventually these are the efforts that will make a lasting difference. If we plant the seeds of understanding, we will reap the harvest of peace. An Ethiopian proverb teaches, “When spider webs unite, they can halt even a lion.”

Let me give you an example of this at work:

In 1992 thousands of people died in Hindu-Muslim riots in India after the destruction of a mosque. Yet in the state capital, only forty miles away, there was not one casualty. In part this was due to the culture of the largest private school in the area. Influenced by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, it seeks to imbue its Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim students with the value of religious and cultural tolerance. Students visit the holy sites of all religious groups in order to learn understanding and respect for others faiths. Classroom activities center on collaboration and problem-solving. Students daily listen to stories and teachings from the world’s religions that emphasize virtues such as love and truthfulness. When violence broke out in 1992, the school responded by staging a march. Parents, teachers and students marched with signs that said “The name of God is both Hindu and Muslim” and “God is One, Mankind is One, All Religions are One.” The school became a center for the community to gather and reinforce the importance of coexistence and tolerance.⁵

This year, the Hebrew month Tishri, in which we celebrate the new year, coincides with the month of Ramadan, the holiest month in the Muslim calendar. Coinciding with the sacred months of Tishri and Ramadan, is also the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi (October 4), and the Worldwide Communion Sunday of Protestant and Orthodox Christians (October 1). St. Francis of Assisi stood almost alone among the Christians of his day in opposing the Crusades and investing months of his life in studying and praying with Muslims. The convergence of these observances happens this year and next and then not for another 30 years. This confluence of events makes this year an especially propitious time to build stronger relationships with people of other faiths.

What prevents us from building strong networks among diverse communities? Distrust and xenophobia sometimes play a role. Sometimes, inconvenience or lack of opportunity is the primary obstacle: we don’t know these people or they don’t live near us. After 9/11, I remember people in our community saying “I’d like to reach out to Muslims, but I don’t really know any.”

This year at Beth Emet, I would like to see us expand and deepen our connections with diverse communities, and to learn more about one other. And we are not starting from zero. Beth Emet has had strong relationships with Evanston churches for years, gathering together for study and pulpit exchanges and discussing contemporary issues from religious perspectives. In the last few years we have also reached out to the Muslim community, hosting them here for Shabbat dinner and attending Iftar (Ramadan’s break-the-fast dinners) at mosques in nearby Morton Grove and in Bridgeview. Our teens have been involved with the Interfaith Youth Core, which brings together youth from many

⁵ Op. Cit., *The Third Side*, p. 127.

faith backgrounds to do service in the community and to learn about each other. Over the summer, Beth Emet's Chevra Kadisha burial society met with the head of the Muslim burial society to compare funeral practices between Judaism and Islam. Those who attended were amazed to learn of the many similarities between our traditions' practices. These commonalities and the openness and enthusiasm of both communities to learning about the other community created a sense of connection.

This year we want to expand on these interfaith efforts. One opportunity will be to jointly study Bruce Feiler's book *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*. Sister Mary Ellen Coombe and Ms. Aisheh Said will co-teach this class with me. Sister Mary Ellen has taught at Beth Emet for many years, often co-teaching with Hyma Levin. Aisheh Said is a teacher and leader in the Bridgeview mosque. She and I met during the filming of *Ties That Bind*, a film produced by our own Ann Feldman that explores women's leadership in the interfaith movement. Members of the Bridgeview mosque plan to attend our study sessions, and I hope that some of our non-Jewish neighbors in the Evanston community will attend as well.

Feiler's book explores how Abraham can be a unifying figure for our faith traditions and how and why Abraham has been interpreted by our various traditions in more particularistic terms. It will be an opportunity to learn more about each other's faiths through the stories of Abraham and explore how we can build bridges of understanding and connection among our communities.

Tomorrow we will read the story of the Binding of Isaac. We know the outcome of the story. We read it every year. We know that Isaac is not sacrificed. We know that the angel is going to stay Abraham's hand just as he's about to slaughter his son. Yet, we're left with an unsettled feeling and an unanswered question. Why was Abraham willing to sacrifice his son?

When Abraham lived, child sacrifice was a common way to serve the various gods that people worshipped. In the Torah we read that the Ammonites sacrificed their children to the god Moloch. According to Rabbi J. H. Hertz⁶, child sacrifice was actually "rife among the Semitic peoples," and suggests that "in that age, it was astounding that Abraham's God should have interposed *to prevent* the sacrifice, not that He should have asked for it."

Abraham is a great religious figure because he was able to break with the prevailing ideas of his day and to declare to himself that God did not want to be worshipped through child sacrifice. Abraham was able to forge a new path, a new way to serve God.

And what of this lesson that God is calling on us not to accept blindly the status quo of our day, but to find a new path? We are far from internalizing this lesson. We fall into old patterns of behavior. We continue to rely on force as a way to solve our problems rather than building relationships that will make us safer and make our world more peaceful.

⁶ Rabbi Hertz was the chief rabbi of Britain from 1913-1946.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel⁷ told a story about a boy who was troubled when he heard the story about the binding of Isaac. “Rabbi,” the boy asked, “what would have happened if the angel had been late and didn’t stop Abraham from sacrificing Isaac?” The rabbi replied, “Angels don’t come late, but human beings, made of flesh and blood, don’t always hear their call.” Abraham’s greatness is that he heard the call of the angel. He understood that God was demanding him to change course, not to follow the prevalent practices of his day. The angels are calling out to us now, telling us there is a better way, urging us to reach out to one another, to protect ourselves and our planet. We must heed them. We cannot wait. The time is now. We must invest our energies into building these relationships for ourselves, for our children, and for the future of our planet.

⁷ In 1967, to explain why he was speaking out against the Vietnam War, Abraham Joshua Heschel told the story of a young Polish Hassidic boy who cried when he read the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac.

Addendum 1:

After I delivered this sermon on Friday, September 22, 2006, Nathan Render who is a sophomore at Tufts University approached me to tell me that the Academic Affairs Office of the Department of Homeland Security is funding a three-year interfaith initiative at Tufts and four other universities on the East Coast. The monies have been given to support the development, implementation, and refinement of programs that will reduce inter-group tensions among university students of different religions, primarily Christian/Jewish/Muslim. The project will focus on affecting the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of university students in an effort to help foster habits of inter-group acceptance and cooperation among future leaders and decision-makers.

The Tufts project, named Pathways, will feature two different dialogue groups, as well as occasional dinners, lecture series, and an annual retreat. One of the dialogue groups, *Pathways to Faith: Religious Pluralism Dialogue*, will explore the beliefs and traditions of the three faiths, as well as their different views on contemporary issues, such as gender roles, humankind's relation to the environment, and the connection between religion and the state. The second group, *Pathways to Understanding: Middle East Discussion and Analysis*, will engage in in-depth conversations on the complex dynamics of the region, and examining topics such as resolutions of the current conflicts and portrayal of the peoples of the region in the Western media.

One of the goals of the program is to instill leadership skills among program participants so that they will make a wider impact on their campus through various projects, including a collaborative art project for the new Interfaith Center set to replace the existing Catholic and Islamic Centers.

The vision for Pathways was set by a consortium of university administrators, faculty and student leaders, including the four university chaplains, faculty in the departments of International Relations, Psychology, Comparative Religions, the Institute for Global Leadership, and the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, and students from the Muslim Student Association, Arab Student Association, Hillel, the Catholic Community, the Tufts Protestant Fellowship, and NIMEP. Abraham's Vision, a consulting group based out of California, will also be involved with continued training and materials.

Building on Tufts University's history of successful campus collaboration to create a community of respect and mutual understanding, the program hopes that increased learning about others will foster awareness of and respect for religious and cultural diversity among the broader campus community.

Addendum 2:

The New York Times
nytimes.com

September 25, 2006

Op-Ed Contributor

Do Unto Your Enemy...

By PAUL RIECKHOFF

IN 2002, I attended the Infantry Officer Basic Course at Fort Benning, Ga. At “the Schoolhouse,” every new Army infantry officer spent six months studying the basics of his craft, including the rules of war.

I remember a seasoned senior officer explaining the importance of the Geneva Conventions. He said, “When an enemy fighter knows he’ll be treated well by United States forces if he is captured, he is more likely to give up.”

A year later on the streets of Baghdad, I saw countless insurgents surrender when faced with the prospect of a hot meal, a pack of cigarettes and air-conditioning. America’s moral integrity was the single most important weapon my platoon had on the streets of Iraq. It saved innumerable lives, encouraged cooperation with our allies and deterred Iraqis from joining the growing insurgency.

But those days are over. America’s moral standing has eroded, thanks to its flawed rationale for war and scandals like Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo and Haditha. The last thing we can afford now is to leave Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions open to reinterpretation, as President Bush proposed to do and can still do under the compromise bill that emerged last week.

Blurring the lines on the letter of Article 3 — it governs the treatment of prisoners of war, prohibiting “violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture” and “outrages upon personal dignity, in particular, humiliating and degrading treatment” — will only make our troops’ tough fight even tougher. It will undermine the power of all the Geneva Conventions, immediately endanger American troops captured by the enemy and create a powerful recruiting tool for Al Qaeda.

But the fight over Article 3 concerns not only Al Qaeda and the war in Iraq. It also affects future wars, because when we lower the bar for the treatment of our prisoners, other countries feel justified in doing the same. Four years ago in Liberia, in an attempt to preserve his corrupt authority, President Charles Taylor adopted the Bush administration’s phrase “unlawful combatants” to describe prisoners he wished to try

outside of civilian courts. Today Mr. Taylor stands before The Hague accused of war crimes.

It is not hard to imagine that one of our Special Forces soldiers might one day be captured by Iranian forces while investigating a potential nuclear weapons program. What is to stop that soldier from being water-boarded, locked in a cold room for days without sleep as Iranian pop music blares all around him — and finally sentenced to die without a fair trial or the right to see the evidence against him?

If America continues to erode the meaning of the Geneva Conventions, we will cede the ground upon which to prosecute dictators and warlords. We will also become unable to protect our troops if they are perceived as being no more bound by the rule of law than dictators and warlords themselves.

The question facing America is not whether to continue fighting our enemies in Iraq and beyond but how to do it best. My soldiers and I learned the hard way that policy at the point of a gun cannot, by itself, create democracy. The success of America's fight against terrorism depends more on the strength of its moral integrity than on troop numbers in Iraq or the flexibility of interrogation options.

Several Republican combat veterans, including former Secretary of State Colin Powell and Senators Lindsay Graham, John McCain and John Warner, have recognized that the president's stance on Article 3 is a threat to our troops and to our interests. It would be insulting for the president to assume he knows more about war than they do.

But the compromise the president struck with the senators last week leaves the most significant questions unresolved. The veterans must hold their ground — and the White House must recognize that our troops need all the moral authority they can get.

Paul Rieckhoff, the executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, is the author of "Chasing Ghosts: A Soldier's Fight for America From Baghdad to Washington."