

“Remember the days of yore, understand the years of generation after generation. Ask your father and he will relate it to you, your elders and they will tell you.” Deuteronomy 32:7

To me, one of the most important parts of Judaism is the emphasis put on personal responsibility for behavior, for continuously working to improve our inward and outward thoughts, words and actions. Realizing that I am only accountable for my own observance made me a better friend, congregant and wife. I can provide a positive model, try to inspire and teach – but in the end I am only responsible for me. I try to take seriously the work of Elul and the days of Rosh Hashanah, the ten days of repentance and hope to approach Yom Kippur with a sense of accomplishment and anticipation that I will get a good decree. I find Yom Kippur to be a day of joy and closeness to God, rather than one of dread and fear, when I have done this work. While we say the Vidui – confession - communally in the first person plural, I know that I am only responsible for my own missed marks and this allows me to focus on my prayers and my connection to the Divine.

Yet, while we are each only responsible for our own behavior, Jews have been held accountable for community behavior or the actions of individual members of that community for millennia. In Ha'azinu Moshe passes on God's warning about how B'nei Israel will stray and follow other gods and God will punish them. There is no mention of punishing only those who actually stray – the people as a whole will be punished. All of Israel is exiled. The Temple is destroyed despite those who fight to preserve it. All of Israel is held responsible for the sins of some. In galut, exile, those under whose power we lived also held the whole community responsible for the real or perceived crimes of individuals. Thousands, millions of Jews have died at the hands of their oppressors because the rich among the Jewish community lent money to the Nobility who knew they didn't have to repay a dead Jew, because one angry Jewish young man killed a Nazi official or because someone had a negative interaction with their Jewish neighbor. While we are taught that we are individually responsible for our sins, others tend to pin the sins of one Jew on the backs of all Jews. How do we all feel when there is a Jewish person in the news for some crime – Bernie Maddoff? Elliott Spitzer? Son of Sam? We have come to feel that it reflects poorly on all of us because that has been our experience. The Rabbis even teach that we are all responsible for each other and this seems to say that what we do does impact other Jews – both positively and negatively.

I am not comfortable with the actions of some Jews coloring how others see me as a Jew. I am particularly not happy when it is “Religious” Jews who act out in a way that is perceived by the world – both Jews and non – Jews - of being “authentically” Jewish but which has nothing to do with my Judaism. I do not want people to associate my being Jewish with the arrests of women at the Kotel for carrying a Torah. I do not want people to think that Judaism means excluding

women from ritual practice. I wrap tefillin, I wear a Tallis, I cover my head out of respect for God and not out of modesty. I lead services, I have been known to read Torah and once read a Haftarah. Why would I want people to think that my Judaism in any way resembled that of those who harass the Women of the Wall and work to maintain the male hegemony in public ritual life?

I also don't want my Judaism to be connected to Jews who speak publically in vile and defamatory language about other Jews. Those who want to be able to judge who is Jewish enough to be a "real" Jew. In June of this year tens of thousands of Ashkenazic haredim in Israel held a rally in support of parents sent to jail for being found guilty of racism for refusing to send their children to school along with Sephardic children. They felt that the Sephardic families weren't "religious" or "Jewish" enough. I find this appalling. It infuriates me that members of a people that has been decimated by others who judged them as "less" can find it within themselves to judge members of their own people as "less". It makes me sick and to be associated with these people as fellow Jews feels dirty. I don't want people to judge me as a Jew based on their behaviors.

And I don't want to be connected to Jews who think those of other ethnicities are in some way impure and not welcome to join our people. Yoram Kaniuk wrote movingly in an op-ed on *ynet* about Minister Yishai not wanting children of foreign workers to be living in Israel out of fears of them mixing with Jews. Kaniuk speaks about how his mother from Odessa has Mongol features and his Yemenite Jewish friend looks like non-Jewish Yemenites and how Minister Yishai looks like anyone else from Morocco. He wonders how could this be unless Jews have intermarried for centuries among those whom they live and have welcomed Jews by Choice into their communities. He quotes Ben Gurion who said "anyone who wishes to be Jewish and share the Jewish destiny, they should be blessed." I think that this is a beautiful sentiment and one that I fully support.

Today is not only Shabbat Shuvah – it is also September 11th - the 9th anniversary of the horrific attacks on our country by fundamentalist, extremist members of Al Qaeda. It is also the last day of Ramadan – the celebration of Eid. The attacks nine years ago by members of the Islamic faith – no matter how far removed their beliefs and practices might be from others of their faith – have done seemingly irreparable damage to the standing of Muslims in this country and the world. It has torn the social fabric of our country and caused every Muslim – no matter how moderate or even non-religious they may be – to be perceived as a potential terrorist. All of the approximately 1+ billion Muslims in the world have been tarred with the crimes of Al Qaeda extremists. Many people are unable to separate out moderate Muslims from these fundamentalist extremists. I recently read "Three Cups of Tea", Greg Mortenson's story of his experiences building schools in rural Pakistani villages. Towards the end of the book the Wahabi

sect of Islam – a hotbed of fundamentalism and training ground for the Taliban – begins to make inroads into Pakistan – this is in the early 90's – and education is their weapon, just as it had been the tool of peace used by Greg Mortenson. Greg knew that education, particularly of women, was the way forward towards moderation and modernity for poor, rural Pakistani villagers. The extremists knew it was the way backwards. Their brand of education has sent not only thousands of villagers back to a time of fundamentalism and loss of rights for women, but it has sent Americans back to a time of xenophobia and racism. There once was a bright future of acceptance for Muslims in this country. While the last nine years has been marked with ongoing ugliness about Islam as a religion of hate and intolerance, the controversy over a Muslim Community Center near Ground Zero has become a battlefield where these ugly prejudices are playing out. While I still am not sure what I think about the appropriateness of a Muslim Community Center being built in this area, I do know what I don't approve of – the tone of conversation. The personal impact of the high level of invective being hurled on Muslims in America is best expressed in an article by Haris Tarin, Director of the MPAC-DC. It is the story of his family and I would like to share it with you:

An Afghan family who moved to the U.S. three decades ago marveled at the openness and welcoming nature of the American people and government. But things have changed after Sept. 11.

When my parents decided to leave their war-ravaged homeland of Afghanistan in the 1980s, they had the option of migrating to a number of different countries, but sought one that they could make their "home." You see, my father was a government official in the Afghan Education Ministry, before the Russian invasion and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban. He was tasked with modernizing the Afghan educational system while also ensuring that core, centuries-old Afghan values were preserved.

The assignment took him all over the world — from Australia to India to Malaysia and a host of other Muslim-majority countries. Yet no nation left a lasting impact on him until his visit to the United States in 1972.

During his extensive travels from coast to coast and many places in between, he established friendships he never imagined were possible with people of a different faith, culture and skin color. He marveled at the openness and welcoming nature of the American people and government. Little did he know then that in a matter of three decades, he and my mother would choose the U.S. as their adopted homeland, and that he would be buried in its soil.

As young children, we would ask him why he chose this country. He would calmly

respond: "The acceptance of my faith that I received in my travels through this country, I would not be able to find anywhere else."

He would tell us about the people who respected his religious practice of praying five times a day and created spaces for him to pray in. He would fondly recall how warm and open people were.

Yet today, I am afraid for my children. I am afraid that when they turn the TV on, or listen to the radio (which I now turn off when we are in the car), they will receive a very different message from the one my father shared with us. The message they hear today is of intolerance. Whether it be about an Islamic center in New York blocks from ground zero or a mosque in Temecula, their faith is being openly and viciously maligned, and they themselves are made to feel responsible for the attacks on 9/11.

My children were born here, and they consider themselves as wholly American, but I fear that the current discourse about their faith and their houses of worship will have a devastating effect on them.

My father knew something greater about America than what is spouted by Sarah Palin, Newt Gingrich and the host of professional bigots who have built a cottage industry out of Muslim-baiting. He knew that the power of America is in its acceptance and openness.

Gingrich is right about one thing. There are no churches or synagogues in places such as Saudi Arabia. But that is precisely the reason so many Muslim immigrants like my father chose not to make a home there or in other similarly restrictive countries. He knew that his children would be better able to worship in a culture of freedom and openness.

I am secretly relieved that my father did not live long enough to see the current controversy surrounding the center in New York City. I am happy that his experience of his adopted homeland was one of friendship and acceptance. I am proud that his best friends, my godparents, are American Jews who loved my father and brought us to the U.S., hosting us in their home until we were able to settle in.

But I'm left wondering: What do I tell my 10-year old daughter, Hanan, and my 8-year-old son, Rayyan, when they ask me why fear-mongers in Tennessee, New York, Florida and California don't want a mosque or Muslims as their neighbors?

Both for their sakes and my own, I will share with them their grandfather's stories. I will

encourage them to become active citizens who will ensure that the tolerance and openness their grandfather experienced decades ago in America will be cherished and maintained for others who yearn for it in the decades to come.

I will refuse to allow the voices of fear to minimize my father's experiences and degrade the America he fell in love with. My children deserve better. We all do.

I find Haris' words so moving and I agree that we all, Muslims, Jews and everyone one else, deserve a better America and a better world. In an article in the New York Times last Sunday about this controversy Imam Adbullal Antepi, chaplain at Duke University was quoted upon his return from a trip last month with a rabbi and other American Muslim leaders to Poland and Germany, where they studied the Holocaust and the events that led up to it: "Some of what people are saying in this mosque controversy is very similar to what German media was saying about Jews in the 1920s and 1930s," he said. "It's really scary." I teach the *Pyramid of Hate* and *Steps to Genocide* as part of my Shoah curriculum and Imam Antepi is correct. Dehumanizing and scapegoating are just steps above name calling and lead towards violence and ultimately making the elimination of the group acceptable to society as a whole.

In this vein, the article quoted Dr. Ferhan Asghar, an orthopedic spine surgeon in Cincinnati and the father of two young girls. "We worry: Will we ever be really completely accepted in American society?" "In no other country could we have such freedoms — that's why so many Muslims choose to make this country their own. But we do wonder whether it will get to the point where people don't want Muslims here anymore." His sentiments were echoed by many American Muslims interviewed for this article. Many felt that things were worse now than even directly after Sept 11th. The promised burning of copies of the Koran scheduled by a pastor in Florida is another cause of fear and concern. This action has been condemned by General Petraeus and he feels it will endanger troops and encourage recruits to Al Qaeda. Fanning the flames of hatred and bigotry rarely leads to good. Watching copies of your holy book being burned should feel uncomfortably familiar to Jews who have been made to witness this scene many times throughout our history.

As members of a people often tarred with the crimes of one member of our collective group, we should understand Haris' plea more than others. As those who have suffered from informal exclusion and formal anti-Semitism, we should know where this path leads and should be working hard to redirect the public discourse and treatment of moderate Muslims. We have been dehumanized, scapegoated and made to watch the public desecration of our holy books and should not stand idly by while it happens to others. Have we learned nothing from our own people's history? While our current relations with Muslims might not be strong, the Golden Age

of Sephardic Jews was lived out under Muslim rule, not Christian. This is an important point often lost in today's political atmosphere.

At this time of returning, of T'shuvah, of repentance and repair, I hope that we can listen to the words of Moshe as he exhorted B'nei Israel prior to his death and learn from our history rather than ignore it and be moved by it to act in defense of those who are being unfairly blamed for the sins of others. To be Upstanders making the world better, rather than bystanders watching others tear our country down.

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