

The Muslims and Us

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This afternoon we will remember and relive Yom Kippur in ancient Jerusalem, before the destruction of the Second Temple.

We remember it all: the crowds, the sunrise, the music, the levites, the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies, the people trembling to know whether he would emerge alive, and when he did, face shining like the sun, he uttered the name of God, never spoken at any other time of the year. The people bowed to the ground and according to legend, a miracle occurred at that moment--no one bumped into each other." I think it's my favorite Jewish miracle. It's a humble miracle...just about people making room for each other.

Through twenty centuries of exile, for Jews expelled from one country after another, often persecuted, and targeted by pogroms and massacres, the pinnacle of human history had been reached long ago: when our people gathered together in our holy city of Jerusalem on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, and the high priest spoke our holiest word, the four-letter name of God, and everyone made room for each other. In the poetry of the prayer book: "Happy was the eye that saw all this!"

I have a crazy fantasy, in which a humble, elderly Persian Jew shows our text to Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, in a quiet moment removed from all the television cameras and microphones. In my fantasy, they drink tea together, relaxed and at ease, and the old Jew explains to Ahmedinejad that for 2,000 years Jews have been reading, and remembering, and reliving that scene from ancient Jerusalem....in Tehran, in Warsaw, in Damascus, in Cordoba, in Baghdad, in Rome, in New York. In my fantasy, after spending just five or ten minutes reading from our prayerbook, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad suddenly looks up and says "why didn't anyone ever show this to me before? Now I understand. You do have history in this region."

It's a pleasant fantasy, but forget it. Did you watch him on television Monday night? I did, I forced myself, and was overcome by feelings of revulsion and loathing as he denied all of our history with such smug self-satisfaction. On an even deeper level, I felt as though I were in a grade-B horror movie, trapped in a house with a lunatic. The revulsion gave way to dread. This lunatic's government is close to acquiring a nuclear weapon. What should the Prime Minister of Israel do? What should the American government do?

We all understand, I think, that in this situation there are no good options. For Israel to launch a strike, with or without the support of the United States, will set Iran's nuclear program back a year or two at most, would immediately unify the entire Iranian population around the government, and in all likelihood lead to a major regional military conflict. On the other hand, to wait, and to allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon, when they have called so consistently and so openly for Israel to disappear from the map seems like sticking our head in the sand....only eighty years after the world failed to take Hitler seriously. There are no good

options. I would observe, however, that Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama, for all their personal dislike of each other, seem to be doing a good job of balancing each other. President Obama is steering a careful and conservative course, and Prime Minister Netanyahu is applying maximum pressure on the US and Europeans. They can't stand each other, but they are working well together. I'm no expert, but that's the way I see it.

Now, there is a broader context to all of this.

Storm winds are blowing throughout the Muslim world right now, and our tiny Jewish state of Israel is in the eye of the hurricane. The Arab Spring swept through Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, bringing down twenty and thirty-year-old dictatorships and replacing them with fragile democracies. A war has been raging inside Syria for months whose outcome is still completely unknown. And now a 14-minute film trailer mocking the prophet Mohammed has sparked a new wildfire of street violence sweeping more than twenty countries. 49 people have died. From Morocco to Malaysia, Nigeria to Bangladesh.

For anyone who values peace, and stability and human life, it is easy to fall into longing for the good old days of the dictators Hosni Mubarak and Muamar Khadafi and even Saddam Hussein, who while they were not even slightly friendly to Israel, at least knew how to maintain order. Remember, by the way, how Saddam kept Iran at bay? And with Mubarak, we never worried about the Muslim Brotherhood. This chaos that has been unleashed does not feel like progress.

But let's take a deep breath, and look more closely, and listen to some quieter sounds and signs which we might miss at first glance. The Muslim world is at least as complex as the Jewish world, and like our Jewish world, the Muslim world is changing, rapidly.

We have access for the first time to new voices from the Muslim world, which were either not there previously, or as seems more likely, they were there but used to be effectively silenced. The fragile beginnings of democracy, and the internet have begun to change everything.

For the past seven or eight years, I have received a regular online posting from the Middle East Media Research Institute. The staff at MEMRI reads widely every day in the Arab press, and then selects, translates and makes available a collection of articles that appear in the Arab press, sermons given by Muslim clerics, and even links to clips from Arab and Muslim television. I will tell you that it is often depressing reading...the anti-semitism, the ignorance, the venom out there is breathtaking..

But lately something new is showing up in MEMRI's postings. In recent weeks, and I am quoting from their summary, there has been an unprecedented wave of open self-criticism in the Muslim world, a growing chorus of Muslim voices in the Arab press criticizing extremism, condemning violence and calling for toleration. Here are the words of one columnist, Ali al-Sharimi, writing for the Saudi daily Al-Watan. I urge you to listen carefully. This appeared in a daily paper in Saudi Arabia ten days ago, and is just one example of many voices which are now being raised throughout the Muslim world:

How can we convince the Western citizen that this religion Islam is respectable when all he sees is extremism and terrorism? We cannot convince the West that our

proud words about the principles of our honorable faith are true unless they are implemented in practice. We can never convince the West that those who blow themselves up do not represent Islam when it sees suicide bombings justified on some of our satellite TV channels, and from the pulpits of our mosques.

We have always believed that such opinions existed, but we have not heard them. Now we hear them.

Of perhaps greatest interest to us here in Santa Barbara, is the letter from our friend Afaf Turjoman, representing the Islamic Society of Santa Barbara, in this week's Santa Barbara Independent. Afaf wrote in the wake of the attacks which killed the US Ambassador to Libya: "The parties responsible for these events claimed to be reacting to an online film considered offensive to Islam. It is important to emphasize **it is a greater defamation of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an to react with violence and murder of innocent people, than any claimed insult from an Islamophobic film.** The Islamic Society of Santa Barbara is committed to upholding the right to **freedom of expression** and **unconditionally condemns any use of violence** as means to protest hateful speech. The answer to anything we find deeply offensive is **speech**. We believe the only proper response to intentional provocations such as this film is to redouble efforts to promote education and mutual understanding between faiths and to marginalize extremists of all stripes."

I know that some of you are thinking to yourselves, "so what? She is one woman, an isolated voice, not representative." Well, I can tell you this: Afaf is deeply respected in her community. Is she typical? No. She is extraordinary. Is she representative? Look at the letter. She signs it for the entire Islamic society. The entire letter in the first person plural. "We are committed...we find offensive...we believe." Our local Muslim community has found its moderate voice.

I have become close to Afaf and her husband Mukhtar through monthly meetings of a small Torah-Qur'an study group of Jews and Muslims, in which five or six Jews and five or six Muslims share with each other the wisdom of our two traditions. It has been one of the most mind opening, transformative experiences of my life. Having come to know Afaf and her husband Mukhtar, I will never again say "where are the moderate Muslims? Why do we never hear from them?" They are speaking up, in Egypt, in Jordan, in London, in Saudi Arabia, and here in Santa Barbara. If we do not hear them, it is because we are not listening.

Shma Yisrael.....Listen O Jewish people.

We are entering a new era in our interactions with our Muslim cousins, the children of Ishmael....Abraham's other son. The Muslim world is rapidly changing, all around the globe, and the Jewish world is changing as well. Within **both of our religions**, there are growing forces of extremism, intolerance, and hatred. But they are not the only ones finding their voice. Within both religions, men and women of moral stature are speaking up, and are joining hands to build bridges of education and interfaith understanding.

When we dialogue with our Muslim neighbors, we will not agree about everything. We will disagree, sometimes passionately. But the question is how we will disagree. And whether we will press forward and continue to talk.

Today, I firmly believe, this is the good fight. I hope that our entire

community will add our considerable strength, intelligence and creativity to the struggle for Jewish-Muslim mutual understanding.

Here at CBB, we will soon have opportunity to listen to and to learn from members of our local Santa Barbara Islamic Society, on Sunday morning October 7th. It will take courage for each and every one of them to step into our building.

Will we have the courage to listen to what they have to say?