

Shabbat Shuvah
Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim
September 10, 2010
Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander

Shabbat Shuvah is traditionally a time for lengthy and passionate sermonizing. It's a time for rabbis, on the last Shabbat before Yom Kippur, to exhort their communities to repent—to use whatever texts, biblical verses, and stories they can to inspire those gathered together to change their ways.

Rest assured, after a moving Rosh Hashanah and only one week from Yom Kippur, I don't have the strength to deliver a lengthy sermon any more than you have the desire to hear one. But I am compelled to share very pointed words about what can only be described as extreme ugliness in our country right now—a swell of religious intolerance that has grown into an almost “anti-Muslim frenzy”.

Discussion of plans to build an Islamic center near Ground Zero in New York has sparked extensive debate that's come here to Charleston, as well. Such debate is not only acceptable, it's to be expected in a country of free and impassioned thinkers such as ours. As a statement issued by 35 prominent Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders this past Tuesday describes, “persons of conscience have taken different positions,” and we respect not only their right to do so, but in many cases the wisdom of their positions, as well.

What is by no means acceptable or tolerable—what is an ugly stain on our democratic and free society—is “the atmosphere of fear and contempt for fellow Americans of the Muslim faith that the controversy has generated.” Mosques have been attacked; individual Muslims have been threatened and harmed; one small church in Florida has declared that it will use tomorrow's 9th anniversary of the tragic events of September 11 as an occasion to burn copies of the Quran.

In response to “the derision, misinformation and outright bigotry being directed against America's Muslim community,” an “emergency summit” was convened in Washington D.C. on Tuesday comprised of leaders representing Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Orthodox Jewish traditions; Greek Orthodox, Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, and Evangelical faith communities; as well as the Universal Muslim Association of America, the Islamic Society of North America, and the Arab American Institute. Together they stood and declared:

“We are profoundly distressed and deeply saddened by the incidents of violence committed against Muslims in our community, and by the desecration of Islamic houses of worship. We stand by the principle that to attack any religion in the United States is to do violence to the religious freedom of all Americans. The threatened burning of copies of the Holy Qu'ran this Saturday is a particularly egregious offense that demands the strongest possible condemnation by all who value civility in public life and seek to honor the sacred memory of those who lost

their lives on September 11. As religious leaders, we are appalled by such disrespect for a sacred text that for centuries has shaped many of the great cultures of our world, and that continues to give spiritual comfort to more than a billion Muslims today.

“We are committed to building a future in which religious differences no longer lead to hostility or division between communities. Rather, we believe that such diversity can serve to enrich our public discourse about the great moral challenges that face our nation and our planet. On the basis of our shared reflection, we insist that no religion should be judged on the words or actions of those who seek to pervert it through acts of violence; that politicians and members of the media are never justified in exploiting religious differences as a wedge to advance political agendas or ideologies; that bearing false witness against the neighbor—something condemned by all three of our religious traditions—is inflicting particular harm on the followers of Islam, a world religion that has lately been mischaracterized by some as a ‘cult.’

“We call for a new day in America when speaking the truth about one another will embrace a renewed commitment to mutual learning among religions. ... The partnerships that have developed in recent years between synagogues and churches, mosques and synagogues, and churches and mosques should provide a foundation for new forms of collaboration.... What we can accomplish together is, in very many instances, far more than we can achieve working in isolation from one another. ...

“We work together on the basis of deeply held and widely shared values, each supported by the sacred texts of our respective traditions. We acknowledge with gratitude the dialogues between our scholars and religious authorities that have helped us to identify a common understanding of the divine command to love one’s neighbor. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all see an intimate link between faithfulness to God and love of neighbor; a neighbor who in many instances is the stranger in our midst. We are united in our conviction that by witnessing together in celebration of human dignity and religious freedom; by working together for interfaith understanding across communities and generations; and by cooperating with each other in works of justice and mercy for the benefit of society, all of us will demonstrate our faithfulness to our deepest spiritual commitments. ...

“Silence is not an option. Only by taking this stand, can spiritual leaders [and all of us] fulfill the highest calling of our respective faiths, and thereby help to create a safer and stronger America for all ... people.”

In the midst of so much ugliness, this joint gathering and statement was a moment of beauty—and there is more. Tomorrow afternoon, at the James Island County Park, Charleston’s Unity Church has organized an “Interfaith Service and Bridge to Islam” event to repudiate the book burning in Florida and take a positive stand for religious tolerance. As the event is on Shabbat, we have not officially publicized it as a

congregation, but we are very pleased that Allan Mysel has graciously agreed to represent our congregation among delegates from a wide array of religious institutions in our community. On all of our behalf, I have asked him to share the following:

As disheartened as we at Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim were to learn of a small right-wing church's deplorable plan to burn Qurans on this 9th anniversary of the tragic events of September 11th, 2001, we are uplifted by this interfaith stand of solidarity in our community. We thank Unity Church and Reverend Ed Kosak for their vision and efforts to organize this event, and the willingness to devote their anniversary celebration to such a noble cause.

This very day on the Jewish calendar marks *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when, as Rabbi Arthur Waskow of The Shalom Center describes, "Jews focus even more deeply on turning themselves toward God and to changing their lives toward compassion and reconciliation with other people." Jewish tradition teaches that we are all one human family. As we learn in Midrash, our collection of rabbinic stories and teachings, man was created alone for the sake of peace among men, that one might not say to his fellow, "My father was greater than yours." We all descend from a single male and female in order that different families of the earth might not quarrel, one claiming superiority to another.

Even this teaching unites us, for as the Quran states (Asad 49:13), "Behold, we have created you all from a single male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to deeply know one another [not to hate and despise each other]. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of God. Behold, God is all-knowing, all aware."

May we ever be mindful of our common lineage, our common teaching, our common stake in the plight of others. May we be strengthened by our interfaith solidarity today, and may we ever journey from strength to strength.