

## The Jewish Obligation to Stand Up against Islamophobia in the United States

*Lisabeth Kaplan and Paul Roochnik*

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out –  
because I was not a communist;  
Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out –  
because I was not a socialist;  
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out –  
because I was not a trade unionist;  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out –  
because I was not a Jew;  
Then they came for me –  
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

The German anti-Nazi Protestant minister, Martin Niemoeller, spoke these poignant words following the end of World War II. Pastor Niemoeller reminds us that whenever society singles out a specific minority for abuse, the rest of society must resist. What folly it is to believe that during a time of insecurity and suspicion, any minority – religious, ethnic, or political – can long enjoy immunity from oppression. The Jewish people, perhaps more than other minorities, has an intimate familiarity with the plight of the scapegoat, a 2,000 year history of diaspora and minority status, with all the cruelty and violence that has accompanied this experience. In this work, we will cite Biblical sources, cultural traditions, and rabbinic teach-

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ings to express the inescapable obligation of Jews to stand in solidarity with Muslims in their time of need.

Make no mistake about it: Muslims now confront unprecedented discrimination and harassment in the United States. In a recent report, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) reports a significant increase in the frequency of hate crimes and acts of discrimination perpetrated against Arabs (both Muslims and Christians) and non-Arab Muslims.<sup>1</sup> The list includes hundreds of acts of physical violence, some 60 incidents of Arab or Muslim passengers being prevented from traveling on airlines simply because of their “profile,” several hundred employment discrimination cases, and serious concerns arising from the USA Patriot Act. Tabloid media and bigoted radio talk show hosts contribute to an atmosphere of Islamophobia, and some Americans associate the word “Muslim” or “Arab” with “terrorist.” Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, conservative pundit Ann Coulter, commenting on Arab and Muslim countries, suggested that “we should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> An Islamophobic atmosphere has taken hold in the United States, targeting Muslims not for any crime, but merely for being Muslims.

## **Biblical Sources**

What is the proper Jewish reaction to Islamophobia? What does God command us to do? What does history teach us to do? To begin with, again and again in the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures), God prohibits oppression: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”<sup>3</sup> A few verses later, God takes the argument a step further and requires empathy on the part of the Israelites: “You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”<sup>4</sup> In the first of the Ten Commandments, God identifies Himself to the children of Israel at Sinai not as the Creator of the universe, but as the God who set them free from slavery: “The Lord your God who took you out of Egypt, the house of bondage.”<sup>5</sup> And regarding their former taskmasters, God commands the Israelites: “You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land.”<sup>6</sup> These amount to a small fraction of instances in which God makes it abundantly clear that He will not permit xenophobia (disdain for the foreigner, disdain for the “other”).<sup>7</sup> Islamophobia certainly falls under the rubric of xenophobia.

## Cultural Traditions

It could be argued that just because the Torah proclaims a precept, this does not necessarily indicate that the “People of the Book” hear these words or heed them. Nevertheless, the rabbinic tradition perceived the centrality of the principles mentioned above and wove them into practice and ritual. A few examples will elucidate this.

During the Passover *seder*, the ritual that commemorates the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, Jews are commanded to read aloud the ten plagues that God visited upon Pharaoh and Egypt as part of the process to win our freedom. With the recitation of each plague, we pour a drop of wine from our goblets. Wine symbolizes our joy; in spilling from our wine, we are literally removing a portion of our joy. Later in the narrative, we successfully cross the Sea of Reeds, but the pursuing Egyptian army is drowned. The Midrash (rabbinic commentary) tells us that at that instant, the angels wished to rejoice, but God rebuked them, saying: “The works of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you would utter song in My presence?!”<sup>8</sup>

Once a week we celebrate the Sabbath, a symbol of the culmination of the creation story. We welcome the Sabbath with a blessing over the wine, which specifically reminds us of our exodus from Egypt. According to Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kremer, it is our experience of slavery that forms the core from which moral obligations to other people are derived.<sup>9</sup> If we are to enjoy the sanctity of this day, we must not forget our former enslavement and its subsequent lessons.

On Yom Kippur, the fasting Day of Atonement, we read from the prophet Isaiah, where he points out the hypocrisy of the man who ceases eating or drinking for a day but continues to oppress others: “Is not this what I require of you as a fast: to loose the fetters of injustice, to untie the knots of the yoke, to snap every yoke and set free those who have been crushed? ... If you cease to pervert justice ... then your light will rise like dawn out of darkness.”<sup>10</sup> Fasting on this most holy of days becomes an empty gesture if not accompanied by just behavior in the greater society.

The festival of Chanukah (“dedication” in Hebrew) commemorates our victory over the Syrian Greeks in 165 BCE for freedom to identify and practice as Jews. Shortly after this anniversary established itself in our calendar, the sages of that time, concerned that we would use this annual celebration to glorify war, intentionally shifted the emphasis away from the battle by focusing instead on the rededication of the Temple and the freedom to be Jewish *openly* and *safely*.

But what good are these holidays, teachings, and scriptural citations if we do not act on them? Can we as Jews value our own freedom while ignoring the plight of our Muslim neighbors who face difficulties? No. Judaism is a religion based not on doctrine but on action. It is our tradition and within our teachings to work for social justice, take a stand against oppression, support the liberation of the downtrodden ... in other words, to behave according to the ethics of our inheritance. To digress from this path specifically when the Muslims are the oppressed is a twofold offense, for it involves not following the ethical obligations of our tradition and singling out Muslims as being uniquely unworthy of our support, which we might otherwise extend to other oppressed groups.

## Rabbinic Teachings

We do not merely read scripture and observe holy days. We live in and act in the world. Jewish teachers and leaders from ancient to modern times have emphasized our obligation to connect the lessons of our heritage to our actions inside and outside of our religious community.

Hillel, one of the founders of the rabbinic tradition, studied and taught some 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem.

Hillel's greatest legacy was his forceful intellect, which directed Judaism toward the goal of *tikkun olam*, the ethical bettering (literally, repairing) of the world. In the most famous tale told about Hillel, a non-Jew approaches and asks him to define the essence of Judaism while standing on one foot. "What is hateful unto you, do not do unto your neighbor," Hillel replies. "The rest is commentary – now go and study."<sup>11</sup>

The rabbinic tradition taught that the purpose of Jewish existence is nothing less than:

... to perfect the world under the rule of God, which is reiterated three times a day in the *Aleinu* prayer, which closes the morning, afternoon, and evening prayer services ... In Jewish teachings, both clauses – the world's ethical perfection and the rule of God – are equally important. Human beings are obligated to bring mankind to a knowledge of God, *whose primary demand of human beings is moral behavior*.<sup>12</sup>

According to *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*, a collection of moral advice and insights of leading rabbinic scholars), Hillel used to say: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"<sup>13</sup> Regarding the second of Hillel's questions, Louis

Kaplan taught: “If you are only for yourself, you cease to be a real human being, and you become no longer a ‘who’ but a ‘what’.”<sup>14</sup>

Naftali Tsvi Horowitz of Ropczyce, Poland, a Jewish mystic born in 1760, reinterpreted the Biblical account of the Torah’s revelation to construct a basic ethical principle. Drawing on Biblical verses, the Midrash, words from his own teacher, and mystical practices, he suggests that what was revealed was the name of God, mirrored on every human face: “When a person continually keeps this idea (that God is in the face of every other human being), then he will not easily be inclined to go astray.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1955, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the organization of North American Reform Judaism, issued its “First Statement of Basic Principles on the Synagogue and Social Action.” That document includes the following statements:

Judaism insists that we must apply constantly the sharp ethical insights of the prophets to specific social problems of our generation ... A synagogue which isolates itself from the fundamental issues of social justice confronting the community and the nation is false to the deepest traditions and values of the Jewish heritage ... As Jews and as Americans dedicated to the democratic tradition, we are impelled to join with our fellows in overcoming bigotry and prejudice; in seeking through education and legislation the elimination of discrimination and segregation because of race, religion, or national origin.<sup>16</sup>

The 1976 Centenary Perspective of the Central Conference of American Rabbis continued to emphasize these points, stating that “Judaism emphasizes action rather than creed as the primary expression of a religious life, the means by which we strive to achieve universal justice and peace.”<sup>17</sup> And although “a universal concern for humanity unaccompanied by a devotion to our particular people is self-destructive, a passion for our people without involvement in humankind contradicts what the prophets have meant to us.”<sup>18</sup>

The Platforms of Reform Judaism issued by the UAHC in 1999 included the aim to:

Seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom, and justice to our world. We are obligated to pursue *tzedek* (justice and righteousness) ... to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the stranger ... and to redeem those in physical, economic, and spiritual bondage. In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform Jewish belief and practice.<sup>19</sup>

In a statement released in March 2004, the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism highlighted the post-9/11 rise in human rights abuses against Arabs and Muslims in this country, stating that:

As Jews, we realize that we have a particularly important and indeed difficult role to play in this effort ... all of us in the Jewish community must remember that, with regard to our Muslim neighbors, there is more in our history and theology to unite us than divide us, and we have more to gain from building partnerships than from ignoring each other or, worse yet, from breaking ties or allowing hostility to foment. We must not forget that we are all God's children, all inheritors of the Abrahamic tradition ... There is enough at stake that we must be willing to extend our hands and hearts to them in an honest gesture of goodwill, cooperation, and respect. And if not now, when?<sup>20</sup>

Finally, Rabbi Mattithia, son of Heresh, said, "Be beforehand in the salutation of peace to all men."<sup>21</sup> This last quotation places the crux of the whole issue in focus: when it comes to doing the right thing, do not delay. Faith, study, and prayer are all indispensable, but they do not suffice. Act.

## Conclusion

Islamophobia, like any prejudice, assumes an unreasonable homogeneity of the group targeted. The ignorance – literally, a lack of familiarity – that allows us to generalize about a particular group in turn prohibits us from recognizing that a group is comprised of individuals. Blindness to individual humanity releases us of the responsibility to treat others as we would be treated, since that blindness has conditioned us to see not the individuals but only the generic soul-less label.

Generalization is not a Jewish tendency; it is a human one. We as Jews, however, know the wide spectrum of opinions and beliefs and appearances within our own "label"; we know that the political views of a Chasidic rabbi cannot be deduced from a conversation with a secular Jewish woman and vice versa. As Jews, on occasion we choose to set our differences aside, but we readily protest the ignorance that would lump us all together for the purpose of target practice. Thus we have no business supporting, either actively or passively, this same treatment of others.

"Post-9/11" has been a fertile time for insecurity, fear, withdrawal, and collective angst. The Jewish people are historically familiar with the link between a wounded society and its search for a scapegoat; specifically, we have *been* that scapegoat on countless occasions. Just as our Torah and our

sages teach us to be kind to the stranger “for you were strangers,” so our own experience as the downtrodden demands that we view and approach the current situation of Muslims in this country with heightened sensitivity and true empathy.

Here in the United States, Jews and Muslims, despite our historical and current experiences, live in relative comfort. We have an extraordinary opportunity to initiate a healing process and to make an effort to know one another, as individuals and as organized communities. Rabbis and lay leaders, shaykhs and imams, can establish regular communication and reciprocal visits. Teachers of the Jewish and Islamic religions can organize meetings between their respective students. Finally, and most importantly, individual Jews and Muslims at work, school, and in the neighborhood can meet and get to know members of the other faith. Hatred derives from fear. Fear is born of ignorance. The more we get to know one another, the more we will discover our commonality and understand our differences, the less we will fear, and together we will act on behalf of peace.

## Notes

1. “Post 9-11 Report on Hate Crimes and Discrimination,” American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Spring 2002.
2. National Review Online, [www.nationalreview.com/coulter/coulter091301.shtml](http://www.nationalreview.com/coulter/coulter091301.shtml), “This is War,” 13 September 2001.
3. Exodus, 22:21.
4. Exodus, 23:9.
5. Exodus, 20:2.
6. Deuteronomy, 23:8.
7. One law for stranger and citizen alike (Exodus 12:49 and Leviticus 24:22); Do not subvert the rights of strangers (Deuteronomy 24:17-18, 27:19); Befriend the stranger, (Deuteronomy 10:19); Afflict not the wretched (Proverbs 22:16; 22:22).
8. Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Raavnitzky, eds. “Midrash Avkir B. Sanh 39b,” in *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, 73.
9. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, ed. *The Women’s Torah Commentary*.
10. Isaiah 58:6-10.
11. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, “Shabbat,” 31a.
12. Ibid. (emphasis added by author)
13. *Pirkei Avot*, 1:14
14. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, 478. Louis Kaplan, born in 1902 in Russia, authored *A New Approach to the Teachings of the Torah*. He espoused

a view of Jewish education as an instrument for helping the individual find his/her place in the larger society of which he/she is a part.

15. Naftali Tsvi Horowitz of Ropczyce, *Zera Kodesh*, as cited in Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, *The Way into Jewish Mystical Tradition*, 65-68.
16. Michael A. Meyer and W. Gunther Plaut, eds. *The Reform Judaism Reader*.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. "Resolution on Reaching Out to Arab and Muslim Neighbors," *Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism*, March 2004
21. *Pirkei Avot*, 4:20