

## **Some Notes on a Jewish/ Muslim Movement of Justice and Compassion in America *after***

**September 11th**

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It is simply not true that September 11<sup>th</sup> changed everything. This understanding is widely cited like a mantra, as if repetition commands reality. But this mantra cedes too much power to the few - those who destroyed - and mystifies the power of America and the global economic system. The relations of power between and within nations have not changed and if anything have solidified in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>. After September 11<sup>th</sup> things are as they were, and more.

Religions and religiosity have not changed either. The discussion of Islam exemplifies the great lengths that the media and the broader public discussion in the West will move in the wake of tragedy to search out the religious motivations of action and reaction in the world. To say that Islam has been demonized in the West in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> is wrong. If anything, Islam has been romanticized, segmented, its tendencies firmly delineated into good and evil. But no religion, especially one that aspires to a global status, can be so easily defined. Islam contains every possibility that any monotheistic religion does, no more or less: the beauty of belief and justice as well as the horror of fanaticism and atrocity. For how did Islam move from its locus to become a world religion if not through its strength of character and its colonial

carriers? Viewed from the vantage point of indigenous religions and spirituality, Islam replays the history of Christianity in its global surge, again expanding through its message and colonial power.

Romanticizing religion has its place; in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the threat of further demonizing Islam in the West, such an exercise was indeed necessary. It was also largely successful. Though pressure has certainly been felt and discrimination and profiling experienced, the overall reality in the United States has been of quiet and respect. For every case of Islamophobia there have been examples of support and embrace. As a growing and in general immigrant religion in America, the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> has shown a remarkable political maturity among the general public in response to Islam, at least in light of the history of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But romanticizing religion in order to protect the ordinary believer or ethnic heirs of the religion may be used to separate the internal and external and mobilize society for war with the other, in this case the Muslim outside the borders. To say that Islam is only a religion of peace and those who commit acts of violence pervert the religion is to strip Islam of its rough edges, in the American mind to show its kinship with a peaceful Christianity, itself tamed and stripped of its own history of violence and atrocity.

In short, a crusade against militant Islam, incorrectly limiting jihad to a spiritual struggle, allows a mystification of Christianity, as if it has only functioned as a spirituality of peace. I use the term crusade deliberately, for at its base America is an evangelical nation with its own sense of mission and destiny in the world, and is historically Christian, though today all citizens, no matter their specific faith orientation, are enlisted and ultimately promote this evangelism. Like Christians in the Islamic world who, while maintaining their specific identity and rituals, are

shaped by Islamic civilization, Muslims in the West will become increasingly Christian in the broadest sense of the American definition of that term.

In the context of civilization, the Islamification of Christianity and Christianization of Islam is perfectly understandable and can bear great fruit in the diversification and evolution of both Christianity and Islam. Though fought by religious authorities, the trajectory is clear in all cases. Any ethnic or religious minority becomes over time more and more like the majority. Assimilation is fought. Assimilation is the norm. September 11<sup>th</sup> will further assimilation in America and make safer the journey of Muslims in the West.

In this Americanization of Islam, a further division between Islam within and outside America will occur. But to what end? As a Jew this process of assimilation is almost complete, but with a caveat: unlike Muslims in America, Jews have arrived at a place of power within the American political and cultural process. Unlike Muslims in America, Jews are now free to connect with Jews outside of America in a solidarity that is insistent and respected by non-Jews. Whereas for Muslims in America, the Islamic world outside America is fraught with accusing images, the historic suffering of European Jews and the images of triumphant Jews in the creation and defense of the state of Israel have raised Jewish status in America.

The assimilation of Jews in America is a victory though in the shadow of the destruction of European Jewry and the consolidation of the Sephardic Jewish diaspora from the Arab world into Israel. Since aspects of European culture and the Arab world are denigrated in America, Jews in the U.S. have benefited, albeit unintentionally, from the events of Jewish history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Israel is seen as a western, small European state tied in a dependent way to the United States, so that even though it is geographically located in the Arab world, it is a place of prestige for Jews in America, perhaps, again, because of its culturally western orientation.

Jerusalem is important in this identity question for Jews and Muslims in America, again functioning at cross-purposes, negative for Muslims and positive for Jews, at least in the mind of non-Muslim and non-Jewish Americans.

In essence Jews have brought the whole Jewish world into the imagination of America as somehow American while the Islamic world, even that part of the Islamic world in the United States, is seen as an outsider. The post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world in the long run will further the assimilation of Muslims in America but the foreignness of Islam in general will remain. Like Jews, American Muslims will become more Christian, but at least for the foreseeable future, the Islamic world outside will remain a point of contention and disconnect. It is doubtful that a museum dedicated to Islamic civilization or any event in Islamic history will ever appear on the Mall in Washington, D.C. or that Congress will swear allegiance to a foreign government with a Muslim majority.

## II

For the foreseeable future Jews can relate to Muslims in America as the assimilated with the soon-to-be assimilated. The difference will remain: Jewish assimilation will include a solidarity with other Jews religiously and politically; Islamic assimilation will diminish or sever relations with Islam in other parts of the world. Personal relations among Muslims, especially through the extended family structure, will remain. However, as time moves on more and more of the familial relations will be in America. A paternalistic relation between Jews and Muslims is part of the future and in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> is already in evidence. More than any other community, Jews will reach out to their Muslim neighbors, welcome them, assure them of their dignity and safety. Like the African-American community, Muslims find that often the

ones who accept them as they are and may even fight for their political rights in a difficult environment are Jews.

But while these facts are telling and important, the reality is much more complex. Like the African-American civil rights struggle, a minority of Jews will accept Muslims in their broader understandings, which include their struggle as a people or community in solidarity with their extended community in different parts of the world. But the majority of Jews, including and especially the Jewish establishment and those linked with it, will include Muslims in the broader American cultural spectrum insofar as the broader connections and aspirations - especially as they relate to the Middle East and Jerusalem - are tamed.

The inclusion of Muslims and Islam by Jews and Judaism is thus paradoxically both real and an illusion, to be celebrated and to be wary of. A hard choice is presented to the Islamic community: acceptance for diminishment; assimilation into America for quiescence. Of course there remains another choice. The Jewish community as a whole can abandon its support of Muslims in America or can discipline the community, as the African-American community was disciplined when Black Power was advocated or when the goals of the civil rights movement evolved from equal protection under the law into entitlements that demanded an accounting from white society.

The disciplining of Jesse Jackson as an African-American political leader by the Jewish establishment is instructive here. As a civil rights leader in the shadow of Martin Luther King, Jr., Jackson was acceptable to the Jewish community, but as his leadership assumed its own dynamic and legitimacy, as he grew in stature and internationalized his vision, as he reached out in the Middle East conflict and embraced Yassir Arafat and then began to address the nation in his presidential bids, he was severely and irreparably disciplined by Jewish leadership. His sin

was less the assumed leadership status for African-Americans in their locality - living far away from the masses of African-Americans, this movement was more symbolic for Jews than of any concrete significance. Jackson's sin was his attempt to usurp the direction of the movement from the watchful eye of the Jewish establishment to include issues that are central to Jewish identity, status and affluence in America. A paternalistic relationship of Jews and African-Americans was assumed as critical to Jewish support. And since support for minorities is hard to come by, could Jackson and the entire civil rights movement afford to alienate the one minority with institutional, media and economic power that would support African-Americans, albeit in a more limited agenda?

We often overlook community power when we analyze community relations. At the same time we often see community aspirations primarily within a community framework. The genius of Jewish ascendancy in the post-Holocaust period is the realization that the individual and community advance together, while the genius of Jewish power in relation to the dominant political and religious culture in America is its ability to appeal as one to that ethos while demanding that other minorities split their agenda, segment and diminish it, until the Jewish argument for the inclusion of the "other" is on Jewish turf. Here Jews serve as the broker, the middle man in a political, cultural and religious sense.

Even progressive Jews serve as brokers, introducing progressive Muslims to liberal America. Again inclusion has a price. To be progressive in America demands certain credentials and lifestyles, certain attitudes and professions, approximating a creedal affirmation. Individuality is affirmed over communal unity and the values of the progressive left in all areas of life become the litmus test for authenticity. While there remains a certain romanticism for dress and community, Muslims need to assimilate here as well. For how to argue authenticity as

an individual with values of enlightened modernity when tied to what seem to be ancient sensibilities and cultures? A division ensues that objectifies the external and renders asunder the internal until schizophrenia becomes the norm. How to be ancient, tied to the Muslim world as seen by the West, and modern, aligned in life and thought with the post-modern?

The issue of Israel/Palestine is crucial here for Muslims of Palestinian descent and Jerusalem the issue for Muslims throughout the world. The price of admission to America for the Jewish establishment is Palestinian and Muslim assent to Jewish equality in the land and city, at the very least, and for many Jews, Jewish superiority. Often this “equality” is itself superiority disguised by the power of articulation, status and power. Among progressive Jews equality can also be superiority disguised by the rhetoric of Jewish suffering, anguish and innocence.

The parameters of discussion, the thinkable thought of Palestinians and Muslims in general is therefore constricted in many ways. The equality of Jews and Palestinians, for example, is already a political assertion of Jewish rights in the land; the proposal to divide the land into two states for two peoples is already a victory for the Jewish claim that Jews are indigenous to the land, like the Palestinians. The separation of the two peoples into two states seems fair within this claim, yet the land area, the cultural, political and military power are profoundly unequal.

How many progressive Jews, even in their assertion of equality between the two communities, propose equality in land, economy and military as critical to a new beginning for Jews *and* Palestinians? Leaving aside the historical claims for a moment, claims that are less than a century old in their assertion by Jews and resistance by Palestinians, how many individual Jews and organizations on the progressive left state the need for a redistribution of land in Israel/Palestine or the creation of a Palestinian military equal to that of Israel? In the years of

struggle - during the last two years of intifada - where in America or among progressive Jews can Palestinians argue this land redistribution and military power? Or simply the recreation of Palestine with Jews and Palestinians as equal citizens throughout the land?

To the casual and informed observer, Jerusalem is known to be the key to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Jewish establishment states boldly the Jewish claim to all of Jerusalem and some Jewish peace groups see this claim as divisive and injurious to the possibility of peace. Yet the sharing of Jerusalem, again already a victory of claims and rights to the city, is most often discussed in abstract terms. Where does the city begin and end? What is in the city and outside of it? Does sharing the city as a joint capital of Israel and Palestine mean West Jerusalem as well as East? Does sharing the city mean dismantling the Jewish settlements that ring Jerusalem or integrating them? Would a shared Jerusalem mean an integrated school system and police force? A government that has citizens of Jerusalem rather than Jewish and Palestinian representatives of divided enclaves?

Religion in Jerusalem has always been contentious and bloody. The vision of Jerusalem as a place of prayer for the three monotheistic faiths has, for the most part, been a messianic dream rather than a lived reality. "Praying" Jerusalem, the children of Abraham returning to each other and the one God, too often softens and even dispenses with the reality of economic and political power. Prayer can be individual and collective in private or in public places but without a supporting culture and politics, without a communal dimension in the world, prayer becomes at most a symbolic resistance. The beautiful mosques of Jerusalem become museum pieces and tourist attractions when the community which supports and peoples them is reduced to a tolerated presence and denied political rights.



The Abrahamic faiths become mystified, as if the gathering of buildings representing these faiths in the city of Jerusalem are themselves a geography of faith and hope. Just the opposite is true: without a vibrant and empowered community the Abrahamic faiths and their gathering places become empty symbols of arguments that were not made, paths thought impossible to take, and visions that were, for reasons of propriety, suppressed.

### III

If the situation was reversed, if Jews and Judaism were on the margins of the West with Muslims and Islam the empowered minority after a long history of suffering, would inclusion carry the same price for Jews as it does for Muslims? The argument from the history of those societies informed by Islam, including Palestine and Jerusalem, is of interest and has its importance. Certainly it is true that societies informed by Islam have in the main and over a long period been more accepting of Jews than European societies formed by Christianity. In the most extreme of examples there is no history of holocaust toward the Jews in the Islamic world as there is in the western Christian world. Anti-Jewishness in general has been much more pronounced and with the gravest of consequences among Christians rather than Muslims.

But the argument of history falls short of prediction. In different circumstance and time periods the dynamics of religious traditions change, to which the recent and revolutionary rapprochement between Jews and Christians in the West attests. There is no argument from history that structures respond for the good or ill. There is no guarantee, for example, that the Islamic world would accept Jews in great number and as a political community in the Middle East today regardless of the detailed studies of positive interaction between the two communities in previous eras.

Of course there is no need for such a guarantee to be made if indeed the Jewish community organized in an empowered political entity is anathema in Palestine and the Arab world. Still the argument often put forth is disingenuous, at least in theory, that if two states were established they would live side by side in peace. This could happen if military power and an overall consensus on both sides agreed that strategically this was in the best interests of both communities *but it does not necessarily follow* from the history of Islam and the trajectory of Palestinian society. This is not a criticism or an affirmation of the acceptance or non-acceptance of an empowered Jewish presence in the Middle East. It is simply a warning against a romanticism. Jews and Judaism are not innocent but neither are Muslims or Islam.

There is a place beyond innocence in our personal and communal lives. And there is a place beyond the understanding that our histories carry an exclusive redemption through God or the land. In all places and times the redemption promised in the Torah, the New Testament and the Koran must be internalized and relativized, lest the redemption of one's own becomes a disaster for the other. There must also be a place beyond the Constantinian synthesis of church and state, synagogue and state, mosque and state, where religion becomes the handmaiden of the state and legitimator of injustice. The belief in innocence and redemption and the use of state power to assure that both are accepted as true and defining of Islam and Judaism, of Muslims and Jews, is the dead end of religion and religiosity and the beginning of an assimilation that becomes a cycle of self-congratulation and deceit.

Who can argue against this sensibility of assimilation and desire for acceptance by the state for the many who seek ordinary life in their homeland and especially in a recent diaspora? The drive to be like the powerful or at least be by their side is strong as is the need to keep other communities within one's power to define. Ultimately the question is neither blame nor the

potential of role reversal. Rather, after the long and necessary analysis of social and political reality, the central question reverts to the religious. What does it mean to be religious, to be Jew or Muslim, and how does that relate to the community that carries that designation? The religious person and the religious community may be connected by a deep and historical bond but there may also be a deep cleavage and a crossing boundary that is surprising and instructive. In the end our declared solidarity as Muslim and Jew to the Islamic and Jewish communities may be a romanticized notion and a sociological imposition calling for evaluation and interpretation.

There is much to be explored here as we continue to probe September 11<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath. Now the categories of Muslim and Jew seem more and more discussed and defined. Later the substance of these categories will be found wanting. Now Muslim and Jew, Islam and Judaism are mobilized for defense and aggression, one Constantinian in its power, the other aspiring to that status. Yet the emptiness is apparent. Many who carry the label of Muslim and Jew are neither religious nor culturally identified except for external circumstance and need. And those who identify with Judaism and Islam at a deeper level often use it to distinguish themselves from the worldly pursuits of power which in their lives they either already enjoy or seek out.

Posturing is deemed, at least in America, as the art of politics and indeed this too often is the case. Yet religious and ethnic posturing is legendary. Both contribute to the cycle of violence and atrocity that seems to define our times and so much of history. We always seem to want to ask the questions that release us from this posturing and this cycle. Judaism and Islam seem vehicles for those questions but the exigencies of life throw us backward into identities that do not correspond to the wrestling peculiar to the human condition. Of course once, before Judaism and Islam, before Jew and Muslim, there was a wrestling that is recorded in the Torah

and the Koran. And there have been followers of these paths, these ways of wrestling with God, truth and each other. But the religions and the politics of identity and community have usurped these paths as definable and codified and as callings to a transcendent that becomes narrower and more militarized in times of crisis.

Jerusalem is a victim of this narrowing as a definable place of worship and identity until the streets are filled with the interchangeable bodies of civilians and soldiers, of the religious and secular, the violent and nonviolent. In this carnage one is forced to ask if the identities as Jew and as Muslim are worth the cost and if the mobilization of these identities is not part of the carnage itself. But if this question is posed, another follows quickly: Without these identities, who are we? And if the identity of Jew and Muslim is jettisoned, will other identities fill this void, identities that are even more problematic, perhaps more violent, pretending also to innocence and redemption? Surely this is the experience of modernity and secularity. The cycle of violence and atrocity has not lessened in the West because the bonds of religion have been loosened and most often coupled with a reassertion of the need for identity and belonging. But those who criticize secularity in the West and pretend to an untainted religiosity are only fooling themselves and mystifying their reality. Material civilization is found in all societies and the naming of one society as secular and the other religious is a mystification that is itself a violence.

#### IV

If there is neither secularity nor religiosity on a communal level without power and identity and the state, then assimilation is the norm and the attempt to set a community apart or above is false and misleading. Jew over Muslim is political and economic in a certain context bound by time and space. Muslim over Jew is a theological projection that makes sense only in a framework backed by status and power. In this sense Jerusalem is neither here nor there, not

worth the fight religiously, either the domination of or resistance to domination, in an ultimate sense. In the cycle of conquering and being conquered Jerusalem stands out as perhaps the pre-eminent example of the absolute need to demystify and relativize claims of geographic and sacred space. The beauty of Jerusalem arises here in the space between claim and relativization and in the appreciation of a history that lacks a definitive conclusion and has aroused so much passion.

This may be the intersection of Jews and Muslims in their diaspora, a relation to and a suspicion of Jerusalem and the claims made in its name. Inside Jerusalem there is a desperate need for the ability to live an ordinary life. Outside Jerusalem there is a realization that ordinary life is precious and that Jerusalem has often denied this very need. Jerusalem is less a place of triumph; its holiness is covered with blood. Jerusalem is the middle of Israel/Palestine, crucial to both Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians, but it is also broken, the meeting ground of religious and political visions that often as not has produced a cycle of violence and atrocity.

Thus the broken middle that Jerusalem represents can be a new metaphor beyond the claims and counter-claims of unity or division. A religious and political vision characterized by middle and brokenness demands the demystification of history and teleology in the public arena while allowing eschatological sensibilities to be embraced in synagogues and mosques. The overarching citizenship of all those who live in Jerusalem would free the concept of ordinary life to compete with the extraordinary claims of the messianic. Investment in ordinary life and the fruits of that life are the only remedy to a history of religions that are infused with violence and atrocity in the name of God.

The place of intersection, the broken middle of Jerusalem, may give birth to a Jewish/Muslim movement of justice and compassion after September 11<sup>th</sup> in the land and in the

diaspora. Here the disparity of power and status is recognized, resisted and struggled within. No slogan - End the Occupation! The Right of Return is Inviolable! - is worth the death of innocents and no slogan will transform a route into a victory. Slogans of ending and return mystify the reality and transform a politics into a religious crusade, whether the people shouting the slogans are religious or not. The transformation of a strategic and contextual politics into a war unto death is precisely what must be avoided. Victory is not right around the corner when the very survival of a people is in question. And one wonders what that victory would produce. Who and what survives victory? And who and what survives the anticipated reversal of defeat into victory?

The broken middle of Jerusalem forces us to survey the geography of loss, a reality much more consistent with Jewish and Muslim life today than the slogans invoked. The Islamic loss in Palestine and elsewhere is easier to trace than the Jewish one, but again that ease is measured in the language of power and coercion. Of course Jew and Muslim in America meet in America, in diaspora, precisely because of defeat and weakness and trial in other parts of the world. Both Jew and Muslim are struggling within histories of contribution and struggle, victory and defeat, power and weakness. These long histories have experienced too much to hoist flags of superiority or even to mobilize for the next battle in a never-ending war.

The geography of loss alerts us to casualties of this never-ending war in the present. The casualties are lives lost *and* the emptying of the ethical content; the very center of each tradition, articulated in text and liturgy, is a casualty as well. For without justice and compassion, tending to the weak and the estranged, what is there left of Judaism and Islam? Within the context of violence and atrocity, the very claims that both religions repeat daily are found wanting. What is left is an identity to assert, to rebel against and within. What remains is the persecution of those

who place conscience over identity or conscience as the essence of identity by the very people who call themselves Jews and Muslims.

Today there is a civil war in both communities around this question of identity and conscience. And it seems that both sides of the Jewish and Islamic community who seek the continuation of violence and atrocity are much closer to one another and that those Jews and Muslims of conscience are likewise closer to one another. The geography of loss - of land, death and ethics - forces an end of sloganeering on the one hand and of identity politics on the other. For if we are closer together on the very issues of life and death, can we be very far apart on the question of meaning and God?

Jews of conscience are Jewish and more than that. Muslims of conscience are Muslim and more than that as well. Thinking critically about politics and religion is thinking about the possibilities and perils of assimilation for our communities of birth and identity, at the same time giving birth to a new community that moves beyond the old. All movements of solidarity and compassion are by their very nature transforming of the old; they point to another reality that is never realized, to be sure, but always on the horizon, the something more promised by the local prophets of Moses and Mohammad. That Judaism and Islam hold out that something more demands respect even as we realize that the traditions and institutions that claim these prophets often betray that vision.

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