

RELIGIOUS TERRORISTS?
a sermon by Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor
Congregation Da'at Elohim - the Temple of
Universal Judaism
Rosh HaShana morning 5772

The reading of Akedat Yikhak – the Binding of Isaac never ceases to provoke me – I always probe it for meaning, and most of the simple take away messages, I end up rejecting. Are we to be impressed with Abraham’s abiding love of God – to destroy the thing he loves best to prove his fealty? Are we to be impressed with Isaac’s seeming willingness to be the sacrifice – to offer himself up as part of a grand demonstration of faith? Are we to see this as a veiled – or not-so veiled diatribe against human sacrifice (which was practiced in other contemporaneous cultures)? Are we to be comforted by the notion that God seems to change the Holy Mind at the last minute? Or, do we (as I have for quite a long time) see the message in this that Abraham just didn’t hear right – he didn’t get the message (my beloved wife accuses me of this all the time)?

My reaction, now, as it has always been – horror. Can I be faithful to a god that asks this of a follower? Reflecting on religion, last night, I presented what religion – and specifically our faith – offers to the world – in a positive way. How can we harmonize the story of Isaac’s almost sacrifice with a tradition which centers on our responsibilities to ourselves, to others and to God?

And while these thoughts are swimming, I am struck by the continued use of religion to justify heinous acts in our world today.

This summer, many of us were struck dumb when we heard the news of an attack on a youth camp in Norway. Anders Behring Breivik, single-handedly slaughtered innocent young people outside of Oslo – and justified it with a 1,500 page manifesto calling for the destruction of non-Christians in Europe and all those who were open to the presence of non-Christians. In the name of Christianity and its preservation, he went on this hate-filled rampage, justified in the notion that he was defending his church, like the Crusaders of old.

Mark Juergensmeyer, a sociology professor at UC Santa Barbara and editor of the book "Global Religions: An Introduction", wrote an essay likening Breivik to Timothy McVeigh, who killed 168 people in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. It was the deadliest terrorist attack on U.S. soil until 9/11.

McVeigh and Breivik were both "good-looking young Caucasians, self-enlisted soldiers in an imagined cosmic war to save Christendom, and both were Christian terrorists," Juergensmeyer wrote.

And despite the fact that for centuries during which Christians went on one rampage after another to rid the world of unbelievers – can anyone suggest in this enlightened time, that Christianity can be used to justify murder? And yet, in Nigeria, Christians attack Muslims, in the name of defense of their faith.

And what of Islam? Last week, I read an article in the New York Times that almost caused me to lose my lunch. Jeffrey Gettleman wrote of a radio station in Somalia that ran a contest for children. He explained "... a Somali radio station run by the Shabab, the most powerful Islamist militant group in the war-ravaged country, held an awards ceremony to honor children who were experts at Shabab trivia and at reciting the Koran. The prizes? Fully automatic assault rifles and live hand grenades. The contest itself was held during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, and featured questions that the Shabab seemed to think every

child should know, like which war was Sheik Timajilic (a famous Shabab warrior) killed in? ... On Sunday, the awards were handed out at a ceremony held at the Andalus radio station in Elasha Biyaha, a small town near Mogadishu, the capital. (Andalus was the part of Spain seized by the Arabs in the Middle Ages.) The first- and second-place winners won AK-47 assault rifles, some money and Islamic books. The third-place winner was given two hand grenades. The contestants were 10 to 17 years old. ... But at the awards ceremony, Sheik Muktar Robow Abu Monsur, who is widely considered a moderate Shabab leader, proudly said, 'Children should use one hand for education and the other for a gun to defend Islam,' according to Somali accounts of the event. The Shabab and other militant Islamist groups in Somalia have become famous for their zeal in enforcing their strict interpretation of Islamic purity." (NYT September 20, 2011)

And we are well familiar with news reports whose headlines begin with the words "Muslim Terrorist.. or Islamic Terrorists." At what point do the majority of these faith's proponents declare without equivocation and without hesitation - THIS IS A PERVERSION OF MY FAITH.

I have no problem saying that the late Meir Kahane, distorted the teachings of Judaism, and I separated myself from his hate-filled rants. I do not hesitate to declare that Israeli settlers, who go on the offensive in the name of our faith, pervert what is most meaningful to me.

At what point will leaders of the religious community comes out and say - NOT IN MY NAME - NOT IN MY FAITH. I cannot believe that any faith - Judaism, Christianity, Islam - in a pure reading of the religious doctrine espoused, demand the wholesale destruction of other human beings. Religious texts may be written in absolutes, but the inheritors of those texts are human beings, and must be guided by the principles undergirding that faith. While God may be presented in unerring terms by religious tomes, we humans must have the humility necessary to understand that we just might not understand it all. It might be

written in black and white, but to read religious texts without subtlety, without being circumspect, without challenging the text is to render the intricate internal logic meaningless and we are left with instructions for simpletons. I say without hesitation that I have studied at length the Christian tradition and Islam, as well, and I cannot believe that those who use these faiths to justify their heinous acts are faithful to the teachings of their tradition. THERE ARE NO RELIGIOUS TERRORISTS - ONLY TERRORISTS WHO USE AND ABUSE RELIGION TO JUSTIFY THEMSELVES.

Yet, because there has not been a hew and cry from responsible religious leaders distancing their faith from these awful activities, many believe that the faith does, in fact, justify violence. One poll after another demonstrates that a plurality of Americans believe that Islam is a violent religion. About.com had an internet poll - 53% said that Islam is a violent religion while 39% said that Islam was a religion of peace. Pew Research (March 2011) concluded that 40% of the American public believed that Islam is more likely than other religions to promote violence. 42% of Americans disagree with that and almost 1 in 4 are not sure. But think about the numbers - 40% -- 2 in every 5 people believe that about Islam. It is no wonder that paranoia about Muslims in America has become so pervasive - especially in the past decade. Not for a minute do I believe that faithful Muslims perpetrated the attacks of 9-11. Hate-filled, criminally insane people fueled by a perversion of Islam and promises of glory were responsible. But I am sad to say that too few Muslim clerics vocally distanced themselves. And those who did, were drowned out by the rage of those who believe that there are religious terrorists.

Recently Rabbi Eric Yoffie, at an event called Shoulder to Shoulder held in Washington DC made the following statement:

The events of 9/11 and other events since, such as the Park51 controversy, opened a door that some have been quick to rush through. Ten years after 9/11, negative views of Muslim Americans continue to rise. Ten years after 9/11, it has somehow become respectable to verbally attack

Muslims and Islam in America. Vital distinctions are being blurred by people who should know better. I am referring to distinctions between the radical, fanatic version of Islam, held by a tiny minority of Moslems, and centrist Islam; I am referring to distinctions between the moderate majority and the extremists on the margins.

There are very real consequences when entire populations are represented in the public imagination by their worst elements, when the sins of the few are applied to the group as a whole.

I have watched in astonishment as prominent politicians, including candidates for President of the United States, have found it politically opportune to peddle divisive anti-Muslim bigotry.

And if all of this were not enough, we have been witness to a paranoid fantasy about Sharia law taking over America by stealth. In the last year, more than two dozen states have proposed legislation outlawing the use of Sharia law in state courts. Louisiana, Tennessee and Oklahoma have already approved such measures, which I do not hesitate to call anti-Muslim.

When I hear such things, I can barely contain myself. What if a state was to put forward a bill that referenced Jewish law or Canon law in a similar way? Jews and Catholics would be outraged, and rightly so. To say that these laws are unnecessary is an understatement of monumental proportions. Have these lawmakers not heard of the First Amendment, which already prohibits courts from adopting any kind of religious code as law of the land?

These laws serve only to do two things: single out Muslims as second-class citizens and undermine the Constitution of the United States.

And I agree with almost everything that Rabbi Yoffie said. Save for one notion - I believe that those who can be labeled radical

and extremists within a faith community, have already stepped outside the circle of their community. They do their community more harm than good and religious leaders have an obligation to defend their faith by pointing out when their faith is used to justify horrific behavior.

And many in our society perpetrate this notion of religiously motivated violence. In a recent report which monitors our country's national security efforts, the FBI employs presentation materials at its counter-terrorism trainings that paints Islam with a very broad brush. And when challenged, the material was rewritten, but it still makes the same ascertainment that we are "at war with Islam." In its stories *Wired* points out that many terrorism experts don't agree with this worldview. And on Capitol Hill, Sens. Joe Lieberman (I-CT) and Susan Collins (R-ME) have demanded that the training curriculum be properly vetted.

[Talking Points Memo reports:](#)

"An initial review by our staff reveals that agencies providing grants to state and local law enforcement lack meaningful standards for counter-terrorism curriculum and an adequate vetting process for individual trainers," Lieberman and Collins wrote.

"In addition, state and local law enforcement often have little to no guidance from the federal government on what counter-terrorism training should entail," they write. "The result has often been cases of trainers spewing inaccurate or even bigoted information to state and local law enforcement personnel, stigmatizing Muslim-Americans generally, and in effect, lending support to the false narrative that we are 'at war' with Islam."

It is up to us, to re-educate the public and to stand up against the misuse of our faith, or the faiths of others.

In ten days we will read the words of the prophet Isaiah (58):

Because on your fast day
you're thinking about your business!
You're oppressing your workers!

Your fast is marred with ego and argument.
You strike with a wicked fist.
Your fasting today
will not make your voice heard on high!"

"Is this the fast I want?
A day for people to starve their bodies?
Do I want you to bow your heads like the reeds,
to mortify your bodies
with coarse cloth and ashes?
You call that a fast, a day
when Adonai will look upon you with favor?"

"No!
This is the fast I want:
unlock the chains of wickedness,
untie the knots of servitude.
Let the oppressed go free,
their bonds broken.
Share your bread with the hungry,
and welcome the homeless into your home.
When you see the naked, clothe them.
All people are your kin:
do not ignore them."

"Then you will shine like the dawn,
and healing will rise up within you.
Your righteousness will vindicate you;
the presence of God will guard your safety.
Then, when you call, Adonai will answer.
When you cry out
God will say, 'Here I am.'"

(translation by Rabbi Rachel Barenblat – the velveteen rabbi)

Isaiah was vocal in his insistence that the people were misusing religion – they cried out that God did not hear them and he reminded them of the true teachings of our faith. Wearing the trappings of religious piety, while doing awful things demands the voice of the prophet – this is a perversion of what we are taught.

And so, I return to the Torah reading of Akedat Yitzhak – and the story is revealed anew to me. This is a lesson about how the teachings and demands of one’s faith can easily be misunderstood because of zealotry and piety. Abraham was asked to bring forth Isaac as if he were an offering worthy of God – AS IF – meaning treat him as something special, as something holy. And in a gross distortion of religiously motivated zeal – the generations of our people could have ended on the top of that mountain. Had Abraham carried through with his misguided mission, we would not be here today. The price of distorting and perverting religious teachings is that high.

There are no religious terrorists – and violence perpetrated in the name of religion requires one thing: Brave, prophetic voices saying – this is NOT our faith.

For these voices, we wait.