

**Ki Tetze-5770**  
**The Cordoba Community Center and Mosque**  
**Rabbi Micah Citrin**

If you have been following the news of late, a debate rages right now about whether or not an Islamic community center and mosque should be built some two blocks from ground zero and the devastation of 9/11. This controversy ultimately revolves one of our most sacred American values, freedom of religious expression, but it also deals with honoring sacred memory. In communities across America, citizens are trying to make sense of this issue as Americans, and inevitably, through the particular lenses of their faith and ethnic traditions. On this Shabbat, let's pause to consider the chorus of different attitudes to this question, consider what our own Jewish experience can teach us, and glean wisdom that this week's Torah can shed on the issue.

It should be no surprise that communal Jewish responses to the question of building the Cordoba Mosque are split. The Anti-Defamation League's statement rejects any opposition to the Islamic Center based on bigotry, but goes on to discourage the project at that particular location writing, "...ultimately this is not a question of rights, but a question of what is right. In our judgment, building an Islamic Center in the shadow of the World Trade Center will cause some victims more pain – unnecessarily – and that is not right." The Union for Reform Judaism, on the other hand, issued a statement that welcomed the building of the center writing, "We welcome the planned construction of the Cordoba House mosque and community center in Lower Manhattan. Although we fully recognize the strong sentiments that have characterized the debate over the center, we strongly believe that Cordoba House's presence will reflect our nation's historic commitment to religious liberty."

The voices of secular pundits, politicians, and scholars have been just as varied, if not more so than the Jewish community. Perhaps NY Times columnist Ross Douthat sums up the differences of opinion best. He explains that the divergent views are products of two contradictory Americas or two different American impulses. Douthat's first America is the one that embraces the Constitutional freedom of religion, and welcomes a plurality of people and beliefs systems within this country. Douthat's second America is the one that embraces a more singular vision of what it means to be American. According to Douthat, this is the American tendency toward a culturally unified country, in many ways based on its white Protestant roots. It is this second American impulse that pressured immigrants to change their names at Ellis Island, that has pushed for English only, and cultural assimilation. Jews experienced this first hand along with Catholics, Irish, Italians, and other waves of immigrants. Douthat concludes that both Americas have legitimate and necessary views when it comes to this debate. He writes, "The first America is correct to insist on Muslims' absolute right to build and worship where they wish. But the second America is right to press for something more from Muslim Americans...Too often, American Muslim institutions have turned out to be entangled with ideas and groups that most Americans rightly consider beyond the

pale. Too often, American Muslim leaders strike ambiguous notes when asked to disassociate themselves completely from illiberal causes.”

So where does this leave us as Reform Jews? What ought to shape our attitudes and opinions? Our Torah portion this week ends with God instructing the Israelites to blot out the memory of Amalek, the people in the Torah who attacked the rear of the Israelite community during the Exodus where women, children and the elderly marched. In blotting out the memory of Amalek, we are instructed to vigorously resist evil in the world, an evil that knows no ethical boundaries. But in this battle against evil in the world, the commentary warns us not to act out of vengeance and hatred, for in this way we would not only stoop to the level of Amalek, but become Amalek ourselves.

Based on this teaching, I would like to share three possible Jewish approaches to the issue raised by the question of the Cordoba Islamic Center. First, not allowing a Mosque to be built in the neighborhood of lower Manhattan near ground zero implies that all Moslems perpetrated the atrocities of 9/11. This would be to react out of blind vengeance and suggest that all Muslims are the enemies of America, even those who are Americans. As Jews, we know all too well from our history the discrimination of being branded with stereotypes and generalizations. To be sure America and the Jewish world face a very real threat from radical and fundamentalist Islam. This is the true evil that we should fight.

Second, some in this debate have suggested that until a church or synagogue can be built in the heart of the Arab world, America, let alone lower Manhattan is no place for Islamic institutions. To this stance we must remember the lesson from our Torah portion. We cannot stoop to the standards of others whose values we do not share in shaping how we behave in the world. Why would we want the values system of a closed society to influence how we approach issues of religious expression?

Finally, the moral strength of Torah is rooted in its vision of establishing societies of justice based on the rule of law. So too, America’s strength stems from its foundation in laws, and a Constitution that safe guards the rights of all citizens. If the law is at the whim of emotion or simply coerced by the will of the majority without a judicial check, our democracy has been lost. If we must choose to err on the side of Ross Douthat’s 1<sup>st</sup> America of Constitutional tolerance and his 2<sup>nd</sup> America of a litmus test of allegiance, as Jews I believe we should err on the side of tolerance. And we must have confidence that fundamentalist ideas expressed under the banner of free speech can be defeated in the arena of public discourse.

As Jews, we hold memory sacred. As Americans we remember the horror of September 11, 2001 and the thousands of victims Christian, Jew, and Muslim, citizens of the U.S. and the world who were killed in those towers. Our legacy in America is the achievement of enjoying the freedoms and blessings that this democracy offers. Our ongoing contribution to American society is speaking out against discrimination of all forms so that the rights we enjoy as Jews extend to all who include themselves in the tapestry we call America.