

PURIM 2009

Tonight, I'm going to address a topic that's become a bit of an obsession. I've always thought of myself as a son of Jacob, but a couple of years back, I realized what it means to be a child of Abraham. Mostly, it entails responsibilities; in particular, the duty to work together with our fellow Cousins of the Book and fight for peace. Let us reflect on how to wage this fight. I'd like to begin by examining the oldest of the three Abrahamic scriptures.

What exactly is the Torah? If you ask that question to a Spinozist like me, you'd be told to consult the teachings of the scholars who've studied the Good Book scientifically and historically. One of these Biblical scholars made the rounds in this area a couple of years ago after he wrote a book entitled *How to Read the Bible?* (Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 2005). His name is Marc Brettler, and he's a professor of Judaic Studies at Brandeis. He's also said about himself, "I am an observant Jew. I take the Bible quite seriously in my personal life. It is not merely a book from which I make a living. ... Rather, it stands at the core of who I am as a person, and as a Jew." (*How to Read the Bible*, at 279.) Sounds like what some of my more conservative friends would call a *real* Jew, right? Well, listen to how he summarizes his method and his findings:

"I have emphasized the composite nature of the Bible, treating it as a human, rather than a divine work. I have contextualized it in the ancient Near East, rather than treating it as a timeless book. I have made the following claims: the beginning of Genesis is a 'myth,' the Exodus did not happen; and Joshua did not fight the battle of Jericho and make the walls come tumbling down. ... Much of the material in the Bible's historical texts is not historical; ... not everything found in the work known as Amos (or Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel) was written by Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel; and ... David composed none of the Psalms. I have asserted that not only is the Song of Songs a secular work, but that much of the Bible is also, for it was influenced by (secular) ideology as much as by religion." (*Id.*)

Those are the fruits of scholarly research, not the product of some atheistic screed. In writing them, the author seems to be saying – “No big deal. So the apparent facts in the Torah are really just fiction. So what? That needn’t stop us from observing all the Commandments -- from avoiding port, shellfish, or for that matter, adultery, and from feeling compelled to honor our parents and our God.” OK, fine. The post-enlightenment Jew can be as observant as he or she wishes. But increasingly, modern educated Jews are countering that point with their own: “Sure we can be observant. *Or not!* Our Bible is fictional, we can act as we please – picking and choosing which directives to follow and which articles of faith to believe. Hell, that’s the great thing about Judaism, anyway. There *are* no articles of faith. A lot of us don’t even believe in God, and that’s OK. As long as our sons are Bar Mitzvahed and we head to Temple on the High Holidays, who’s to say we’re not living a Jewish life?”

I’ll tell you, who – the Muslim community. As I’ve come to know more members of that community, I’ve grown increasingly fascinated by the way they see Judaism and its Scripture. Let’s start with their short indictment of the Torah. According to traditional Muslim teaching, the Torah -- and the so-called “New Testament” -- are *corrupted texts*, whereas the Qur’an is the original, unadulterated word of God. That supposedly explains why Muslims can have such a heartfelt relationship to Allah, whereas Jewish people are constantly questioning the very existence of God, let alone His so-called teachings. This lack of faith doesn’t sit well at all with my Muslim friends.

In my exposure to Islam, I have at times perceived the same sort of chauvinism that I’ve seen in traditional Christianity – that only one of the three Abrahamic faiths represents the ultimate truth and salvation for humankind. I see less of that chauvinism in Judaism, and that difference is a source of incredible pride for us Jews. Still, chauvinism isn’t altogether absent from our tradition; after all, aren’t we the “chosen people”?

Traditionally, Jews say daily prayers of gratitude to have been born Jewish. Culturally, Eastern European Jews boast of the so-called “yiddesha kop,” which literally means a Jewish head, and connotes superior intelligence. Besides, it’s difficult to get too upset with the arrogance of Islam when its Holy Book proclaims that our greatest Prophets –

Moses, Abraham, Joseph – are holy messengers of God. Islam has gone so far as to say that Jesus, another of our flock, was born of a virgin. To me, that says a lot about how far Muhammad was willing to go to treat the other Peoples of the Book with respect.

One of my fundamental goals in writing *Moses the Heretic* was to ensure that Jewish people return the favor. In the past few months, I've given book talks at several synagogues and challenged the people in attendance to identify any aspects of Islam that are uniquely beautiful. Each time, my challenge has been met with silence. It is my hope that, just as the Jewish people have come to respect the grace and power of the Sermon on the Mount, we will eventually be willing to admire the teachings about Allah in the Qur'an. Philosophically, Allah may be similar to Adonoi or God the Father, but if anything, Allah is more pure and less anthropomorphic. Plus, his universe is less geocentric. Stated simply, Islam can teach us not to emphasize God's *likeness*, but rather to emphasize God's *greatness*. I love that about the religion.

We'll get into some of those profound Islamic teachings in a few minutes. But first, we have business to take care of. Before the Jewish people can gain inspiration from Islam, it must come to grips with the aspects of that faith that are viewed so condescendingly in the western world. Let's take a look at a few.

One common misconception is that Islam tolerates terrorism, and even suicide bombing. In a word, this is bunk. The Qur'an is clear that violence is permitted only under very limited circumstances. The Qur'an explicitly proscribes killing oneself (4:29), or oppressing other people. (4:42) It permits people to defend themselves, though only "after a wrong (is done) to them." (42:41) "Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you," states the Qur'an, "but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors." (2:190) In fact, far from supporting intolerance of non-Muslims, the Quran' states that "Allah made you unto nations and tribes that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you." (49:13)

So yes, the Al Qaeda types are truly perverting their religion, at least as I read their holiest book. But that's not to say that the book is altogether modern in its view of divine punishment. Over and over again, the reader is faced with references to Allah's Hellfire, and to be sure, this Hell is not a pleasant place. It is said that on the Day of Judgment, unbelievers will be "dragged through the Fire on their faces." (54:48) That fire will be "blazing (fiercely)" (101:11); and as for those who reside in its midst, "yokes (shall be round their necks), and the chains, they shall be dragged along – in the boiling fetid fluid; then in the fire shall they be burned." (40:71-72) This is the punishment set not only for evil doers but for those who worship the wrong deity and reject the messengers of God identified in the Qur'an. (40:70) In fact, Hellfire is the destiny of all who "rest not their hope on their meeting with [Allah] but [who instead] are pleased and satisfied with the life of the Present." (10:7-8)

In short, for those modern Jews and gentiles who have lost faith in the Word or in God Himself, the Qur'an promises the heights of torture. Muslim commentators debate whether this torture in Hell is truly eternal, but most appear to agree that if there is an end to the Qur'anic Hellfire, it will not occur anytime soon. (See commentary to 11:107, in the *The Meaning of The Holy Qur'an*, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 11th Edition (Beltsville, MD, 1989)). Note the irony: the very first verse of the Qur'an talks about Allah's grace and mercy ... but those who reject Him and His messengers do so at their own unspeakable peril.

To ensure that a Believer stays out of the Hellfire, the Qur'an has much to say about living virtuously, including the benefits of martyrdom. These statements become grist for Al Qaeda's mill. Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian intellectual who is one of Al Qaeda's greatest ideological influences, wrote that the Qur'an "points to ... the [Jews'] craven desire to live, no matter at what price and regardless of quality, honor, and dignity." Now there is no denying that the Qur'an places tremendous value on human life. But Qutb did have one valid point – that book repeatedly praises the willingness to fight fiercely, and if necessary die, for a just cause, and indeed, it provides a seemingly rational basis for such

an attitude – eternally blissful rewards for the righteous who depart from this world, including “gardens ... grapevines ... and [yes], companions of Equal Age.” (78:32-33)

Another frequently reviled aspect of Islam is its dealings with gender. The most common example of this is the explicit Qur’anic sanction to “marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four.” (4:3) Note that polygamy is allowed, but only in one direction – a woman cannot marry more than one man. That this is unsurprising stems from the blatant sexism inherent in the Holy Book. “Women shall have rights,” the Qur’an states, “but men have a degree (of advantage) over them.” (2:228) The Book goes on to say that men are stronger than women (4:34), and establishes that in a court of law, the testimony of two women is equal to that of one man. (2:282) You’ll forgive modern commentators for drawing some fairly damning implications from that statement.

When you consider what we’ve reviewed, the source of Jewish condescension toward the Qur’an becomes clear. The Book is seen as condoning violence toward infidels – how else do we view God’s Hellfire? – and oppression of women. Combine that with the exposure given to suicide bombers and the legions who support them, and it’s not hard to see why much of the world views Islam per se as a threat to the survival of humanity.

Before we Jews get on our high horse about Islam, though, we might want to consider our own Bible. The jealous Allah who punishes Unbelief with medieval fury sounds a whole lot like the vengeful and ruthless God of Deuteronomy and Joshua. That God commanded the Hebrews to slaughter one neighboring people after another in order to claim the Promised Land – and these were not exactly wars of defense. At one point, God ordered that all males be put to the sword, whereas women, children and livestock could be taken as booty. (Deut. 20:13-14) At another instant, the Lord ordered the death of all the people in town, but the livestock were spared. (Josh. 11:10-15) Praised be God for that bit of mercy.

As for the idea of Scriptural sexism, the Qur’an hardly has a monopoly on that market either. The Torah explicitly sanctions selling one’s daughter into slavery or taking

multiple wives, but there's nothing said about selling one's *son* as a slave or taking multiple *husbands*. (Ex. 21:7-10) In Leviticus, the Torah even goes as far as to assign different values for human beings – in each case, men are valued much higher than women. (Lev. 27:3-7) And I need not mention all the denigrating ways in which the Torah discusses female sexuality. (See, e.g., Deut. 22:23-24) Frankly, finding examples of sexism in the Torah is as easy as shooting fish in a barrel – and no less painful.

“Well, fine,” says the Jewish chauvinist. “So perhaps the Torah itself isn't a model of enlightenment thought. But modern Judaism isn't primarily a function of the precise words of the Torah – it's a function of the teachings of the rabbis. And those teachings have evolved over the centuries to epitomize enlightenment thought. By contrast,” the Jewish chauvinist continues, “the Muslim world has never gone through its enlightenment period. It is still mired in the same seventh century ideas expressed by Muhammad and his minions.”

To say that Islam has yet to go through its enlightenment is surely true to a degree, but then again, the other Abrahamic faiths don't exactly epitomize philosophical modernity either. Enlightenment thinkers are duty bound to follow the truth wherever it leads and toss asunder any articles of faith that get in its way. To be frank, I'm not exactly seeing that attitude modeled at churches and synagogues. The priests and rabbis I've known do a pretty good job of skirting the big questions. This way, their flocks can continue to say their prayers without questioning whether the prayers have become antiquated by the teachings of modern science, let alone modern philosophy.

To me, the job at hand for a Jew is to place Islam where it belongs as an honored relative of our own beloved Judaism. Let's start with some terminology, which can go a long way to organizing our thinking.

If you want a name for the family of religions in which Judaism is a part, call them the “*Abrahamic*” faiths. No longer should any of us use the term “Judeo-Christian.”

As for the Bin Ladins of the world, what term should we use to refer to them and their conduct? Why not *pseudo-Islamic*? After all, the religion they practice is no more Islamic than the members of the Spanish Inquisition were Christian.

As for the authentic practitioners of Islam, refer to them as our “cousins,” as I have done already. They will refer to themselves as brothers and sisters, and it’s fine to recognize that they are not our brothers and sisters, for we have many legitimate differences with them. But since those differences pale in contrast to the similarities, the word “cousins” seems to fit to a T. In fact, the more Jews get to know those cousins, the more we will find that they are among the most gentle, loving souls in our midst. I would go as far as to say that no Jew can fully understand the meaning of words like “equality” and “fraternity” until he is blessed to spend time among Muslims.

Once we are willing to treat Islam not as some sort of scary, foreign force but as a cherished relative of our own religion, Jews then can greatly profit from contrasting and comparing these two approaches to spirituality. Take, for example, the whole idea of “faith.” Judaism de-emphasizes it more than Islam. The religious Jew is defined less by what he or she believes than by the way he or she behaves. In fact, religious Jews are supposed to be constantly questioning their beliefs. I once was taught by a rabbi at an Orthodox yeshiva that every morning, a Jew should even question God’s existence. You would never find that conception in Islam, in which faith in God is the alpha and omega of spirituality. As a result of this emphasis on faith, Muslims are less likely to doubt their own views about God or to accept that conflicting views may be equally valid.

Another difference is in the way we relate to God. To pray with Muslims is find yourself on the ground, prostrating before the One and Only who warrants our submission. Indeed, “submission” is precisely what the word Islam means. Observant Jews also prostrate themselves before God, but only twice a year during the High Holidays. More frequently, Jews wrestle with the existence of God, the best way to conceive of God, and the proper way to honor God. Rather than simply submitting to the divine word, we see ourselves as God’s partner in the effort to repair the world.

So yes, there are differences. But the similarities are more significant. Even in the notion that Jews wrestle with God do we find similarities. Think of the words, “Israel” and “jihad.” Believe it or not, they are synonyms. Israel got its name from Jacob, whose name was changed when he wrestled with God. But a jihad is nothing more than a struggle – and, according to Muslim theology, the *greater* Jihad has nothing to do with taking up arms, but is associated instead with spiritually struggling to uplift ourselves.

As for other similarities, both of these Abrahamic peoples are dedicated first and foremost to a strict ethical monotheism. That is why there’s very little said in a Jewish service that Muslims can’t also embrace, and vice versa. Consider Surah 112 from the Quran: “Say, He is Allah, the one and only. Allah, the eternal, absolute. He begetteth not, nor is He begotten. And there is none like unto Him.” Substitute “Adonai” for “Allah” and you have Judaism. Well, almost. Jews still talk about being made in God’s image. But who really believes that? Who really believes we are qualified to comment on the so-called “image of God,” let alone to connect ourselves with such an image? Muslims are much better trained to appreciate what Spinoza meant when he said that to compare God’s mind with ours is like comparing the constellation of the dog with the animal that barks. (Ethics, Part I, Prop. 17)

If anything, we have Islam to thank for reminding us that God’s greatness is beyond words – a teaching that was prominent among the founders of the Kabbalah. Indeed, I love the traditional Muslim metaphor for teaching just how small we are compared to Allah. It is said that Allah’s universe is composed of 18,000 worlds, of which our material universe is among the smallest, and resembles but a grain of sand in a desert when compared to the invisible domain. According to this metaphor, the invisible domain contains seven heavens and seven earths encompassed by the Divine Footstool, which is itself encompassed by the Divine Throne. As stated in a hadith, which is an oral teaching of the Prophet, “The seven heavens and the seven earths compared with the Footstool are no more than a ring cast in the wilderness; and the superiority of the Throne

over the Footstool is again like that of the wilderness over the ring.” (Ibn Hibban, Sahih 2/77; Ibn Kathir, Tafsir, 1/311, 587)

It should be clear by now that when a Muslim chants the words “Allah Akbar” – “God is great” – she really means it. Exactly how great is God? In a moment that again sounds an awful lot like Spinoza, the Qur’an goes as far as to say that “it is He that doth encompass all things!” (41:54) Is there any wonder why Goethe, arguably Spinoza’s great disciple, was so enamored of Islam and its God?

Lest I create the impression that Islam and Judaism are related solely in terms of their monotheism, allow me to focus on the realm of ethics. Islam, like Judaism, is a religion that preaches the centrality of such virtues as justice, patience, perseverance, humility, and charity. Like Jews, Muslims are taught to be gentle and compassionate, and are offered Muhammad as a supreme role model in this regard. And also like Jews, Muslims are taught to fight if need be to right wrongs – or more specifically, oppression. In one of the more controversial verses of the Qur’an, it is said explicitly that “oppression [is] worse than slaughter.” (2:191) That statement alone should tell you volumes about how careful we need to be when dealing with our cousins in places like Palestine.

After I finished writing *Moses the Heretic*, I was honored that the book received a blurb from one of the world’s most prominent moderate Muslim intellectuals. He is a professor at UCLA named Khaled Abou El Fadl, and what I found most striking about his blurb was when he said that he found to be “eye opening” the “parallels between the Jewish concept of tikkun olam, and the Muslim ta’aruf and islah.” “Tikkun olam” is a Kabbalistic term commonly used to refer to conduct directed to repairing our planet. The Islamic term “ta’aruf” refers to nations recognizing each other respectfully, not through conflict, and “islah” encompasses such ideals as reform, repair and reconciliation. I point out El Fadl’s comment because it illustrates two things. First, that with very few exceptions, all the great concepts in Judaism or Islam seem to have a close parallel in the other religion. And second, that not only practitioners of each religion, but scholars as well, tend to be ignorant about the other faith.

It is my hope, as we progress with our Muslim-Jewish interfaith initiative, that we Jews will become soldiers in our own jihad. The enemy is not flesh and blood, but ignorance – ignorance in the way our brothers and sisters understand our cousins from Palestine, Damascus, and Karachi. Let us begin by working with mosques in our own community to introduce one another to the parallels between the two faiths ... and the ways that our paths diverge. Remember, it's not a question of one path being more enlightened than the other. When we go to a national park and look up at a mountain, we always appreciate that there exist multiple trails, and look forward to enjoying different trails at different times in our journey.

Now, before I conclude, I'd like to share some thoughts about a parable from the Qur'an:

“Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp. The lamp enclosed in Glass. The glass as it were a brilliant star: Lit from a blessed Tree. An Olive, neither of the East Nor of the West, whose Oil is well-nigh Luminous, Though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! Allah doth guide whom He will to His light: Allah doth set forth Parables for men: and Allah doth know all things.” (24:35)

According to Qur'anic commentary, the three central symbols here are the Niche, the Lamp and the Glass. The fourth – olive oil – is simply the beloved, universal substance that fuels the lamp to make it the holy of holies, as we would say in Judaism.

Now, a “niche” refers to the small, shallow recess in the wall of a Middle Eastern home. Back in the days before Edison, these houses would need niches – they'd be placed high above the ground, and the lamp that would be inserted inside the niche would allow light to be diffused throughout the area below with a minimum of shadows.

In the case of this parable, the light coming down through the niche connotes light of a *spiritual* nature. Note the symbolism – that light is coming from high above worldly

things. The source of the light is not to be found in such mundane things as politics, business, or athletic competitions. To find the source of spiritual light, we must look for it from “up high” – from books like the Qur’an or the Torah, and the teachings of those who have been steeped in the highest spirit of those works.

As for the lamp, that represents the core of truth that’s the real source of spiritual light throughout the world. The Qur’an teaches that the holy books of the Abrahamic faiths, at bottom, convey essentially the same Truth. That Truth is universal – it applies for all peoples and for all times – just as the mystical “olive tree” that fuels the lamp is supposed to be neither from the East or the West, but from throughout the planet. This universal Truth – this wonderful lamp – is conveyed in words like Adonai and Allah, and preached in teachings like Jesus’ holy Sermon on the Mount. Surely, the universal lamp of truth is beautiful beyond words and worthy of honor.

But there is a problem; we can’t see the lamp directly in all its splendor. After all, we are only human. We live “down below” in the world, and are too limited intellectually and linguistically to grasp more than a superficial understanding of God and truth. And that’s one reason why we need a glass to enclose the lamp.

The glass is the transparent vehicle through which the light passes, in both its physical and spiritual senses. It serves multiple purposes. It protects the lamp from invaders – wind, insects, or the results of passionate human conduct from down below. And, according to the commentators, it also serves as a medium through which the spiritual light can be *filtered* so that human beings can apprehend it. Our minds and our language are certainly primitive in relation to reality as a whole; as such, some sort of glass is needed to allow the lamp’s light to be appreciated by our own limited minds and ears.

So much for the Qur’anic commentary. Now let me offer a bit of a supplement, mediated through my own brand of Jewish heresy.

Books like the Qur'an, the Christian Bible and the Torah – with all their detailed proscriptions and renderings of history – go way beyond the fundamental truths contained in the Lamp. They also preach words to us from a time when most people were illiterate, science was primitive, and philosophy reflected the primitive nature of our science. Admittedly, the glass that emerged from each of our respective Bibles was an inspired vehicle for filtering the truth into the minds of our ancient ancestors. And God knows our little minds still require a filter. But our species' knowledge has progressed considerably in the intervening centuries, and we are ready for a new medium, a new filter. In fact, without one, more and more of our most intelligent young minds are refusing to pay attention to the lamp, and are satiating themselves exclusively with the lower world of business, sports, and other forms of michegas.

My mantra is simple: *It's time to change the glass! It's time to replace the filter.* That takes nothing away from the holiness of the Torah, the Qur'an, or the Gospels. As sources of proscriptions of how to live ethical lives, our scriptures continue to serve us as magnificently as they served our ancestors. Indeed, these holy books also thrive as reminders of the lamp that lights our world – a lamp that is essentially the same whether you are Jewish, Muslim, Christian, or for that matter, Buddhist. But these scriptures must not be nooses around our necks, precluding us from tapping into the scientific and philosophical insights of the past millennium.

Before we destroy each other – cousin against cousin – let's invoke the power of these religions to *unite* us. To make that happen, let's focus on the lamp. As for the glass, there's no reason to insult it. But there is a reason to change it – it's too late for a mere cleaning.

How do we change it? I don't have all the answers, but I do know where to start: by embarking on a dialogue with our cousins. In this dialogue, we will search together for a shared understanding of the Lamp. Then, each respective community of faith can separately pick out some new glass – not a new scripture, but a new set of ideas that honors both the old scripture and the teachings of our greatest modern scientists and

philosophers. Whatever we select, let's just make sure it is suitable for an era marked by the commitment to justice, charity, and mutual respect – whether they go by the names of tikkun olam, ta'aruf, or islah.

Do you notice the irony? I began this process thinking it was the devotion to God that unites us with our Muslim cousins. Now, I realize that Jews are all over the place on God -- we can't agree with each other, let alone Muslims. But we can pretty much agree on our values. And though Muslim values and Jewish values aren't identical, the similarities are inspiring and profound. They – and whatever spirituality and loving reverence we can muster -- will be our collective salvation.