

"The Children of Abraham and the Search for Justice"

Speech by Jacob Bender

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Asalamu Aleikhem! Shalom aleikhem!

Even though these ancient Arabic and Hebrew words of greeting speak of peace, these are dark and difficult times, and we live in an age when war has replaced negotiations, when terrorism has replaced tolerance, when ignorance has replaced understanding, not least between ourselves, we Children of Abraham, *Abnu' Ibrahim*. Today, the worldwide relationship between the Muslim and Jewish communities is one of open hostility; on an individual level, if Muslims and Jews have contact with each other at all, it is usually marked by mutual suspicion.

This is an immense tragedy for both of us, and indeed for the entire world, and ironic when we stop to explore a time when Muslims and Jews lived together in peace, when a Muslim reign of tolerance stretched across the Mediterranean and the Middle East, from Iberia to India. This was the enlightened civilization of medieval Islam, and in Al-Andalus, in the city of Cordoba, street lightening emblazed the nights, and the city was home to hundreds of libraries, mosques, synagogues and gardens. Medieval Christian travelers visited Cordoba in amazement, writing accounts of her many wonders, and for a time, Cordoba was the most advanced city on the entire European continent.

Cordoba was also the birthplace of two of the greatest thinkers of the Middle Ages, Abfi al-Walid Muhammad Ibn Rushd and Moses Maimonides, the Latinized name of Rabbi Moshe ben Maimun, whose was known in Arabic as Musa ibn Maimun, the most important Jewish thinker of the last two thousand years. They, together with the Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas, are the subjects of "Reason and Revelation," the documentary film I am currently directing. I began working on the film in the months following the attacks of Sept. 11th with the following goals: 1) to encourage greater interfaith understanding in our own day by looking back at the cross-fertilization between the Abrahamic faiths in the Middle Ages; and 2) to counter the anti-Muslim stereotypes and prejudices that were spreading wildly in the Western media by demonstrating that at the core of what is now called "Western Civilization" there was to be found an Arab and Muslim foundation.

Ibn Rushd and Rabbi Musa shared much in common. Both were born in Cordoba only 12 years apart; both became "philosopher/theologians" and the foremost interpreters of Aristotle within Islam and Judaism, with both attempting to harmonize reason and revelation; both became jurists

and authorities in the religious law that is still central to Muslim and Jewish observance; and both became physicians to their local rulers, Ibn Rushd to the Caliph of Cordoba, Rabbi Musa becoming court physician to the great Salah-ah-Din in Egypt.

These centuries were, after all, a time when 95% of the world's Jews lived in the Umma, a fact that is surely not well known by my fellow American Jews.

Now, the similarity in the lives of Ibn Rushd and Rabbi Musa are only symbolic of the many things that Islam and Judaism themselves share in common: a belief in the unity of God, in the reality of prophecy, in the revelation of the Torah and the Quran. In both of these sacred books, we find the story about the Prophet Abraham and his breaking of the idols.

Today, I would also like to break an idol. The idol I wish to break is an idea. It is an idea called the "clash of civilizations." This idea proclaims that "the West" and Islam have always been, and will always be, enemies; that Arabs and Jews have eternally been at war; and that to ensure American security, any means necessary, from torture to pre-emptive wars, are to be employed.

Any cursory glance at the morning headlines, however, will confirm what is abundantly clear to most of the world: the "clash of civilizations" is a dangerous idea and has led the United States to disaster, ending the lives of hundreds of young Americans, and tens of thousands of Iraqis.

Furthermore, this ideology is also a crime against memory, the deliberate distorting of Islam, its history, and its contributions to "Western Civilization." Rather, what I believe is called for is a "dialogue of civilizations," spoken about so eloquently by former President Khatami of Iran, and symbolized by this very conference.

And finally, the "clash of civilizations" ideology violates the ethics of tolerance enshrined in both Islam and Judaism, and historically realized in Al-Andalus and other places in the Umma. This tolerance at the heart of Islam, and its relevance to Jews and Muslims today, can be illustrated by the following two stories.

In the year 2000, when Al Gore was running for US President, choose Senator Joseph Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, as his running mate for vice-president, American Jews, and other commentators, tried to outdo each other in their praise of "American tolerance," and to argue that in no other country had Jews reached such heights. Yet, over nine centuries ago, in Muslim Spain, a Jew named Ishmail ibn Nagrel'a, was vizier, or prime minister, of the Muslim-ruled state of Granada and the military commander of her armies for over thirty years.

Secondly, we turn again to Rabbi Musa. Civil liberties and human rights in my country were greatly enhanced by the 1966 Miranda Decision of the United States Supreme Court, which held that an arrested suspect must be read their constitutional rights, may remain silent, and must be represented by a lawyer. And there in the Miranda Decision, written by Chief Justice Earl Warren himself, we find the following quote from Rabbi Musa: "The principle that no man is to

be declared guilty on his own admission is a divine decree." American justice was therefore immeasurably enhanced by a reference to Musa ibn Maymun, an 11th century Jew, writing in Arabic, who was born in Muslim Spain and died in Muslim Egypt, and who served for many years as "Ras al-Yahud" of the Egyptian Jewish community..

So, after having briefly reviewed the glories of our shared heritage, we might rightly ask, if Jews and Muslims were participants in all this his common history, if we lived together in peace for so long, why then are the relations between our two communities so bitter, so poisoned with hate, so prone to violence? There are, I believe, three explanations for the sorry state of Jewish-Muslims relations in the present hour.

First, the relationship between our two communities does not exist within a vacuum, but in a climate that was already spoiling before 9/11, and became positively poisonous after the attacks.

Given this climate, and fueled by the apostles of hate in the US, is it any wonder that the popular American imagination will see every Muslim as a potential terrorist, and conceive of Islam as intrinsically violent, fearful of freedom, and perpetually at war with the West?

The second explanation for the sad state of interfaith relations between Muslims and Jews is the continuing tragedy of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I speak not only for myself, but for thousands of my fellow Jews, both in Israel and around the world, when I say that the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian people, with its hundreds of illegal settlements, its thousands of destroyed homes, its uprooted farms and olive trees, its checkpoints and daily humiliations, is a violation of national and human rights that we believe must immediately end. Now, please understand, those of us who oppose Israel's occupation do so not because we are alienated from Jewish tradition, but because we are proud of our tradition's ethics of social justice; we oppose the occupation precisely because we accept the obligation demanded by the Torah: "Justice, justice, shalt thou pursue." I believe this same sentiment is found in the Quran when it says: "O those who believe! Stand up firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin..."

The good news today is that we have many such recent moments when Jews and Muslims did exactly this. After the attacks of September 11, after the bombings in Bali, and Madrid, and London, countless Muslim religious, political, and civic leaders around the world issued condemnations against indiscriminate attacks against civilians, recalling the words of the Quran, that "to destroy a single life is to destroy an entire world." Unfortunately, the Western media seldom reports these proclamations.

Likewise, this audience may not be aware that there are many Jews around the world who have, like myself, unceasingly worked against Israel's occupation and for the establishment of a Palestinian state in all the territories captured by Israel in 1967. You may not be aware of Rabbi Arik Asherman of Israeli Rabbis for Human Rights, who was arrested in the West Bank for blocking an Israeli Army bulldozer about to demolish yet another Palestinian home. You may not be aware of the many Jewish organizations in the United States formed precisely to oppose Israel's occupation and support the just demand of the Palestinian people for a state of their own.

And you may not be aware of my beloved synagogue in New York, a synagogue where dozens of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims have visited and made speeches, where Israeli "refusniks" have spoken to our congregation on why they went to prison in Israel for refusing army orders to serve in the West Bank,

The third and final explanation for the tragic state of Muslim-Jewish relations has been, in my opinion, the violent actions by Muslim extremists themselves, targeting unarmed civilians in Bali, Madrid, London, New York, two weeks ago in Israel, two days ago in Egypt.

I am also deeply offended by the evidence of anti-Jewish prejudice around the Muslim world, whether in France, or in the Egyptian media, or in the statements of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, or in Charter of Hamas, which relies on the anti-semitic forgery known as "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." Are these Muslims unaware of the long history of Jewish participation in the Umma, of the protection that Jews were offered in one Muslim land after another, of the prohibitions against hatred of the "People of the Book" found throughout Islamic tradition?

Jews and Muslims now face a crossroads of ethics: we can build walls and fences, both literal and symbolic, or we can build bridges. We can sit silent while those in our religious communities continue the crimes of occupation or terrorism, or we can take seriously the obligations of Muslim and Jewish ethics and work together for a world of justice and peace.

During the past four years, in the process of working on my film, I have had the honor of having been invited to speak before thousands of American Muslims in mosques and Muslim conventions across the United States. I was often the first American Jew that these Muslims had ever met. In these speeches, I often concluded, as I will do here today, with this verse from the Quran: "For every one of you (Jews, Christians, Muslims), we have appointed a path and way. If God had willed, He would have made you but one community; but that he has not done, in order that He may try you in what has come to you. So compete with one another in good works."

For me, an American Jew and an artist, my film is an attempt in good works, an attempt to build bridges of understanding, illumination, and compassion, and I am most thankful and honored to be here with you today at this historic gathering.

Thank you.

Jacob Bender can be reached at reasonrevelation@aol.com