

This morning I'd like to begin with several quotations from the various monotheistic faith tradition that trace their lineage back to Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. See if you can correctly identify the origin of each religious source. Here we go . . .

1. "Since they live among us and we know about their lying and blasphemy and cursing, we cannot tolerate them if we do not wish to share in their lies, curses, and blasphemy. First, let their places of worship be set on fire, and whatever does not burn up should be covered or spread over with dirt . . . and this ought to be done for the honor of God. Second, their homes should likewise be broken down and destroyed . . . that they may realize that they are not masters in our land, as they boast, but miserable captives . . . let us drive them out of the country for all time. For, as has been said, God's rage is so great against them that they only become worse and worse through mild mercy, and not much better through severe mercy. Therefore, away with them . . ."
2. "Angered at the commanders, the officers of thousands and the officers of the hundreds who came from the legion of the battle, he said, 'Did you let every female live? Behold -- they caused the people to commit a betrayal against the Lord . . . so now, kill every male among the young children, and every woman old enough to have had carnal relations you shall kill. But all the young girls who are not old enough to have had carnal relations, you may keep alive for yourselves."
3. "Therefore We prescribed for the Children of Israel that whoever slays a person -- not as punishment for murder nor for corruption in the land -- is like one who has slain all humankind; and whoever saves a life is like one who has saved all of humanity. O humanity, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another."

The first source comes from the founding father of Protestant Christianity, Martin Luther. Written in 1543, it's an excerpt from his most famous anti-semitic sermon entitled, *Concerning the Jews and their Lies*. The second text is from *Sefer Bamidbar*, the book of *Numbers*, in which Moses directs the Israelites to exterminate all of their Midianite captives, except for the young

girls, for the sin of promoting idolatry and blasphemy among the people of Israel. The third and final source -- despite its reference to the Children of Israel -- is actually from Sura 5 of the Q'uran. One source from Christianity advocating intolerance and persecution of unbelievers; one from Judaism commanding the killing of blasphemers; and one source from Islam proclaiming the sanctity of all life and God's universal sovereignty.

Of course, we could easily reshuffle the deck and pick a beautiful passage from Christian Scripture extolling peace on earth and good will toward all men, choose an inspiring rabbinic teaching about the Divine image in every human being, and then contrast it with a blood-curdling text from the Quran extolling the virtue of slaughtering infidels. The sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have all been used at various points of history to promote peace or encourage violence, to initiate war or avoid bloodshed. Myriad variables -- including geopolitical conflict, military might, and internal power struggles -- can bring out either the best or the worst in any given faith tradition.

That all religion is vulnerable to corruption is a theme found this week's Torah portion. Indeed, the very first death recorded in the Hebrew Bible does not result from natural causes, but rather, arises from religious jealousy. Adam's and Eve's two children, Cain and Abel, each bring an offering of thanks to God. **וַיַּשֶׁעַ ה' אֶל-הַבֵּל וְאֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ, וְאֶל-קַיִן וְאֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא**. **וַיַּשֶׁעַ ה' אֶל-הַבֵּל וְאֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ, וְאֶל-קַיִן וְאֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא** -- The Lord approved Abel and his offering, but did not approve Cain and his offering. Cain was filled with rage, and his face fell" (*Genesis* 4:5-6). As we well know, Cain's anger at God's rejection leads to the first shedding of human blood.

The great John Lennon once sang, "Imagine there's no countries/It isn't hard to do; nothing to kill or die for; and no religion too. Imagine all the people living life in peace..." That's one message, I suppose, we could draw from the story of Cain and Abel -- but it would be the wrong one, for the Torah doesn't for a moment presume that religion must inevitably give rise to conflict. On the contrary, God reminds Cain that he has a choice -- "Why are you distressed, and why is your face fallen? Surely, if you do right there is uplift, but if you do not,

sin crouches at the door. It's urge is toward you, וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל-בּוֹ -- Yet you *can* be its master” (Genesis 4:6-7). The underlying idea is that every person is endowed with moral autonomy, with freedom of choice. To live a truly spiritual life we have to subdue our primitive passions, or else they will end up controlling us.

Yet this is not the only crucial message contained within the story of Cain and Abel. When Cain asks, “הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אֲנִי” -- Am I my brother's keeper?”, Scripture emphatically and unequivocally tells us that indeed we are. God “hears” Abel's blood crying out from the earth. Strangely, the word for “blood” used by the Torah is in plural form, meaning literally “bloods.” In noting this grammatical oddity, the rabbis teach that the plural form signifies that Cain did not shed his brother's blood alone, but all of the children that Abel could have sired had he lived, and their children, and their children's children -- countless generations of the never-to-be-born. Based on this, in a very famous passage the Mishnah teaches “לְפִיכֹךְ נִבְרָא אָדָם יְחִידִי, לְלַמְדֶּךָ, שְׂכָל הַמַּאֲבֵד נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת מֵעֵלָה עָלָיו הַכֶּתוּב כָּאֵלוֹ אֵבֶד עוֹלָם מְלֵא. וְכָל לְמַקְוִים נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת, מֵעֵלָה עָלָיו הַכֶּתוּב כָּאֵלוֹ קַיִם עוֹלָם מְלֵא -- Therefore, God created a single human being to teach that whoever causes the death of an individual is considered to have destroyed an entire world, and whoever saves a single life is considered to have preserved an entire world” (Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 4:5).

Sound familiar? It's almost identical to the passage I quoted a few minutes ago from the Qu'ran! In fact, Islam's sacred writings do borrow any number of *midrashim* from the rabbis. This isn't to sound condescending, but quite the opposite; for it shows what happens when religious civilizations live in proximity with one another -- powerful ideas find common ground in diverse faith traditions; spiritual resonance passes back and forth between cultures. Christianity in antiquity and Islam during the early Middle Ages borrowed from Judaism; in later centuries, both of Judaism's daughter religions returned the favor, influencing Jewish mysticism, music and practice in myriad ways. When we transcend the hermeneutic of suspicion, when we get beyond the “us vs. them” mentality, we realize how we much we truly are our brothers' keepers.

God has many names. Allah is but one. To burn a book containing any of God's names is to blaspheme God. To sanction the burning of any religious text is to desecrate our own history by emulating the Christians who consigned the Talmud to flames in 13th century France and the Nazis who burnt Jewish books in 20th century Germany. To speak disparagingly of Islam is to sling mud at Judaism -- not only because our faith affirms that there are many paths to the worship of the one God, but also because Islam derived many of its core tenets from us!

Notwithstanding the rubbish of conspiracy theorists who claim that President Obama is a closet Muslim, what if he *were* an adherent of Islam? Have we sunk so low as a nation that we would prohibit a person from running for office because of his religion? And if we are prepared to rationalize such prejudice, then we must also be prepared to accept the errant nonsense of anti-Semites who claim that a Jewish President would usher in an era of control by "Jewish interests" or hatred of Christians. Bigotry comes in many flavors -- all of them equally foul.

Yet in fairness, there is also ample work for the Muslim community to do. It is difficult, indeed impossible, to skirt the undeniable truth that while the vast majority of Muslims are not terrorists, the vast majority of terrorists and suicide bombers do claim Islam as their inspiration. There are courageous individuals in the Islamic world, who speak out against radical Muslims, often at great personal cost. Nevertheless, there are also many apologists, who would have us believe that the proponents of extremism are no more than a noisy handful. Yet an intolerant and vitriolic brand of Islam finds expression in wide swathes of the Muslim world; the preachers of hatred are leaders in places like Iran, they speak in the name of Saudi Arabia, and find expression in popular shows on Jordanian television and in the cartoons of Egyptian newspapers.

Even so-called moderate Muslims have yet to articulate their acceptance of Israel -- whatever its final borders -- *as a Jewish State*. Go to Barnes and Noble and purchase *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Islam*, an excellent example of a book written by a moderate Muslim, and you will still find a highly biased account of Israel's establishment without a single hint of Israel's legitimacy as the ancient homeland of the Jewish people. Those who would choose a future for Islam defined by decency and democracy, peace and pluralism,

must engage more vigorously with their fanatical co-religionists who advocate brutality and violence in Allah's name. Their work, if they're to succeed, is cut out for them . . .

This past Monday evening I participated in a meeting of the Table of Abraham. An interfaith consortium founded in 2007 by Jacksonville's Muslim community, the Table of Abraham consists of three churches (one Greek Orthodox, one Methodist, and one Baptist), the Amity Turkish Cultural Center and Temple Ahavath Chesed. The group gathers for meals 3 or 4 times during the year, as different faiths host an event centered on a religious holiday or observance of their particular community. At last Monday evening's gathering, sponsored by the Temple in honor of Sukkot, I sat at a table with a Baptist couple, a mother and daughter from Riverside Presbyterian, and a husband and wife from the Islamic Center. As we talked about the connection between Sukkot, harvest and the land of Israel, we shared food and fellowship; fascinated by our differences we were also struck by how much more people of faith have in common.

It is my hope that the Jacksonville Jewish Center will participate as a new Table of Abraham is formed in the coming months. Let us sit down together with our neighbors and realize that more than just children of Abraham, we are also children of Adam created in God's image, for as the rabbis tell us also in that famous passage, God created but a single human being so that no one can say my ancestry is better than yours. Let us sit down at the table of Abraham and recognize what we share, accept where we differ, and see that none of us may lay claim to absolute righteousness or perfection. Abraham may be our common ancestor, yet there is a bit of Cain in each of us. Still, unlike Cain we need not ask "Am I my brother's keeper?" For we already know the answer to the question. Elie Wiesel once observed, "Perhaps Cain himself aspired to be not just the first murderer in history, but the last as well." In our generation we can rewrite the story of Cain and Abel . . . if we are all but willing to come to the table.