

Freedom, Book-Burning, Peace
Rabbi Zoë Klein 9/10/10

Shabbat Shalom.

Leviticus 26:36 reads:

The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight. Fleeing as though from the sword, they shall fall, though none pursues.

It is a terrible curse,
That even the sound of a leaf scuttling in the breeze
Should terrify you, should send you running
From a phantom enemy.
The fires of fear so well-fueled and stoked,
that there can be found no quietness,
without pursuant,
victimhood is stamped in the marrow.
How can one live this way?

On March 3, 2006,
20 year old Matthew Snyder
Of Finksburg, Maryland,
Died from a non combat-related vehicle accident
In Iraq.

His father, Albert, said of him:
“He was a hero and he was the love of my life.”

At the funeral of his only son,
Albert was dismayed to find a fundamentalist pastor
And his ragtag group of followers,
Most of whom were the pastor’s own relatives,
Protesting with signs that read:

“Thank God for dead soldiers.”
And, “God hates you.”

The fire-and brimstone group
believes the death of soldiers is
God’s punishment for the military’s

“don’t ask, don’t tell” policy
Which allows gays and lesbians to serve.

Albert Snyder walked through
Screaming, foaming picketers
Holding signs –
“Don’t Pray for the USA,”
“America is doomed” –
To attend his son, his hero,
The love of his life’s funeral.

The father said it felt like being
Stabbed with a wound that cannot heal.

In an interview,
The preacher brushed off Snyder’s anguish,
Saying, “He ought to be very thankful to us
that we ... warn people about the perils of sinful conduct
that will destroy a nation.”
This preacher knew nothing about Matthew Snyder,
who was not gay,
who was a graduate from Westminster High School
Who had been assigned to a Combat Battalion
As a generator mechanic.
He did not know Matthew
beyond that his funeral offered the chance
to draw media attention to his message of hate.

Tomorrow is September 11,
And we as a nation still grieve...
The pain is raw, and real,
And the shock of it grips us
Again and again.

I remember in the weeks that followed September 11,
The media tried to protect the public a little,
And stopped showing images
Of the people leaping from the towers.
Imagine, *the media*
Trying to protect the public...

And now,
Just as the funeral of Matthew Snyder
And the unbearable grief of his family
Was hijacked by a hate-filled opportunistic
Uneducated power-greedy heartless zealot...

Our day of national mourning, remembering, reflecting,
And potential bridge-building
Has been hijacked by a tiny band
Hate-filled venomous zealots,
And the story-chasing media
Who made them a headline,
Whose cameras and reporters
Outnumber this clown's flock-of-fools
A thousand to one,
Legitimizing the idiocy,
Enabling the asininity.

In response to the proposal to turn September 11
into "Burn a Koran Day,"
Rabbi Eric Yoffie,
President of the Union for Reform Judaism,
issued the following statement:

We can scarcely find words to express our revulsion at the Dove World Outreach Center's "Burn a Koran Day." Only those whose minds have been tainted by evil and acrimony would undertake to organize a sacrilegious event such as this and to do so in the name of God and religious piety.

We reject attempts at dividing our nation along religious lines, and, together with the overwhelming majority of America's religious leaders, commit ourselves to standing up to those who wish to ostracize and intimidate our Muslim neighbors. Our fight is not with America's Muslims, but with all those whose extremist views lead them to hateful and dangerous actions. We will not compromise our principles of tolerance and understanding, and we will not defer to those who preach hatred while cloaking themselves in religious garb.

Book-burning has particular resonance

for Jews.
On May 10 in 1933
The Nazis burned 20,000 books...
A line from poet Heinrich Heine
Is engraved on the site.
It reads:
“Where they burn books,
They ultimately burn people.”

“Sooner or later, [it seems,]
the enemies of the Jewish people
become the enemies of the world...”¹

The Jewish people are sometimes
Called “the canary in the coal mine:
the canary, with its limited lung capacity,
dies to let the miners know there is lethal gas.
But despite everything,
the Jewish people have survived.”²
We are the canary that lived to tell the tale,
And therefore are called to witness...

“...Not only about the sufferings of Jews alone:
it is profoundly Jewish to cry out about Darfur,
Congo, the oppression of women —
about evil anywhere in God’s world, in our world.
Hatred always bursts its bonds and will spill over.”³

Where they burn books,
They ultimately burn people.

We are blessed to live in a country
Where the first amendment
Protects our free speech.
Along with that freedom
comes vitriolic messages of
bigotry and rage.

¹ Rabbi David Wolpe

² Rabbi David Wolpe

³ Rabbi David Wolpe

Free speech can mean howling hatred
Across the airways
Which are all too promiscuous
For a salacious scoop.
We live in a country
Where the price we pay
for being able to protest injustice,
For raising our voice,
For the privilege of questioning our governance,
Is the accreditation of flag-burning,
urine-soaked Virgin Mary's
As works of art,
Upside-down crucifixes as edgy pop jewelry,
The opportunity for every
Opinionated boor and brute,
Every chauvinist,
Doctrinaire,
Maniac,
Segregationist,
Racist,
Sexist,
Superpatriot
Militant monster
To have his or her own cable
Or prime-time
Talk show.

All you need is an axe-to-grind
And a camera-phone.
Or a balloon, a kid named Falcon,
And delusional fame fantasy.

Albert Snyder was presented a flag at the graveyard.
He saluted his son's coffin,
While protestors held up signs
That said "God hates you"
Turning his sacred time
Into a fiendish circus.

The case is going to the Supreme Court

In October.

Freedom of speech is a privilege
With a significant price...
And it is also a responsibility.

As the Rev. Larry Reimer, pastor of United Church of Gainesville, said when he presented to Terry Jones 8,000 petition signatures gathered through an Internet effort in opposition to the Koran burning:

*Freedom of religion is a founding principle of our constitution, and the burning of any people's sacred texts is in direct opposition to this principle. If you proceed with your plans to burn the Quran, please understand that this act will not serve to lessen our respect for the Muslim faith but will only serve to lessen our respect for you and what you are preaching.*⁴

When hate-mongers call for the burning of holy books,
When governors imagine beheadings along our borders,
When community centers fuel more outrage than strip clubs
Because of its proximity to Ground Zero,
When the images we are shown
Over and over again from every angle
Are designed to make us afraid,
Eventually we do become afraid,
And ultimately what will destroy us,
Is not the imagined enemy,
But the sound of a driven leaf,

Once freedom overrides basic human dignity and respect,
We have turned freedom itself into an idol
At whose feet we worship,
Upon whose altar we allow our ideals to be sacrificed,
Our ideals and children,
Like Matthew Snyder,
Whose funeral, and memory, were hijacked by media-hounds.

Freedom of speech is a privilege.
It is also a responsibility.

⁴ LA Times

Part of that responsibility is upon the individual,
But there will always be fanatics.
And so part of that responsibility has to be upon media as well,
“not to provide coverage of events that are gratuitously manufactured to
provoke and offend...Lisa Mills, a University of Central Florida professor
who studies media theory and is a former television journalist, said [in
today’s LA Times]: ‘We need to think about our responsibility to our
viewers and subscribers and to our community.’”

Part of the responsibility
Is also upon us to stay informed.
To listen discerningly.
To see for ourselves.

The Shura Council of Southern California,
Is holding their annual event
On Sunday, October 17th
Called Open Mosque Day.

Hosted by neighborhood mosques, it is a sincere effort for the Muslim
community and its neighbors to meet and know each other. Come and bring
your family, friends, and colleagues to Know Thy Neighbor.

I’d love for a group of us to go
On October 17th for one of these visits,
And if there is someone here
Who would like to volunteer to help organize this,
Please let me know.

Tomorrow is September 11th.
We are celebrating two bar mitzvahs.
It is Sabbath.
It falls this year
In the midst of our High Holy Days.
Our days of Awe.
It is also a day raw with hurt,
Choked with memory.

Let it be a day where we consider our responsibilities,
Our partnership

With God and with one another,
To protect each other,
To acknowledge each other's strivings,
To lift one another up
In hope and faith and love.

You will receive an email tonight from the temple
With a prayer from Rabbi Nachman of Breslov,
A Hasidic Rabbi who lived in the late 18th century.

The Koran-burning has apparently been officially called-off,
Let's hope the impressionable copycat oafs
Who liked the idea have put away their lighter fluid as well.

Let's replace book-burning with another ritual.
Replace heated fury
And smoking grief
With a scintilla of gratitude for family and life,
With a kindling of embers of love...
Replace our fevered anguish and fuming remorse
With a spark of strength
And the courage to build bridges...
Replace our scorching devastation and explosive laments
With the warm lantern of the heart,
With a prayer:

*Lord of Peace, Divine Ruler, to whom peace belongs!
Master of Peace, Creator of all things!
May it be thy will to put an end to war and bloodshed on earth,
and to spread a great and wonderful peace over the
whole world, so that nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.
Help us and save us all, and let us cling tightly to the virtue of peace.
Let there be a truly great peace between every person and their fellow,
and let there be no discord between people even in their hearts.
Let us never shame any person on earth, great or small.
May it be granted unto us to fulfill Thy Commandment to
"Love thy neighbor as thyself,"
with all our hearts and souls and bodies and possessions.
And let it come to pass in our time as it is written,*

*“And I will give peace in the land,
and you shall lie down and none shall make you afraid.
I will drive the wild beasts from the land,
and neither shall the sword go through your land.
God who is peace, bless us with peace.”⁵*

And I add, may the sound of a driven leaf, be to us nothing more
Than a reminder that autumn is here,
And our own leaf,
Once again,
Has the blessed opportunity to turn over.

⁵ Nachman of Breslov