A House of Prayer for All Peoples

By Steve Greenberg

The problem of religious arrogance has haunted me since the events of September 11. We all came face to face with the moral and mortal danger of "God's chosen ones" carrying out the punishment of an evil empire in a terrible Islamic fundamentalist drama. Once heaven's spotlight shines exclusively upon a single religion, the rest are easily cast as supporting players, walk-ons or antagonists. When I was a young rabbi I preached this sermon, not to Moslems but to Christians.

A couple of years following my rabbinic ordination, I was asked to speak to a group of Christian seminary students about Judaism. Because it happened to be just after Yom Hashoah, I could not resist the temptation to introduce my talk with a few words about Christian anti-Semitism. These bright-faced seminary students were totally unprepared to be forced by me, a rookie rabbi, child of a Holocaust survivor, to face Christianity's complicity in the death of millions, including my own grandfather.

I asked them to read aloud a few of the most rabid accounts of Christian clerics, ministers and popes and, haltingly, they did so. Disturbed that I might believe that they, too, subscribed to such vile opinions of Jews, they insisted that these were not true Christians nor was this true Christianity.

"And the Crusaders," I asked, "were they not Christians? Luther, was he not Christian?" Motivated as they were by the sweetness of their calling, these students were ill prepared to accept that the same scripture and traditions in which they found profound healing and love could be so viciously employed to justify such cruelty and violence. They wanted to comfort themselves with the thought that the Crusaders were just bad people, or that the Christian theology of these moments were aberrant blips on the screen. They could not see the linkage between Christianity's universalist theology (specifically that God is mediated for all humanity only through Christ), and its brutal medieval and modern history.

Of course, I too was irresponsible. I had conveniently described Jews as the eternal victims of other people's bad theology. I thought the record spoke for itself. Historically speaking (and likely not unrelated to the accident of Jewish powerlessness over the last two thousand years), Jews have not perpetrated a fraction of the violence that has marked both Christianity and Islam.

What I failed to remember is how Jewish truth claims have been played out in the Land of Israel. One might consider the early Canaanites as the first people to

suffer the consequences of a holy war waged by God's people against infidels. Were at least some Jews not invested in an exclusive narrative truth, there would not have been Jewish radicals willing to do almost anything in order to secure every last inch of the Promised Land (that is, the land promised to the Jews in the Hebrew Scriptures).

Reflecting on this, I wonder if arrogance were a feature of monotheism itself. When the one universal God prophetically speaks to any one people, the temptation to universalize the particular is enormous. In the struggle to balance these strands, Judaism actually has a lot to offer. Among the monotheistic faiths, Judaism places clear limits on the range of its interests. Judaism is not a faith practice for the whole world. We have no conversionary ideals. We are "chosen" to help the world move, not toward particular Jewish faith or observance, but in a moral/religious direction that might be easily described as ethical monotheism. As a vanguard, Jews have unique duties that are not incumbent upon others. Jews are to be a holy people in the service of humanity, a blessing to all the families of the earth.

Still, some might claim that the notion of chosenness was the kernel of the problem. Isn't the rejection of every other religious story implicit in the idea of God's choosing of one people over others? If so, my critique of Christian supercessionism may amount to little more than resentment at them for having stolen our trump card. The church, it would seem, merely supplanted an original Jewish arrogance by claiming to have replaced the Jewish people as God's chosen.

This year Rosh Hashanah followed less than a week after the attack upon the Twin Towers. As I began on Rosh Hashanah Eve to pray, I found myself comforted by the liturgy. "May all Thy creatures know Thee, and all humankind bow down to acknowledge Thee. May all Thy children unite in one fellowship to do Thy will with a whole heart." At the climax of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, verses from *Isaiah* are recited that are the epitome of Jewish messianic hope.

Moreover, the holiest spot on earth, the spot most associated with our unique destiny as Jews, belongs to the whole world: "And I will bring them to my holy mountain, and they will rejoice in my house of prayer. All their offerings will be received upon my altar, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples, says the Lord" (*Isaiah* 56:7).

Deep inside of Jewish sensibility is the idea that Jews are chosen for the sake of all the families of the earth. This is the core of God's covenant with Abraham. The children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are chosen and blessed by God as both an end in itself and as a resource for world blessing.

In fact, chosenness, as Isaiah sees it, is not ultimately exclusive to the Jews. Isaiah insists that, at the end of days, not only Israel, but the arch enemies of Israel, Egypt and Assyria will all be blessed. God will say, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria the work of my hands, Israel my inheritance" (*Isaiah* 19:25). The vision is not of one people nor of one final and true religious narrative, but of one God who is celebrated in different ways by different communities, all chosen, all blessed.

What I told those innocent seminary students nearly twenty years ago I say now with a bit more calm and, I hope, a good deal more humility. No faith can claim to be the exclusive path to the divine and avoid being implicated in the violence done in the name of God. Those who believe that their religious story is ultimately the only story, who claim that one cannot reach God except through Moses or Jesus or Mohammed, have become a threat, not only to the plausibility of any religious world vision, but to the very safety of the world. The rising threat of Islamic fundamentalism challenges us all to find, within each of our faiths, the capacity to speak a language of personal faith that we do not force upon others and a public religious language that struggles to include everyone.

Judaism can play a crucial role in the shaping of this United Nations of religions. As religions go, we have learned how to sustain an enormous amount of dissent without compromising deep commitment. Its most faithful adherents tend to honor questions, and often prefer them to answers. Even the name, Israel, means God-wrestlers. For us, two completely opposing views can both be "the word of the Living God." The Talmud edges closer toward divine truth not by narrowing perspectives, but by multiplying them.

Last spring, I helped bring a friend of mine, a scholar of Islam, to Jerusalem from New Zealand. I helped her to her hotel in the Moslem quarter of the old city so that she could participate in the morning prayers at Al Aksa, on the Temple Mount. By the time we finished getting her settled it was late, but she was eager to walk around the city. I told her that I wanted to pray that evening at the Western Wall and she excitedly asked me if I might bring her with me. She was overwhelmed at the stark spiritual beauty of the wall and prayed on the women's side for nearly an hour. When we met again, she thanked me for the opportunity to visit with me a place she would not have come to on her own. She asked me what it was that I really wanted for this little hilltop at the edge of the desert. We talked quietly about the Temple Mount as we walked through the narrow streets back to her hotel.

I think I want this sacred place to be open, to be for all those who worship God, I told her. Despite the fact that I had at one time longed for the Jewish recapture of the Temple Mount, I realize that I no longer need or want to mark the most sacred place for Jews as "only ours." If the chosenness of the Jewish people is not so much for their sake as for the sake of all, then surely the holy mount, the place of God's choosing, should be a place for all. It should be our honor that

the sacred rock of the Temple Mount be deemed holy for members of every monotheistic faith. Surely each faith needs its own sacred space. Retaining the plaza of the Western Wall as a Jewish pilgrimage and prayer space and keeping Al-Aksa open for Moslems on the southern side of the Temple Mount would seem right. At the same time, the Dome of the Rock standing at the center of the Temple Mount, roughly in the same place as the temples of Solomon and Herod, should be open to all for contemplation and prayer to the One God. But this isn't really a new idea. It is quite old. The prophet Isaiah leads us to this vision of a redemptive future: "For my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples, says the Lord."