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"Remembering 9/11: How might we love our neighbor as ourselves?"

(Lev. 19:1-18 Isaiah 56:1-7)

The conversation started with a protective grandmother. For thirty-five years, living in the American Heartland, she had been comfortable referring to God as Allah and fasting during Ramadan. Her neighbors and friends included Jews and Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and atheists, families that had ancestors who landed on the Mayflower and those who immigrated more recently from Europe, Africa, Latin America and South East Asia. She felt welcomed. But when her son, raised to stand up for his convictions, publically called out the bigotry that he saw deepening around him, she grew frightened. "I'm worried about your children," she said. "The kids are fine. Just high energy." "I'm not worried about their energy. I'm worried about their names. They sound too Muslim. What will happen to them on the playground at school? Who will defend them from bullies? Even the teachers might treat them badly. They're young yet. It's not too late to give them more American names. In a year, no one will remember their old names."[i]

Unhappily, this fear is not new to this generation, nor limited to Muslims. For years I worked with an Orthodox rabbi named Chaim. When he started school, his teacher insisted that he be addressed as Howard. And one of his rabbis, an adult who goes by Yitz, short for his Hebrew name Yitzchak, was known as Irving all through his childhood. His parents thought it would give him a better shot at getting into Harvard.

Americans pride ourselves on our diversity, on embracing each new culture that takes root in our nation. But we sometimes ask people to hide or to masquerade in order to be accepted into our midst. I recently returned to my own birthplace—Brooklyn. What a cornucopia of world traditions. Every restaurant in my old neighborhood features a different cuisine and culture. The sights, sounds and scents evoke Central America, the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Europe. The cabbies are from every country in the world, speaking animatedly into their cell phones in foreign tongues and then conversing with their fares in accented English. Some of the people who create this rich diversity came to America seeking their fortune. Others came to America forced to leave behind their fortune. Some came as refugees-- former accountants working as home care givers, former doctors working as cashiers, starting over with hopes for freedom to rebuild. They all came believing that freedom beckoned, that there was a place for them here, that their lives—and most significantly, their children's and their grandchildren's lives would be enriched here. They came to become Americans.

As we anticipate the eleventh anniversary of 9/11, there are ample experiences of the fulfillment of those hopes. Both the Republican and Democratic conventions overflowed with speakers whose families came from elsewhere to become neighbors to one another in an America filled with diversity. But, as we come close to the anniversary of 9/11, our fearful grandmother reminds us, for the Muslim community, there is an impulse to lay low, an inherent anxiety about partaking in the celebration of difference that has come to characterize our best values. They have ample reason to fear as this summer's Wisconsin shooting makes clear. During this past month's Ramadan, at least seven mosques and one cemetery were attacked—burned, bombed and dumped with pig parts. In 2010, the most recent year of FBI statistics, between Florida pastor Terry Jones' Koran burning episode and the outrage over building a mosque near the World Trade Center site, hate crimes spiked 50%[ii]. And for those who may not feel physically threatened, the message still rings loud and clear. Change your names. Hide your religious practices—in essence, wear a metaphorical burka, in order to be welcomed as our neighbors. Even in this country that prides itself on diversity, we ask people to change who they are rather than confront our own fear and prejudice.

In Leviticus, in a section called the "Holiness Code", we read the oft-repeated lines: "*Vahavta l'reacha kamocha, ani Adonai*" "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Eternal Your God." What does "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" have to do with "I am the Eternal Your God."? How we treat our neighbors, particularly those who are misunderstood and frightened, those who have been demonized or targeted, is a manifestation of how we honor and imitate God. How we recognize and identify with our neighbors revitalizes the sacred hopes of our own ancestors. To understand the stories behind the eyes of those who struggled to arrive here, to see the shared humanity amidst the different practices, languages, clothing, aromas and recipes is to be reminded that we are all descendents of the first human beings; we are all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve.

V'ahavtah l'reecha kamocha—You shall love your neighbor as yourself. One renowned Jewish sage, Nachmanides, seems to anticipate the question most of us secretly want to ask when commanded to love. Love our neighbors? What if we fear them? What if we don't *like* them? How can we possibly love them? Nachmanides finds an ingenious answer through Hebrew grammar. To be grammatically correct, "You shall love your neighbor" would be "*Vahavta **et** reachah*. Instead the Hebrew is, *Vahavta **l'**reacha* -- "You shall extend love **to** your neighbor," adopt a loving *attitude* toward everyone: "Let's rise above our narrowness," he says, "and overlook fear, unfamiliarity and ignorance. Let's celebrate our neighbors' happiness as we would our own." How? By *seeing ourselves in them*, by extending to them the dignity we hope to receive from all who encounter us, whether at our most loving or our most fearful.

If Nachmanides attends to our attitude, the great Jewish philosopher and physician, Maimonides attends to our deeds. Maimonides takes the emotion of love out of the equation altogether. He says loving one's neighbor is about practical

behavior: We extend love when we visit the sick, when we accompany the dead for burial, when we make sure a bride has a gown and when we try to patch up quarrels between friends. We manifest love in our communities when we create and sustain a web of connections, laughing and celebrating together in times of joy, buoying one another in times of sorrow. Maimonides would have said "Amen" to my favorite lines of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr's, now etched in his memorial wall. "We are all tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality...I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. "[iii]

In the summer of 2010, no one defended the community center and mosque near Ground Zero and the man who envisioned it, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, more fiercely than Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Years earlier, at a memorial service for Stanford graduate and *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, Imam Feisal said, "If to be a Jew means to say with all one's heart, mind and soul, *Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai echad,* 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one', not only today I am a Jew, I have always been one." Mayor Bloomberg quoted the Muslim leader's words and added, "In that spirit, let me declare that we in New York are Jews and Christians and Muslims, and we always have been. And above all that, we are Americans…There is nowhere in the five boroughs of New York City that is off limits to any religion. By affirming that basic idea, we will honor America's values and we will keep New York the most open, diverse, tolerant and free city in the world."[iv]

Mayor Bloomberg was nearly a lone voice in those dark hours. It took courage to stand with his neighbors, when so many demonized them. Why was he so insistent? It turns out that Michael Bloomberg knew the experience of being feared, of being cast out. As a child, his family wanted to buy a home in the Boston suburb of Medford. But there were restrictive covenants. Jews were not welcome. They were rebuffed as neighbors. His parents had to ask their Christian lawyer to buy the house and then to sell it back to them.[v] Michael Bloomberg was determined to use his personal and political power to insure the commandment to love his neighbor as himself would be part of the fabric of New York City.

Stephen Carter, now a Yale law professor and novelist also knew what it was like to be in a neighborhood where he was unwanted. In 1966, when he was eleven, his family moved into a new neighborhood in Washington. He remembers sitting with his two brothers and two sisters on the front steps of a grand new house aware of being a black boy in a white neighborhood. He couldn't hide who he was or pretend to be like his neighbors. His skin betrayed him. Lonely, fearful, watching strangers walk by without a hello or a wave, he recited a litany of despair. "I knew we wouldn't be welcome here. I knew we wouldn't be liked. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we shouldn't have moved here…"

Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted by a friendly welcome. A neighbor across the street disappeared into her house and emerged with a tray of cream

cheese and jelly sandwiches, which she carried to his porch, feeding and greeting the children of a family she had never met. They were strangers, black strangers, and she created a sense of belonging for them where none had existed before. In the midst of a white neighborhood in a racially charged era, she was trusting when there was no reason to be and generous when nobody forced her to be. She demonstrated not merely a welcome that nobody else offered, but a faith, a trust that the Carters were people to whom one could and should be neighborly.

That neighbor, Sara Kestenbaum, Stephen Carter came to learn, was a religious Jew. Stephen Carter was literally and figuratively fed by Sara Kestenbaum's fulfillment of the obligation to love one's neighbor. "To this day, I can close my eyes and feel on my tongue the smooth, slick sweetness of the cream cheese and jelly sandwiches that I gobbled on that summer afternoon when I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life forever," [vi] Stephen Carter has written.

Sara Kestenbaum's welcome and Michael Bloomberg's staunch defense of his Muslim neighbors combine a generous attitude with a straightforward and thoughtful act. Gestures of neighborliness, understanding, support and friendship like these contain the poetry of everyday life written into the language of simple deeds. Isn't that what we hope for in our own neighborhoods—to develop empathy, joy, kindness and care so that we can find holiness in every person, even those whose differences may have frightened or separated us?

Isn't this, after all, our country's greatest genius? To build a community where what unites us is stronger than what divides us? To discover in each of our encounters the words of Proverbs, "As in water, face answers to face, so in the heart of human to human." (Proverbs 27:19)

Learning to respect another's tradition is borne of understanding and valuing our own. Berea College, a Christian college in Appalachia, is a radical experiment. It was founded in 1855, by a minister and abolitionist for poor Appalachians. It admitted blacks as well as whites, women as well as men. As it has since its inception, Berea charges no tuition and only admits academically promising students who are poor.

When Muslim activist Eboo Patel was invited to speak in the chapel at Berea, he was asked if, in order to make him as a Muslim more comfortable in a Christian setting, he would prefer for the cross be covered by a blanket. He gave this hospitable question some thought and realized, "That cross is why this college exists. [Rev.] John Fee risked his life to build an institution that brought people from different backgrounds together. I'm standing here, a Muslim, interfaith leader, because Berea believes that cross signifies an inclusive and relational Christian identity. I don't want them to cover the cross. I don't want them to hide their Christian faith. I want them to tell the story of how that cross inspired them to build an interracial college in pre-Civil War Kentucky. I want them to share how that

cross moves them to admit Buddhists from Sri Lanka and Hindus from India and have them in classes and volunteer activities with Christians from Appalachia. I want them to tell the world, 'This is what it means to be a Christian.'"[vii]

Whether in a college chapel, on the steps of City Hall or at the voting precincts, we encounter neighbors who not only have different stories, but whose very differentness can illuminate and encourage us to celebrate our own uniqueness, our own humanity, our nation's remarkable story. Those who were once "the other" can become beloved neighbors and friends. As feminist theologian Mary Daly once wrote, "Our liberation consists in refusing to be "the Other", and asserting instead, "I am"—without making another "The Other". In the Berea Chapel, in Stanford Memorial Church, in temple, gurdwara, synagogue and mosque, let us welcome our neighbors into our houses with the vision of the prophet, Isaiah, "They will come to my holy mountain and rejoice in my house of prayer. My house will be a house of prayer for all peoples." May we each live in a house open to all peoples. As we come upon the next anniversary of 9/11, may we listen to each other's stories, assuage each other's fears and break bread together, welcoming our neighbors, elevating ourselves.

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[i] Eboo Patel, Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice and the Promise of America, pp. xxi-xxii.
[ii] http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/09/05/rising-anti-islamic-sentiment-in-america-troubles-muslims/?hpt=hp_c3
[iii] Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution"
[iv] Patel, p. 12
[v] Patel, pp. 21-21
[vi] Civility, Stephen Carter, p. 61-63
[vii] Patel, pp. 127-128