

Help Wanted: Freedom of Religion  
(Leviticus 19:33-37; Ps. 114)

Last Saturday night, Stanford students performed *The Hijabi Monologues*, a dramatic rendering of the stories and experiences of American Muslim women. The playwright, Sahar Ullah, introduced the evening by paying tribute to *The Vagina Monologues*, the well-known work of secular, Jewish feminist, Eve Ensler. Yet even as Ullah acknowledged Ensler's work, she reflected on how this performance differed. "*The Vagina Monologues* took something private and gave it a voice." Ullah said. "*The Hijabi Monologues* takes something public and gives the whole woman a voice." The Stanford production came about because students listened to one another's voices. A Jewish woman and a Muslim woman discussed the play they attended together at the Kennedy Center while at Stanford in Washington. Another Muslim woman and a Christian woman, who became friends at the weekly gathering of the Fellowship for Religious Encounter joined forces to produce the play here. As that Christian woman, who coincidentally is our reader and usher today, Heidi Thorsen wrote in the playbill, "It is about Muslims—and Christians, Jews, Hindus and people of other diverse beliefs—coming together to present and confront these important stories." At our weekly gathering of the Fellowship for Religious Encounter, students build on one another's curiosity, understanding, questions and convictions. Over dinner and dessert in Stanford's multi-faith Center for Inter-Religious Community, Learning and Experiences, students discuss passionately who they are, what they know, why they believe. And then, just before our weekly gathering concludes, one of our number will offer a prayer—in Hebrew, in English, chanted in Latin or Cambodian or Arabic, or invoking the silence of a

Quaker meeting, we pray in one another's presence. We pray in one another's parlance. We reach out beyond our borders to offer our distinctiveness.

For the first eight decades of Stanford's existence, this could not have happened. The Founding Grant of the University permitted only one place for prayers at Stanford University—here, in the ornate and iconographic Memorial Church. It wasn't that Jane and Leland Stanford aimed to be inhospitable to those who weren't Protestant Christians. It was an unintended consequence of another deeply held value. When they established the university as a memorial to their 15 year-old son, Leland Jr., they insisted that no single religious dogma or authority would curtail freedom of inquiry. The charter states, "...the moral and religious development of the University will be better accomplished if entirely free from all denominational alliances, however slight the bond may be."<sup>i</sup>

They may have resisted the idea of Presbyterians, Methodists or Episcopalians meddling in the affairs of the university, but the Stanfords nonetheless very much wanted their school to be religious. The founding faculty believed that a library should be in the geographic heart of the university; Jane Stanford insisted that the mile-long Palm Drive lead instead to Memorial Church. While Mrs. Stanford was neither schooled in theology nor bound by religious authority, she poured into this academic monument her thwarted hopes for her own lost son. "Take away the moral and spiritual from higher education," she said, "and I want nothing to do with this or any other university."<sup>ii</sup> Leland Stanford Jr. University held out for her the promise of immortality. Is it any wonder why the soul of the university meant so much to her?

But, sectarian or not, “the moral and spiritual” at Stanford had a decidedly Protestant inflection. Yes, a few leaders from minority religious communities spoke from this pulpit to the Christians in the pews of Memorial Church. But public worship outside Memorial Church, was strictly forbidden by Mrs. Stanford, in the Founding Grant. And so it was.

The wheels of change turned very slowly. In 1965, campus ministers, including the new Rabbi Charles Familant, who became Hillel’s first full time leader, argued that, contrary to the founders’ wishes, restricting denominational prayer had created a de facto Stanford State Religion. The medium became the message—harmonizing with the formal, Christian artistry we see around us, High Church Episcopalian worship was the sole religious option at Stanford.<sup>iii</sup> Richard Lyman, later to become Stanford’s seventh president, believed that the time had come, as he put it, to “open up” Memorial Church. He successfully convinced the Trustees to allow sectarian worship “on a trial basis”—but, in keeping with the Founding Grant, this worship could only occur inside the sandstone walls, amidst the New Testament mosaics and stained glass windows that we see here in Memorial Church.

As you can imagine, this “breakthrough” did not exactly suit the needs of Jews, let alone Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus.

And then a Jewish medical student lost his father and innocently asked Rabbi Familant to arrange a daily *minyan*, a prayer quorum, so he could recite the mourner’s prayer. This fateful call would land the controversy over freedom to worship on the front pages of the *Stanford Daily* and force the hand of the trustees. Rabbi Familant obtained permission for a 5 p.m. daily service in the Women’s Clubhouse. He publicized not only the daily gathering, but

also Friday night worship—same time, same place. And so it came to be that Stanford University indeed held Jewish services... for three weeks—until Rabbi Familant received a letter from the Office of the President insisting that he discontinue Sabbath services in the Clubhouse. A daily *minyan* for a bereaved student constituted private prayer, the administration reasoned. But, Friday night services presided over by a rabbi was public worship, and therefore violated the terms of the founding grant.

“Rabbi Barred from Services,” the front-page headline proclaimed in bold letters. A *Daily* columnist laid out the choice Jewish students faced— pray surreptitiously on campus, or pray proudly—and provoke the administration into taking disciplinary action. There was no question which option to choose—after all, it was the Sixties. Civil disobedience meets the struggle for religious freedom. Faculty, led by religion professor and theologian Robert McAfee Brown, supported proud and public Jewish prayer. The *Daily* continued to report on the services, now packed with supportive students of all faiths—some holding prayerbooks upside down, flummoxed by the Hebrew pages. In solidarity, Christian campus ministers refused to lead their own denominational worship until Jews could pray, too. The Trustees found themselves in the unenviable position of upholding Jane Stanford’s outdated, unjust and unpopular mandate. Casting about for a solution, the administration turned their gaze eastward, to Yale’s Rev. B. Davie Napier, who by then, had been picked to become Stanford’s next Dean of Memorial Church. Napier, himself a principled activist, refused to uphold a policy that both disenfranchised Jews and privileged some religious students over others.<sup>iv</sup> The Rev. Napier was downright Talmudic in his interpretation of the Founding Grant. His solution? “Why don’t we think of “Memorial Church” as more than a mere physical place?” he proposed. Then, all worship at Stanford takes place “under the auspices

of the *person* responsible for Memorial Church [emphasis added].”<sup>v</sup> And so it was. Denominational worship was approved on an “interim” basis. “Interim” turned out to be seven years, until President Lyman and the Trustees succeeded in legally modifying the Founding Grant. And so it came to be that in March of 1973, the right to worship freely was legally protected at Stanford University.

For Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, freedom of religion was not easily won at Stanford. And Stanford’s recent chapter is but one episode in an ongoing American story. In August, 1790, George Washington visited the oldest synagogue in America, now known as the Touro Synagogue, in Newport, Rhode Island. There, a letter from Moshe Seixas, the warden of the synagogue greeted him. In florid prose, Seixas conveyed the Jewish community’s esteem and welcome for President Washington, but there were anxious questions underlying the letter: “Will America be safe for Jews?” “Will we, who have escaped from province to country to continent have to run once again?” “Can we plan to build a life in this new country, free to practice our religion?” President Washington’s response was unequivocal, inspiring and affirmative.

“The Citizens of the United States of America ...All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.” Washington wrote. “For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens.”

Washington continued, “May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.”<sup>vi</sup>

This letter, a ringing reassurance of the freedom to practice religion by our country’s first president is re-read every year in a public ritual at the Touro Synagogue. It was read again this past August, as the fiery debate raged over the building of a Muslim community center and mosque two blocks from Ground Zero. Amidst the roar of rhetoric beginning across the Long Island Sound in Manhattan, and spreading throughout the nation, in Newport, Rhode Island, the quiet strains of George Washington’s affirmation of religious inclusiveness filled a small synagogue sanctuary. “For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance...”

As we look back on both the loud wrath and the quiet promise, we must recognize an admixture of fuel in the fires of outrage which burned in response to this particular cry for religious freedom. The concerns of some, kindling perhaps, began and ended with the sensitivity and rawness of the project’s proximity to Ground Zero. Holocaust survivors among them, their passions were ignited by a strong sympathy for the symbolism and sanctity in places where mass death has taken place. They truly would be comfortable with a mosque, ten blocks, rather than two blocks away from Ground Zero. Then there were those who poured gasoline on the flames--who **do** give bigotry sanction and persecution assistance, who see in every Muslim a terrorist and in every mosque a *madrassa*, no matter what the address. The Park51 community center and mosque project was the powder keg, which galvanized their public opposition to mosques anywhere in the United States, whether in Sheboygan, Wisconsin or Temecula, California. Then there is a third group—those who

exploited this convenient controversy, stoking the flames of fear and hatred into a conflagration, dividing and inciting for their own cynical purposes.

In the face of this recent history, what could we say to a modern day Muslim Moshe Sexias who asks, “Is America safe for Muslims?” Is it safe when demonstrators carry signs that say, “All I need to know about Islam I learned on 9/11” and “Mosques are monuments to terrorism”? Is America safe when a zoning and property issue becomes the catalyst to unleash bigotry and justify hatred? Is America safe when arsonists firebomb mosques and Christian ministers are poised to burn Qurans? Is America safe when we tune out research finding that contemporary American mosques deter terrorism and extremism, but we heed a virtual industry disseminating distortion, lies and religious bigotry?<sup>vii</sup>

Every year, in a small sanctuary in Rhode Island, the words of George Washington proclaim freedom to practice religion without fear. Shouldn't we, in all of our sanctuaries, proclaim it as well? Every year, during Passover, the holiday celebrating freedom and liberation, participants recite “*B'chol dor vador chayav adam lirot et atzmo ki'lu who yatz'a memitzrayim*”. “In each and every generation, we are obligated to see ourselves as if we went out of Egypt.” The Exodus from Egypt is our collective Biblical legacy, we Jews and Christians. The obligation to know the heart of the stranger is inscribed over and over again in the Bible. Religious Jews and Christians are taught that we must not allow people to be persecuted, degraded and humiliated simply for being “Other”.

Just as Sahar Ullah's inspiration for *The Hijabi Monologues* was based on the work of a Jewish woman, the initiators of the community center and mosque modeled their project on

the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y—a Jewish cultural and community center providing education, entertainment, health and civic opportunities for people of every race, ethnicity, religion, age and social class. The New York Times has called the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y “the quintessential New York institution.” The architects of the Muslim community center and mosque wanted it to be a locus for the same openness, educational opportunity and cultural diversity. Muslims long to be at home in New York, at home in America. Yet, even when they are striving to be quintessential New Yorkers, they are branded as “Other”, foreign, fraudulent, frightening. This controversy not only pits fear against the fundamental rights enshrined in our civic DNA. It also prevents Muslims, proud of and desiring to be at home in this country, from assimilating as Americans, whether they were born in Indonesia or in Iowa, in Malaysia or in Michigan. Had you been at *The Hijabi Monologues*, you would have heard a hilarious story of Muslim women figuring out how to pray at a football game, a truly American moment.

Feminist theologian Mary Daly says it well. “Our liberation consists in refusing to be “the Other” and asserting instead, “I am”—without making another “the Other.”<sup>viii</sup>

The way to not make another “the Other” is to remember what it feels like to be so marginalized. The way not to make another “the Other” is to listen, to learn, to communicate, to honor the stories in which we find our common humanity.

This summer, my mother-in-law died in San Diego after a five-year battle with Alzheimer’s. None of her children now live in San Diego, so as we were arranging her funeral, we puzzled over where to hold the *Se’udat Havra’ab*, the meal of condolence following the burial. While making a list of who would want to know about her death, the



answer to our question became clear. For years, my mother-in-law, a research psychologist, joined work friends for lunch at Fairouz', a Middle Eastern café and gallery run by a Muslim artist who had become a dear friend. His artwork was vibrant and his hospitality was legendary. When we contacted him, Ibrahim was so grateful to honor his friend, to host us as we mourned her, to feed us eggs, the ritual food acknowledging birth and death, and to comfort us as we turned toward life. His was not just the gesture of a generous friend. He had lost his wife recently; he recognized us in his own loss. He opened his heart as well as his doors to us. Ibrahim enabled us to fulfill the commandment to honor the dead and he fulfilled the *mitzvah* to comfort the mourners. In effect, he provided for our family a community center—a central place for our community to gather, to celebrate, to commemorate, to remember. He provided for our family a mosque—a place filled with a connection to the Sacred, knitting together the indelible bonds of brotherhood. He did this as a Muslim, and we embraced him as family.

Similarly, at *The Hijabi Monologues*, the last one was a wrenching story of a mother mourning her son, a Muslim story which touched the hearts of everyone listening, whatever their religious orientation.

When George Washington wrote back to Moshe Sexias, he closed with the following invocation: “May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.”

And may we, heirs to that vision, be among the holders of the light. *Ken yebi ratzon.*

So may this be God's will. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> The language of the Stanford Founding Grant, amended on October 3, 1902: "The University must be forever maintained upon a strictly non-partisan and non-sectarian basis...the moral and religious development of the University will be better accomplished if entirely free from all denominational alliances, however slight the bond may be." Stanford University, "The Founding Grant with Amendments, Legislation and Court Decrees, published by the University," p. 21. <<https://wasc.stanford.edu/files/FoundingGrant.pdf>>.

<sup>ii</sup> John Casper Branner, "Founders' Day Address," March 10, 1917, pp. 5-6. (Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries)

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbi Charles Familant, "How Jewish Worship Got on Campus" unpublished reflections, p. 2, and personal conversation July 19, 2010.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> "Flexibility Urged in Worship Sites," *The Stanford Daily*, shown in DVD produced by Marie-Jo Mont Reynaud, "A History of Jewish Life at Stanford," 2008 screening at the dedication of the Koret Pavilion of the Harold and Libby Ziff Center for Jewish Life, April 13, 2008.

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/bigotry.html>

<sup>vii</sup> "Across the Nation, Mosque Projects Meet Opposition" New York Times, August 7, 2010

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/us/08mosque.html?pagewanted=2&sq=temecula%20mosque&st=cse&scp=1>

<sup>viii</sup> P. 34 "Beyond God the Father"

This sermon was adapted from a version I delivered to the Stanford Jewish community for Yom Kippur, 2010.