

Progressive Judaism's brave new initiative

By Jim Levinson

Saturday, October 4, 2008 — BRATTLEBORO - The recent PBS series, "Jews in America," and an important new initiative of the Union of Reform Judaism (URJ) got me thinking about Jewish history during the past 100 years, and our evolution in this country from threadbare, poverty-ridden beginnings.

Our immigrant grandparents did not have it easy, and the means of escape from that poverty were limited. One of those means of escape, sadly, was crime and violence. We were involved in plenty of it - some exceeding that of the burgeoning mafia. Every bit of this crime emanated from poverty. But what happened when our ancestors moved from the Lower East Side - out of extreme poverty - and into the Bronx and Queens? Jewish crime diminished to a tiny fraction of previous levels. Crime was contrary to our now primary concerns of pursuing our lives, our careers and our families.

A second compelling dimension of our history, well illustrated in that PBS documentary, is Jewish pride. In the early decades of the 20th century, we were excluded from neighborhoods, schools, hotels and clubs, and some national figures called openly for Jews to be driven from positions of responsibility and preferably out of the country altogether. And then came the Holocaust, and the very real question of whether we would survive as a people.

How did we respond to such humiliation? While some of us were cowed by fear into silence, and in some cases denial or repudiation of our Judaism, others of us responded much more actively. We are, after all, a proud people. We got angry, we lashed out, we fought back.

In 1913, we created the Anti-Defamation League, shining an angry spotlight on instances of anti-Semitism, and taking action to address it. And sometimes we turned to violence. The Irgun which operated in Palestine between 1931 and 1948 believed that the survival of our people was indeed in danger, and that only active and violent retaliation would deter the forces who stood as obstacles to a safe haven for our people.

Awareness of our own history provides, I believe, a basis for really understanding an important new initiative of the Union of Reform Judaism, a "Resolution on Jewish-Muslim Dialogue" adopted last December following valuable dialogue between leaders of the URJ and the Islamic Society of North America.

URJ president Rabbi Eric Yoffie made the point that we as Jews have been through it, we know what it's like to be poor, to be victimized, to be fearful, to be angry and to fight back. We're a people who can understand what this is about.

The plight of Muslims in the world today is similar in many ways to that which we faced in earlier decades. Those of us working internationally on poverty alleviation understand as an undeniable truism that as poverty decreases so does violence. My own work in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia has made clear that the areas of these countries which are the hotbeds of Jihadist activism are invariably the most deprived areas. Think of it: For a tiny fraction of the money we're spending fighting Islamic militancy with our weaponry, we could be pulling the rug out from under radical Islam by helping to meet the basic human needs of these deprived families.

Islamic violence springs also, as was the case among our own people, from fear and humiliation. Contrary to popular opinion, most of the Muslim clergy who are seeking to influence young Muslims in the world today are teaching the basic values of Islam which, at their core, are not so different from Jewish and Christian teachings.

Most Muslim youth are taught these principles. Some also, sadly, are taught the precepts of radical Islam (in the Islamic schools that make the news.) How will these youth make the choice? I daresay that choice is influenced in large part by what they're watching on their TV screens - namely the so-called "war on terror" which they are reading quite simply as "the war on Islam."

When the URJ initiated its efforts to facilitate Jewish-Muslim understanding, some asked, "So why aren't the Muslims themselves decrying Islamic violence? Where is the Muslim equivalent of the Haganah which opposed the violence of the Irgun? Where is the Muslim equivalent of the responsible African-American leaders who spoke out against rioting in Watts and Detroit?" Are Muslims protesting? The answer, surprisingly, is yes - lots of protest. But we'd hardly know it. The stories are virtually ignored by media.

We also hear little about the Muslim outreach to Jews: the "Open Letter from Muslims to Jews" signed by dozens of leading Muslim scholars, the plea from the Saudi king for dialogue, the efforts of the Achmadi Muslim community in Haifa on behalf of reconciliation, or indeed enough about the Muslims in our own Brattleboro area with whom we held the first Jewish/Muslim interfaith worship services in America.

Just imagine what would happen if even 10 percent of the attention given to radical Islam were given to these efforts - strengthening the hands of these courageous groups and individuals in this most vital work they are doing.

At a time when we are winning the battle of gender equality in Judaism, when we are making significant headway in the battle to provide equality to same-gender loving people, this may be the next great challenge of Jews in America, namely taking up this brave new challenge of Rabbi Yoffie and the URJ - to stand together with these courageous Muslim brothers and sisters, as tens of thousands of young Israelis are standing together with like-minded Palestinians, as we American Jews stood together on that bridge in Selma with Martin Luther King.

And in the same way that our involvement in the civil rights movement rekindled the energies and enthusiasms of my generation of American Jews, this new partnership designed to bring an end to Jewish-Muslim acrimony and stalemate might be just what is needed to reawaken the younger generation of Jews in America today.

In launching this initiative, the URJ has demonstrated considerable courage, but also possibly great foresight. They need to know that we are solidly behind them. We've made a dramatic beginning right here in Brattleboro with our Abrahamic initiatives, and that energy is now spreading to surrounding communities. We can do even more - more conversations, more events, more joint learning opportunities. I have no doubt that our grandchildren will look back on these efforts with the greatest pride.

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