

A shepherd was herding his flocks in a remote pasture when suddenly a brand new Jeep Cherokee advanced out of a dust cloud towards him. The driver, a young man in a Brioni suit, Gucci shoes, Ray Ban sunglasses and a YSL tie leaned out of the window and asked our shepherd: "If I can tell you exactly how many sheep you have in your flock, will you give me one?"

The shepherd looks at the yuppie, then at his peacefully grazing flock and calmly answers "sure!" The yuppie parks the car, whips out his notebook, connects it to a cell-phone, surfs to a NASA page on the Internet where he calls up a GPS satellite navigation system, scans the area, opens up a database and some 60 Excel spreadsheets with complex formulas. Finally he prints out a 150 page report on his hi-tech miniaturized printer, turns round to our shepherd and says: "you have here exactly 1586 sheep!"

"This is correct. As agreed, you can take one of the sheep," says the shepherd. He watches the young man make a selection and bundle it in his Cherokee.

Then he says: "If I can tell you exactly what your business is, will you give me my sheep back?"

"Okay, why not" answers the young man. "You are an economist for a government think tank," says the shepherd.

"This is correct," says the yuppie, "How did you guess that?"

"Easy" answers the shepherd. "You turn up here although nobody called you. You want to be paid for the answer to a question I already knew the solution to. And you don't know anything about my business because you just took my dog.

In today's environment there appear to be only two certainties, 1. We live in uncertain times, and 2. We will continue to see a rise in the number of jokes about economists. In many

ways though it is not their fault because the world economic situation is complicated to say the least. There was a time when economists could create simple measures to study the health of an economy. Their models would typically be based on goods produced, sold and purchased. But nowadays where commerce is measured not just in goods, but also in ideas and where markets are constantly in a state of flux, how can one possibly hope to keep up? It is as if judging the health of the economy is almost as complicated as predicting the weather.

Because of this informed opinions about the economy are often confusing and contradictory. The experts never seem to agree and conflicts abound: Keynesian theory versus Freidman theory, deficit spending versus controlled spending, limited government intervention versus stimulus packages. Or as it is said in the First Law of Economists which states: For every economist, there exists an equal and opposite economist.

Nowadays economic theory is becoming increasingly an exercise in chaos theory because not all data is knowable, thus any conclusions are not certain. Chaos theorists describe this phenomenon as the butterfly effect. Our little daily purchasing decisions can impact the world's economy in unknowable ways. And this is why it is so frustrating at our inability to get a straight answer about our economy and where it is headed. The only truth we know for sure is that these times are uncertain as we are sailing in uncharted seas.

One of the unintended consequences of this economic uncertainty is fear, fear of the present, fear for the future. Fear can be paralyzing if not properly channeled. Fear can also be used to further build up anxiety and stress. Worries in effect become contagious. Perhaps no story illustrates this better than that of a woman who woke up at 3:00 a.m. to see her husband pacing the floor. "Why can't you sleep?" she asks him.

“You know our next door neighbor, Sam. I borrowed a thousand dollars from him, and it’s due tomorrow morning, and I don’t have the money.” I don’t know what I’m going to do.” The woman gets out of bed and opens the window. “Sam!” she shouts, and several times more, “Sam, Sam!”

Finally a very groggy man opens the window opposite her: “Wha...What is it?”

“You know the thousand dollars my husband owes you? He doesn’t have it.”

She slams the window shut. “Now,” she says to her husband, “you go to sleep and let him pace the floor.”

We live in a climate of great uncertainty that makes it easy for others to prey on our fears. Right now what is the greatest fear out there? “The other.”

We Jews certainly know about being the “other.” For nearly two millennia we have been persecuted and vilified because of our belief system, our language, our dress, our ethical code, our traditions, our food, and the like. Thank God we, at least in this country for the most part, are accepted into all aspects of society. We can have memberships in just about any country club. Our children and grandchildren can attend any college they want, assuming they are accepted. Jews have attained almost every level of achievement our country has to offer. We in many ways are no longer, like the Irish or the Catholics before us, considered the “other.” We are even getting closer everyday to having a minyan on the Supreme Court, which is theoretically possible if we count the frieze of Moses on the building.

Moses is not alone in our nation’s capitol. The House of Representatives’ Chamber in Congress is adorned with marble relief portraits of twenty-three famous lawmakers and lawgivers throughout history. Included is the picture of one of the greatest rabbis in our tradition, Moses Maimonides. Maimonides, also known as the Rambam, an acronym for Rabbi

Moshe ben Maimon, was born in Cordoba Spain in 1135 or 1138 depending upon which scholar you ask. Maimonides lived during the waning time of the Golden Age of Spain which celebrated the greatest Diaspora community up until the establishment of the Jewish community in North America.

Maimonides was a Torah scholar, physician, philosopher, and theologian. To quote one of his biographers Joel Kramer, “As a philosopher and scientist, he wrote the illustrious Guide of the Perplexed and mastered mathematics, astronomy, logic, ethics, and theology. As a physician, he served royalty and wrote medical works that were studied in the Middle East and Europe for centuries. As a jurist, he wrote a great compendium of Jewish law that influenced all subsequent Jewish law codes. As the Great Rav in Israel, he was the highest religious authority for Jews in Egypt and for others east and west, north and south.”<sup>1</sup>

Maimonides did all of this while living his entire life in the Islamic world. Given the current tensions between Israel and the Arabic world, many have erroneously thought that Jews and Muslims have always been at odds. Historically speaking, nothing could be further from the truth. Though there were rough patches to be sure. It was the fundamentalist Almohad invasion of Spain that forced Maimonides and his family to flee first to Fez and later to Israel and then to Egypt, but it was also the same Muslim world where Maimonides was able to study and learn physics, medicine, ethics, astronomy, and optics. This was because it was in this world he encountered a constant exchange of ideas. Our piyyutim, liturgical poetry like Adon Olam, Akdamut and Lecha Dodi come straight out of this world as well.

This of course is in stark contrast to what was going on for Jews living throughout most of Europe at that time who were becoming increasingly insular as they were forbidden to have

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<sup>1</sup> Kraemer, Joel, Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization’s Greatest Minds, New York, Double Day, 2008, pg. 1.

virtually any contact with the dominant cultures and societies in which they lived. These Jews were becoming ghettoized, sometimes for their protection like with the establishment of the first ghetto in Speyer, Germany in 1084, but mostly these ghettos were used to keep the Jews not only separate but also impoverished.

We would be remiss then if we did not acknowledge the many ways Judaism has had and been profoundly impacted by our relationship with Islam since its founding by Mohammed in the sixth and seventh centuries C.E. Or in the ways Judaism has influenced Islam as well. Scholars have noted that Mohammed did encounter Jewish merchants living northern Arabia. According to some traditions, they had been living there since the time of King David for nearly sixteen hundred years by the time of Mohammed. Their teachings of monotheism and of the Torah must have profoundly affected him to the point that he even borrowed from our tradition to proclaim Ishmael to be the true inheritor of the monotheistic tradition from Abraham.

The Akeida, which we read from today, tells of the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. An act of extreme faith, but thankfully not taken to its conclusion. There is a midrash explaining how the Akeida was not only a test of Abraham but also a test of Isaac. It starts with Isaac and Ishmael, like all boys, arguing over their bris of all things. Ishmael said, "I am more beloved than you, because I was circumcised at the age of thirteen." Isaac replied, "I am more beloved than you because I was circumcised at eight days." Ishmael responded, "I am more beloved because I could have protested, yet I did not." Isaac argued, "O that God would appear to me and bid me cut off one of my limbs! Then I would not refuse." God then spoke saying, "Even if I bid you to sacrifice yourself, you will not refuse," to which Isaac agrees.<sup>2</sup>

Another Midrash goes on to say that when Isaac was to be sacrificed, he was a young thirty seven years while his father Abraham was over 100 years old. Isaac could have prevented

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<sup>2</sup> Beresheet Rabbah 55:4

his father from going through with it at any time, but he does not. Instead Isaac tells Abraham to bind him tightly so at the moment the knife is lifted Isaac will not flinch.<sup>3</sup>

We are greatly troubled by this story of the Akeida. What is this text trying to teach us we wonder? Some have suggested it is a polemic against child sacrifice. Others have argued in this last test Abraham actually failed because of his zealotry to fulfill the wishes of God at the expense of this family. And there are so many other interpretations as well. But what our tradition does appear to emphasize is the moral courage Isaac demonstrated at a time of great adversity.

The Quran also talks about the binding of Abraham's son.<sup>4</sup> However it does not specify which son Abraham offered up. Commentaries on the Quran argue that it was Ishmael not Isaac as the son who was to serve as the *Olah*, the sacrificial offering. An idea not too many of us in the Western world are familiar with because we do not know that much about the Quran or Islam.

Which is all a very round-about way to get to the point that Muslims are very much the "other" in our society today. Given circumstances in the Middle East given the rise of fanatical Islam, Al Queda, and the like, it is challenging to be sympathetic to their cause. After all, why should they have a right to build a mosque and community center right next to the place where the World Trade Center stood? Don't they know this is an affront to all things good and decent? But it does beg the question, given the mosque will be two blocks away from the World Trade Center site amidst churches, synagogues and even strip clubs, how far is far enough? Is four blocks far enough away? What about six? Should it not be built in Manhattan at all, but instead in the Bronx or is that still too close?

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<sup>3</sup> Beresheet Rabbah 56:11

<sup>4</sup> The Quran 37:99-111

In the past whenever I was asked my opinion on this topic I would say maybe they should take all the money and build a synagogue instead. But in all seriousness, this is what it means to live in a society that allows for the free expression of religion. Without this underlying principle we would certainly not be the successes we are today.

But the problem is that the arguments against the mosque are not logical arguments; they are instead arguments made from fear. They are based on the actions of small groups of fundamentalists and are used as an indictment of all Muslims. There are nearly a billion Muslims in the world. If they were all filled with this sense of hate and extremism they are accused of, the world would most certainly be totally consumed by violence. Yet we are surrounded by a constant stream of venom against Muslims and we cannot help but be influenced.

Just look to Pastor Terry Jones of the Dove World Outreach Center, who on the anniversary of 9/11, is planning on burning Qurans to “ward about the teachings and ideology of Islam.”<sup>5</sup> This act has been declared by General David Petraeus to be not only hurtful, but possibly incendiary and a clear and present danger to our troops serving so valiantly in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Now I am not out to borrow a term from another tradition, to beatify Islam. Contained within the Quran are some pretty hurtful teachings and in the wrong hands they can lead followers to engage in horrific acts. Though we should note all religious traditions, if in the wrong hands, can lead to acts of great violence and suffering. Islam, in particular, does seem to be particularly prone to powerful abuses. But I do think it is worth remembering that fanatical governments and entities like Iran, Syria, the Taliban exploit the “other” to justify their own repressive regimes. In this time of economic turmoil where the future is uncertain, it is easy to

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<sup>5</sup> <http://cnn.com>

be afraid. But if we let this sense of fear overwhelm us, it can lead us down a dangerous road. I am not equating the dialogue to that of Iran or the Taliban, but in some cases the rhetoric does sound eerily familiar.

Instead it is worth thinking of those powerful words offered up by another great rabbi Mark Twainstein who said, “courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear.” Mark Twain also provides us with another gem, “it is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world, and moral courage so rare.”

At the beginning of 5771, perhaps then we should strive to live in the tradition handed to us not just by Abraham, but also through Isaac, who demonstrated moral courage in the face of adversity and whose example can guide our words and the work of our hands.

Ribbono Shel Hamayim, God, may You help us to increase our understanding this year of those who are different from us, for without understanding there can be no hope of peace. But with understanding we may be able to build those bridges necessary to bring about a better world.

*Cayin Yehi Ratzon*, May this be God's will