

FROM RABBI DON WEBER

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“Muslim influence is creating great turmoil in Europe.”

“Persecution of Muslims only followed after Christians first were persecuted.”

News report: People marched for months in New York, protesting the migration of Muslims to the United States.

“The President and his Muslim conspirators are keeping this country from reaching its full potential.”

“Keep America safe for Americans!”

These quotes do not come from recent headlines. They are from the 1930s, from the mouth of Father Coughlin – one of the most prominent and outspoken anti-Semites in the United States. In writing the quotes above, I substituted “Muslim” for every place Father Coughlin said “Jew,” or “Jewish.”

In the days leading up to World War II, when such influential Americans as Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh were defending Nazi Germany’s handling of its “Jewish Problem,” Father Coughlin was the weekly radio cheerleader for their anti-Jewish message. His support for “the German war veteran, Adolph Hitler,” recorded in 1938, is a stunning reminder that the United States did not have to take the side it took in World War II... and leaves us wondering where we Jews would be today if Coughlin’s message had succeeded.

None of us remembers how scary it was to be a Jew in the United States in the 1930s. We were first- or second-generation immigrants. We had little political power, “restricted” communities were still prevalent, and many Jews were associated with the rise of Communism in Russia. We were terribly, terribly vulnerable, and those like Coughlin who wanted to elevate themselves in the public eye found us an easy target. I believe the echoes of that anti-Semitism contributed to the United States turning away Jewish refugees during the Holocaust; how many thousands of our people would have survived if American minds had not been poisoned against us?

Which is why we Jews, more than anyone else, need to think very carefully before decrying Islam today. We have been there – literally – and we should be at the forefront of the call to respect our Muslim neighbors as we respect all Americans. Not only were we the target of such slander just within the last century, but the Torah itself reminds us over and over that “you were strangers in the land of Egypt,” and we know better than anyone how it feels to be the “alien”:

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 23:9)

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I, Adonai, am your God. (Leviticus 19:33-34)

I thank God that Americans were courageous enough to stand up to Ford, Lindbergh and Coughlin and resist the temptation to label Jews as the enemy 70 years ago. Now it is our turn to be the courageous ones – to stand up for American Muslims and declare that *they* are not our enemies; they are our brothers and sisters.

Given our country's strong belief in the freedom of religion, the latest tactic seems to be to declare that Islam is not a religion, but a political movement, and therefore not worthy of protection. Again, we Jews are witnesses to the error of this claim: we have lived with Muslims for more than 1,000 years, and some of our greatest achievements have come in times and places where Islam was the dominant religion. Imagine how surprised Maimonides would be to hear that Islam is not a religion; his work in Jewish law, philosophy and medicine all took place in a Moslem society! Likewise, "The Golden Age of Spain," which saw the flourishing of Jewish life and culture, happened because of the respect which Islam held for Judaism and Jews.

Islam faces tremendous challenges today. Fundamentalists are trying to hijack it for their own political aims, and the free world needs to resist this with every resource we have. But there are fundamentalist Christians and fundamentalist Jews, too, and I hope no one would judge Christianity or Judaism by looking at the fanatical fringe. It is tempting to see enemies in every person who looks different or prays differently, but that is not our way. Not as Americans, and not as Jews. Only when we welcome Muslims – and mosques – in our community will we truly live up to the heritage we inherit.

We must never forget that *we* were strangers in the land of Egypt. And we must act on that memory... now.

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