

“Having the Right to Do Something Doesn't Mean It's the Right Thing to Do.”<sup>1</sup> Thoughts on the Mosque at Ground Zero”

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James Carroll, a former Roman Catholic priest and the author of one of the most authoritative books on the history of Jewish-Christian relations begins his nearly 800 page book, *Constantine's Sword*, not in Jerusalem or Nazareth or Bethlehem...not in Rome or Alexandria or Antioch...He begins his exhaustive, comprehensive treatment of this subject at Auschwitz. The book begins with these words:

*“The cross is made of stout beams, an intersection of railroad ties. It stands in a field of weeds that slopes down from the road. The field is abutted on one side by the old theater, where gas canisters were stored, also looted gold; where, much later, Carmelite nuns accomplished cloistered words of expiation, sparking fury; and where, now, a municipal archive is housed. On the other side, the field runs up against the brick wall, the eastern limit of the main camp. At more than twenty feet, the cross nearly matches the height of the wall...Immediately beyond are the camp barracks, the peaked roofs visible against the gray morning sky. The nearest building, close enough to hit with a stone thrown from the foot of the cross, is Barracks 13, also known as the death bunker, the starvation bunker. In one of its cells the Franciscan priest Maximillian Kolbe was martyred. He is now a saint of the Roman Catholic Church. Kolbe is the reason for the cross.”<sup>1</sup>*

Auschwitz is synonymous with the Holocaust. As the world's largest Jewish cemetery, the name Auschwitz is virtually interchangeable with the whole saga of suffering, and genocide, and death that occurred all across the European continent. And in this epicenter of suffering and misery, in a two story building that was once used to store the very Zyklon-B gas that suffocated unknowing men, women, and children in the gas chambers, a group of Carmelite nuns established a monastery. A 26-foot cross was erected there as well. The nuns gathered there to pray for Catholic martyrs, to venerate the memory of two Catholic saints who perished there, perhaps even to pray for the souls of Jews as well...who knows? But for Jews who made the pilgrimage to this place of horror; to teenagers on the March of the Living, as well as survivors of Auschwitz who returned to the hell they once inhabited, the site of the monastery

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<sup>1</sup> Carroll, James. Constantine's Sword, The Church and the Jews, A History. Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2001. P. 3

and cross added a dimension of pain to an already tear soaked landscape. James Carroll writes about standing on that very site:

*“I love the cross, the sign of my faith, yet finally the sight of it here made me, in the words of the spiritual, tremble, tremble, tremble. Because of a resounding Jewish response, I saw the holy object as if it were a chimney...the primordial evil of Auschwitz has now been compounded by the camp’s new character as a flashpoint between Catholics and Jews.”<sup>2</sup>*

Protests raged between Polish Catholics, a population that endured a heavy toll of victims at the hands of the Nazis, and Jews from around the world. Father Kolbe, the martyr who was canonized, himself hid 2,000 Jewish refugees in his friary and was sent to Auschwitz for his resistance of the Nazis. Jews claimed, however that Catholics were turning this place that is associated overwhelmingly with Jewish suffering into a Catholic shrine with crosses and convents. The protests and clashes turned increasingly vicious and ugly...Until a voice of wisdom and courage entered the fray. A former resistance fighter himself, a Roman Catholic who risked his life to protest the Nazis and who was known to have helped many Jews both during and after the Shoa, a Polish priest who would become the first Pope his homeland would ever produce and who made Catholic-Jewish reconciliation a hallmark of his pontificate...None other than John Paul II wrote a letter to the nuns at Auschwitz saying: “By the will of the Church you are to move now to a different site in Oswiecim.”<sup>3</sup> The note is terse and unambiguous...**you are to move now to a different site**. The Carmelites could not refuse a papal order, and they indeed moved from the Zyklon-B storage building turned convent to a different location in the diocese.

I have thought of this story over and over again as we read in the newspapers about the proposed Cordoba House, a \$100 million Islamic center and mosque to be built two blocks from the site of Ground Zero. The Imam, Feisal Abdul Rauf, has spoken publicly for the need to promote tolerance and understanding, and he suggests that this will be the primary purpose of the Islamic Center at 45 Park Place. Yet I wonder how much tolerance will be inspired by a man who, in an interview only 19 days after the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> pronounced during a 60-Minutes appearance that United States foreign policy was “an accessory to the crime” of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. I wonder how much peace can be promoted by a Muslim who refuses to label Hamas a terrorist organization. Many have wondered where Faisal will come up with the exorbitant sums of money to build the 13-story structure

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 12

<sup>3</sup> Papal Letter to Carmelite Nuns at Auschwitz, April 9, 1993

in Manhattan (noting his own organization's limited resources), fearing that some of the funding will invariably come from places like Saudi Arabia, where it is illegal to possess even a symbol of a non-Muslim religious faith, like a cross or star of David, much less be an adherent of another religious faith. Saudi Arabia—which allows for no religious freedom whatsoever— has taken the lead in funding the building mosques internationally. All that being said however, I do not believe there is or should be any legal way to stop the construction of the Cordoba House. Our country is not, to paraphrase Mayor Bloomberg, in the business of “vetting clergy” or affirming or denying religious claims. God-forbid that 21<sup>st</sup> Century New York should become 17<sup>th</sup> Century New Amsterdam, where then governor Peter Stuyvesant attempted to discourage Jewish settlement there by forbidding the construction of synagogues! New York City has decided that 45 Park Place is not a landmark cite, removing legal hurdles to the building of the mosque. This kind of religious pluralism and freedom that is anathema in most Muslim countries is precisely what is great about America. I believe we must protect that greatness at virtually all costs.

However, I would not have joined the rabbis who rallied in the streets in favor of the Cordoba Center. It's a strange name by the way, Cordoba...In 1145, when a Jewish boy named Moses Maimonides became a bar mitzvah, Cordoba was invaded by Almohades, a sect of radical Muslims that offered conversion or death to the Rambam and the city's Jewish citizens. This is what led to Maimonides flight from Spain, as well as that of thousands of other Jews from Andalusia.<sup>4</sup> But I can give them the benefit of the doubt, as Cordoba was a place that at one time also flourished as a center of rich cultural coexistence between Muslims and Jews...I hope it is that Cordoba that they are remembering. But even if it is that Cordoba they aspire to, I can't join my rabbinic colleagues in public support for this project. I can't join them because I keep thinking of the profound wisdom and sensitivity of Pope John Paul II, who courageously instructed his nuns that it was the wrong time and the wrong place for a convent to stand at Auschwitz. I can't help thinking that if that was the case for Auschwitz a half century later, how much more so is it the case for Ground Zero not even ten years later. Ground Zero is modernity's arch symbol of murderous terrorism. I lived in Manhattan on 9/11, and I'll tell you that the TV footage of those planes slamming into the World Trade Center still repeat in my head like a mental film loop. There are children and widows and widowers in the New York area who are still coping with the loss of their spouses and parents. Militant Islam is far from vanquished and is still very much a threat. I wish there was a John Paul equivalent in moderate Islam to counsel Faisal Abdul Rauf that maybe this is not the

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<sup>4</sup> With gratitude to Rabbi Steven Moskowitz for sharing this on his blog, “Mosque at Ground Zero,” Tuesday, August 3, 2010

right time or the right place for a mosque. Maybe a James Carroll-like figure, who stood outside of Auschwitz and said “The cross here is simply wrong.”<sup>5</sup> That voice cannot, must not come from the law. It must come from a moral authority who knows that, to quote William McGurn, “having the right to do something doesn't mean it's the right thing to do.”<sup>6</sup>

Our parasha opens with the famous words: “Justice, justice shall you pursue...”<sup>7</sup> Many have wondered why “justice” is repeated twice in that verse. The holy Kotsker Rebbe<sup>8</sup> taught that the doubling of “justice” is intended to teach that our *means* as well as our *goals* must be just. The Cordoba Center’s stated goals of increasing peace, tolerance, and understanding are certainly just. But it is the *means* of accomplishing those goals that are of such deep concern. Let us hope and pray that just goals join with just means so that that peace will truly come to our people, to all people, and to the entire world.

Amen

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<sup>5</sup> Carroll, James. Constantine’s Sword, The Church and the Jews, A History. Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2001. P.

<sup>6</sup> McGurn, William. “WTC Mosque, Meet the Auschwitz Nuns,” The Wall Street Journal, August 3, 2010

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 16:20

<sup>8</sup> Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, Poland, 1787-1859