

In the book of Numbers 29:12-35, which are part of the Maftir readings for Succoth, we read that on Succoth, in Temple times we sacrificed 70 bulls for the 70 nations of the world. This was done for their benefit and expiation, and so that rain would fall on all living things: The *midrash* in *Song of Songs Rabbah* states, "Just as the dove makes atonement for the pilgrims, so Israel makes atonement for the other nations, since the seventy bullocks that they offer on Tabernacles correspond to the seventy nations, and are brought in order that the earth may not be left desolate of them."

In the Haftorot, on the first day and today, we read about the end of days when all people will recognize God. Succoth encourages us to universalistic ideals and calls on us to care about and try to help all peoples of the world.

Yet, often it feels to me, like we live inside our little bubble of modern Orthodoxy in St Louis Park. Do we know and understand the other nations of the world enough to be praying on their behalf and bringing peace?

We live in a predominantly Christian society and I have learned a lot about Christianity over the years. I had an experience last spring that forced me to ask myself, what do I know about another dominant religion, Islam?

On a Friday evening in June, Darchei Noam hosted a Minnesota Area Interfaith Initiative (MAII) event. Before and after services, I met with a group of around 40 Christians and Muslims answering questions about Judaism. I noticed that I felt quite comfortable comparing and contrasting Judaism with Christianity but quite ignorant when it came to Islam. So I decided to learn more about Islam.

A few weeks later was the month of Ramadan and I had an opportunity to attend an iftar, the meal to end the fast, at a mosque in Woodbury. I was able to observe an evening prayer service and visit with Muslims from around the world as we asked each other questions about our respective religions. They were very surprised to learn that Jews fast and that some of our fasts last 25 hours. As I left, they offered me a Koran. At my request, the Muslim woman I drove with, who had attended the MAII event at Darchei, gave me several books on Islam. So much of my summer was spent learning about Islam.

This morning I would like to share some general impressions from my reading and see how it may relate to Succoth.

First of all, the Koran is very hard to get though. But I made it! It consists of 114 chapters, or Surahs. It is very repetitive since Mohammed is said to have received revelations at many different times and places. Certain messages are repeated over and over again. For example, unbelievers and sinners are going to burn in Hell for eternity; God is a very merciful and forgiving God so no one really knows who God is going to forgive. This is a similar message to our High Holiday theme except much more emphasis on the afterlife. Jews are mentioned a lot in the Koran. We are included in the group of monotheists who can go to heaven, but there is a lot of disparagement of Jews who have failed to properly heed the message and therefore are condemned. I found myself feeling defensive at these characterizations, although I realized that if a rabbi were saying the same words I would have reacted differently. The descriptions of God feel very Jewish and it is clear that Maimonides was heavily influenced by Islamic ideas. Finally, there is a lot about wars and forced conversions to spread the message of Islam.

The parts of the Koran I enjoyed the most were the retelling of stories from the Torah. Let me give a few examples:

Almost an entire chapter, 101 verses, is devoted to the Joseph story. It starts out similar to the Torah version with Joseph's sale, but when Potiphar's wife desires and chases Joseph and rips his tunic, Potiphar determines who is guilty by how Joseph's shirt is torn. If it is in the front Joseph is guilty but if from the back Potiphar's wife is guilty. Since it was torn in the back Potiphar knows that Joseph is innocent. Ingenious!

The women of the city start mocking Potiphar's wife for trying to seduce a slave so she holds a banquet where they can all see Joseph. When they see him they all think he is an angel and all want to ensnare him. Jacob prays for prison rather than be seduced. All acknowledge that he is pure and blameless. Compare this to the Shalshet, the Torah note on the word Va Ye ma ain, which means, but he adamantly refused when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him. The note indicates ambivalence. He was tempted, he was human. In the Koran, when Pharaoh summons Joseph to interpret the dreams, Joseph initially refuses unless he is guaranteed that the woman won't try to seduce him again. He is described as ever true and virtuous.

In our story of Noah, the rabbis criticize Noah for not trying to save the rest of humanity. But in the Koran, Noah does try to get the people to repent but they reject him.

In the Abraham story of the Akeida the Koran has Abraham's unnamed son explicitly state, "do as you are commanded, if God so wills". Lot is listed as a prophet with no mention of his less flattering

moments such as choosing to live in Sodom or sleeping with his daughters. I saw this repeatedly in the Koran. Episodes in the Torah that illuminate the flaws and humanity of our Torah heroes are either not mentioned or the people are presented as perfect and idealized in the Koran.

And no one is more idealized than Mohammed. He is the paragon of virtue to be emulated in every way. Our hero, Moses has many flaws in the Torah, but in the Koran, there is no arguing with God at the burning bush, his killing of the Egyptian merits only a brief mention , “you slew a man but we saved you from trouble”, and when Moses is angry at the people the fault always lies with the people.

You get the idea. In the Koran, the good guys have no flaws and the bad guys burn in Hell. But again, this is always tempered with the statement that God is merciful. God’s mercy is especially evident in the fall of Adam. After Adam and Eve eat the fruit and are told they must leave the garden, it says, “then Adam learned from his Lord words of inspiration, and his Lord turned toward him: for he is Oft –returning, Most merciful.

So like all religions, Islam has multiple messages. I do think there is more submission in Islam compared to arguing in Judaism. The way bible characters are presented reinforces that. The focus on war in the Torah relates to a specific people, time and place. In the Koran it is a more general strategy to promote Islam. But before we label Islam a warring religion of fanatics let’s look at today’s Haftorah.

It describes the war with Gog and Magog which is supposed to be a war of good against evil and be the forerunner of the messianic days. The Haftorah on the first day also deals with this war and concludes that all gentile survivors of this war will be required to go to Jerusalem every year on the holiday of Sukkot to pay homage to G-d. If they don’t, God will punish them.

So let me get this straight. In order to bring world peace, we need a holy war which concludes with forced conversions and retribution on those who do not comply.

I think that events of the past century if not all of human history make it pretty clear that world peace will not come about through war. I think these Haftorahs also make it clear that Judaism contains rhetoric similar to what we hear from radical Islam. We know that these are not dominant themes in Judaism but it would be easy to harshly judge Judaism based on selected reading of our texts.

In fact, I was reading a novel Sweet Tooth recently and in one scene a minister is trying to rouse his congregation in a sermon about how Christianity invented the current notions of love. He thunders,

(quote) “In the harsh iron age world of the Old Testament, ethics were pitiless, its jealous God was ruthless and his most cherished values were revenge, domination, enslavement, genocide and rape”.
(end quote) Not exactly how we would describe our Torah.

If we truly want to bring about the world peace that Succoth is supposed to usher in, we will need dialogue, empathy and understanding. In short, we will need the world to embrace pluralism.

Tom Friedman in an editorial in the September 21st Sunday NY Times wrote that “pluralism, as defined by the Pluralism Project at Harvard, is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity”. He continues, “Diversity without real encounter and relationships will yield increased tensions in society. Pluralism means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another”.

Islam, like Christianity and Judaism contains messages of war and of peace. All three religions have inspired countless people to better themselves and make the world a better place. It is when religious groups gain political power, which they use to coercively impose their worldview on others, that all religions can become dangerous.

We no longer can sacrifice 70 bulls for the benefit of the 70 nations of the world. But we can reach out to other groups, including through our social action committee, which serves St. Stephens, Second Harvest and Step. The only way for us to fulfill the universalistic yearnings of Succoth, is to venture out of our Succoth, our insular community, and to go out into the world and build bridges to other communities. If you are interested, the Minneapolis area interfaith initiative might be a good place to start and Raleigh would be a good resource.

Let me close with a quote from a leading Muslim scholar and spiritual leader, Fetullah Gulen, from his book Love and Tolerance. (quote) “In truth, no divine religion has ever been based on conflict; whether it be the religion represented by Moses and Jesus or the religion represented by Mohammed, upon them be peace...Tolerance and dialogue should be represented in our country in the best possible way and should be an example to the whole world”. (Unquote) May his words help us achieve the vision of Succoth for a world at peace.

Shabbat Shalom