"Why not build a mosque at ground zero?"

Posted At : July 23, 2010 3:35 PM | Posted By : Seth Chalmer
Related Categories: pluralism, religion, religion and state, Jewish-Islamic relations

The sentence quoted in this post's title is *not* related to the ongoing fracas about the Cordoba House initiative to build an Islamic community center three blocks from Ground Zero. **In fact, this quote is from 2001,** in an article written for **CLAL** by Rabbi Daniel S. Brenner entitled **"A Religious Shrine at Ground Zero?"**

Some highlights, which (in my humble and non-BJPA-representative opinion) are quite relevant to the current kerfuffle:

> "Religious groups and organizations were among the first to respond to the attack. Moreover, in the days following the attack, Americans flocked to their synagogues, churches and mosques in record numbers...
>
> "But while those services were articulations of America's common spirit, they also spoke to our religious particularities. As an American I listened intently to all the clergy who spoke, but as a Jew, I cared most about what the rabbis had to say. I imagine that this was the case for Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and Buddhists, all who were represented in those services. America is great because we not only allow for the freedom of religion, but we have a public square that can encourage our religious diversity at the right moments.
>
> "For this reason, I would ask, **why not build a mosque at ground zero? And a church, and a synagogue as well? Why not erect a vast inter-religious center on the premises** as a supplement to the secular, cultural, and artistic elements that will figure in the blueprint for the site's reconstruction?...
>
> "**Building a mosque on the site would also send a message to the Islamic world about America, and our commitment to the freedom of religion...** Maybe a few misguided Muslims would go there to praise Allah for his great victory in destroying the towers - **but I imagine the vast majority of American Muslims would go to simply offer prayers of gratitude that Allah, in his mercy, has created a place called America, where both freedom and faith can flourish."**

I think there is a lot of merit to Rabbi Brenner's argument. (And I'm not just saying that because he wrote on **his blog** that **"NYU Wagner's Berman Policy Archive Rocks!"**)

It is worth noting, however, before anyone decides to deputize Rabbi Brenner's argument into the Cordoba House wars, that there are some differences between this proposed center and Rabbi Brenner's vision. The vision was an interfaith center, which would be (to my mind) the best possible repudiation of the jihadist ideology; the actual proposal here is*only* Islamic. Though its primary concerns will be culture and community rather than religious practice, it will *not* be a pluralist institution. Then again, neither will it be *at* Ground Zero; it will be *near* Ground Zero, and not even overlooking Ground Zero. Of course, neither is its proximity to Ground Zero accidental.

I do not intend to advance a position on Cordoba House here; only to call attention to the (limited, but substantive) applicability of Rabbi Brenner's 2001 argument to the current Ground Zero Mosque Affair.

And to use this question to launch a larger question: what are the limits of pluralism? What does it mean to hold both universal and particular identities? And if our particularist commitments are real commitments -- if they are worth our very lives -- then how, in any context, can we embrace pluralism? This is a question to which I hope to return very soon with a blog post focusing on Jewish community day schools and interdenominational Jewish relations. Stay tuned.