

# The silence of the rabbis

By Charles Jacobs



Given the daunting challenges facing the Jewish community, what would unite 62 Boston area rabbis and a few rabbinical students to release a letter that is equivalent to a kind of a Jewish “fatwa”? The rabbis didn’t speak out against any of the many anti-Semites who have recently defamed and attacked the Jewish people – not against Helen Thomas or the UN or Iran, but against someone who claims that the leadership of the largest Islamic organization in Boston is radical – and takes to task a rabbi for denying that fact.

While the rabbis’ letter – and my *Advocate* column that provoked it – has generated heat, it has also finally unveiled a quiet, almost hidden but fierce battle within the Jewish community to determine the appropriate strategy for dealing with Islamic extremism in our midst.

My organization, Americans for Peace and Tolerance, believes it is best to expose this threat by reaching out to Muslims we can trust and work with, by distinguishing between radical and moderate Muslim leadership, and by holding civic and religious leaders accountable for failing to confront the threat. The rabbis have adopted another strategy: Be silent or minimize the problem while preaching love, brotherhood and multiculturalism in the hope everything will be just fine.

Many of the rabbis understand that the problem of Islamic extremism in Boston is real – they’ve seen the facts and have acknowledged as much in private. These rabbis face a difficult ethical dilemma: How can they conduct a smiling public dialogue and at the same time let their congregants know that they know they are taking a risk, that there really may be a problem with these folks? They cannot. So there is only pretense. This must be agonizing. There is no transparency, neither with the Muslims nor with the Jewish community. That’s why anyone who exposes this kabuki dance is a threat to the whole performance.

However, I’m not sure that all the rabbis who signed the letter actually understand this debate. Many, I believe, signed on only to support a colleague, not to defame me or claim that there is no Islamist threat. None of the signed leaders approached Americans for Peace and Tolerance to get the facts on the Deval Patrick controversy.

Rabbi Eric Gurvis is an intelligent and caring rabbi without a doubt. His wisdom in matters of personal morality was unquestioned – until the publication of this defamatory letter. His wisdom in political matters is something else entirely, and it was on his political involvement that I criticized him – under the assumption that rabbis who enter the political arena can be criticized. The political arena is rough-and-tumble. Rabbi

Gurvis inserted himself into the campaign for governor and defended the demands made on Patrick by the Muslim American Society, a radical organization that has been called “the overt arm of the Muslim Brotherhood” by federal prosecutors and assailed for its ties to anti-Semitic extremists by the Anti-Defamation League.

In fact, this is not the first time that Rabbi Gurvis took a clearly ideological public stance on a controversial issue, and it is not the first time that some of the 62 rabbis have been recruited to join him. Ten of them, together with Rabbi Gurvis, signed onto another rabbinical petition four years ago, this one demanding that the United States continue sending aid to the then-newlyelected Hamas government. But again, I did not criticize the rabbi on a personal level. I am simply very worried that his political actions are doing us harm.

Yet the response to my criticism was to mobilize once more a team of progressive rabbis to launch an open letter accusing me of “lies, half truths and distortions in leading a campaign against local Muslims,” all without providing a single fact to support their accusations. These are false and dangerous charges given the tendency of some Muslim preachers to promote the view that Muslims and Islam are under attack.

I am fine receiving counterpunches on behalf of their offended colleague. But I trust that the rabbis, once they examine the issue in the cool light of day, will rescind their untrue charge that I am campaigning against all Boston’s Muslims.

It is getting late. This is a dangerous time: Our community is under siege at home and abroad. We need to unite our community with the truth; and for this to happen, our liberal brethren must abandon their uncritical acceptance of the doctrines of political correctness. I want to directly ask the signers of this letter to withdraw their names from the accusations that defame me. I am reaching out to each and every person who signed the letter with an offer to meet with you and show you why you should be concerned about the Muslim American Society.

I propose that the Jewish community have an open and honest dialogue about these extraordinarily difficult dilemmas. It needs to have two separate phases: first understanding the problem by fairly examining the evidence, and later a democratic discussion on what policies should be adopted.

As a small and vulnerable minority, we need to strive for unity in the face of the severe challenges we face. We need to bridge this Jewish political divide by dialogue and mutual understanding based on the truth.