

# The Words of Muhammad Ali

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by David Reinhart

Today, we remember “The Greatest”, Muhammad Ali, who sadly died two weeks ago today. Being from Louisville, KY, Ali’s hometown, I have always had a stronger connection to and affinity for “The Greatest,” and I absolutely love what he stood for. Now, I have never been a boxing fan. I’ve never watched a whole round, let alone an entire fight, but I know Muhammad Ali. I know the Ali Shuffle. I know he knocked out Sunny Liston. I know he beat George Foreman at The Rumble in the Jungle. I know he fought Joe Frazier three times, from the Fight of the Century to the Thrilla in Manila. While he was nicknamed “The Greatest” for what he did in the ring, the reason he became “The Greatest” and the reason I am obsessed with him is because of the person he was and what he meant to millions around the world.

He was brash, he was audacious, and he was happy to let people know it. Spouting memorable quotes from, “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,” to “It’s not bragging if you can back it up,” or, my favorite, “It’s hard to be humble when you’re as great as I am.” This is all fun, funny, and certainly entertaining, but as he grew older and matured, he was also extremely honest and extremely insightful. He expounded life lessons such as “A man who views the world the same at 50 as he did at 20 has wasted 30 years of his life,” and even better, “It isn’t the mountains ahead to climb that wear you out; it’s the pebble in your shoe.” Most of all, however, Muhammad Ali was absolutely courageous.

He loved to talk, and he never avoided saying or doing something because it was difficult or controversial. He was an advocate and spokesperson for the civil rights movement in the 1960s. He converted to Islam in 1964, even though he knew it would make him a pariah. Most

amazingly, in 1967, when he was drafted to fight in the Vietnam War, Muhammad Ali refused to serve. He refused, even though he knew he would be labeled a coward, a draft dodger, a deserter, a turncoat, that he would be hated across America, that he would be arrested, that he would be stripped of his Championship Title and that he would be banned from the boxing world. Muhammad Ali stood up for his beliefs, for his convictions, and refused to fight in a war with which he did not agree.

After he retired from boxing in 1981, Ali redoubled the support of his beliefs and convictions. He upheld and supported the values which Islam had instilled in him. Love, compassion, and peace. He preached that “Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth,” and that “Hating people because of their color is wrong. And it doesn't matter which color does the hating. It's just plain wrong.” He, as the most famous Muslim on Earth, became a defender of Islam and a primary spokesperson for religion and faith in general.

On September 11, 2001, mere hours after the devastating Terrorist attacks, in the midst of fear and growing hatred of the Muslims who carried out these acts, “The Greatest” reminded us that “Killing like that can never be justified.... Islam is a religion of peace. It does not promote terrorism or killing people.... People say a Muslim caused this destruction. I am angry that the world sees a certain group of Islam followers who caused this destruction, but they are not real Muslims. They are racist fanatics who call themselves Muslims, permitting the murder of thousands.”

Just last December, less than 6 months before his eventual death, he reminded us once again, “I am a Muslim and there is nothing Islamic about killing innocent people in Paris, San Bernardino, or anywhere else in the world.” He continued “We as Muslims have to stand up to those who use Islam to advance their own personal agenda. They have alienated many from

learning about Islam. True Muslims know or should know that it goes against our religion to try and force Islam on anybody.” This was Muhammad Ali’s last public statement.

Unfortunately, “The Greatest” died one week before the world, and America in particular, needed him dearly. In the early hours of this past Sunday, America’s worst terrorist attack since 9/11 itself and the deadliest mass shooting in US history was carried out by an Islamic extremist. 49 people were murdered and more than 50 injured at a gay nightclub in Orlando, FL because of one individual’s hatred and with the goal of inciting fear and encouraging more hatred across the US. Regrettably, this individual’s attempt seems to have succeeded. While the enormous outpouring of prayers for the victims of this attack, the wonderful recognition of its heroes, and the increased support for the LGBT Community has helped bring our country together, the fear and hatred caused by this act of terror is spreading and threatens to tear us apart. Anti-Muslim sentiment is growing rapidly. Fear of attending public events is beginning to seep into people’s thoughts. And blame for these attacks is being carelessly thrown about. This is the moment that the American public needs Muhammad Ali – to remind us that fear, prejudice and hatred are dangerous, to remind us not to allow these base instincts to control our thoughts, feelings, and actions, to remind us to confront them head on and continue standing up for our beliefs and convictions no matter the situation.

Until his last breath, Muhammad Ali continuously exclaimed that Islam is a religion of peace. We needed Muhammad Ali, and, now that he has indeed gone to heaven, we – you and I – as humans, as Americans, and especially as Jews must fill the enormous gap his passing leaves behind. He once said, “Rivers, ponds, lakes and streams. They have different names, but all contain water. Religions have different names but all contain truth.” Judaism’s truth is the same as Islam’s – Peace! The Priestly Benediction, one of our best known blessings, which comes

from this week's Torah portion, Naso, ends with Peace. "*Yevhārēkh-khā Adhōnāy veyishmerēkhā* – May God bless you and keep you. *Yā'ēr Adhōnāy pānāw ēlekhā viḥunnēkkā* – May God's light shine upon you and be gracious to you. *Yissā Adhōnāy pānāw ēlekhā viyāsēm lekhā shalom* – May God smile upon you and grant you peace." Peace. While the literal translation has us, God's people, being the recipients of peace, the Rabbi's changed this dimension and commanded us to "be like the disciples of Aaron, love peace and pursue peace. Love your fellow creatures and bring them to the Truth." From this interpretation, we are not being blessed with peace, rather we are gifted with the ability to **be** loving and to **create** peace.

In the wake of tragedies such as the Orlando shooting, we have the opportunity to remain firm in our beliefs and convictions. To be courageous like Muhammad Ali. To confront our fears, overcome our doubts, and fight hatred in all its forms. To remain faithful to our ancestral Truth, to love our fellow creatures and pursue peace, in all its forms. To remind the world that "Hating people is wrong and it doesn't matter who does the hating."

In the last two weeks, we lost the great Muhammad Ali, we lost 49 individuals murdered out of hatred, and we suffered a devastating terrorist attack, but, even in the light of all this loss, if we remember who we are and resist the temptation toward fear, together, we can overcome the seemingly impossible and create peace.

I want to end with one last inspirational quote by Muhammad Ali. "Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It's a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing." Let us reject the impossible and embrace our power to change the world. Let us be like the disciples of Aaron and Muhammad Ali. Let us love peace and pursue it."