

MAHMOUD, MOM; MOM, MAHMOUD

Shalom Auslander's simple proposal for eradicating anti-Semitism based on shared goals, mutual dreams, and a common disgust with his mother

BY SHALOM AUSLANDER

The worst thing about the next Holocaust will be if the Muslims put me in the same bunker as my mother. There'll be the nudity, of course, mine as discomfoting as hers, but I'll probably be able to trade some morsels of bread for a metal spoon with which to gouge my eyes out. But far worse — far, far worse — will be the ceaseless, pounding, unrelenting I-told-you-so's.

"You thought I was crazy," she'll say.

"Shut up, Ma."

There will be strict punishment for anyone caught talking after dark, but she won't care; punishment will only prove her point.

"You told me I was paranoid!" she will shriek. "That I was obsessed! That I should get over the Holocaust!"

"Ma, would you shut up?"

But it will be too late; the Muslim guard will have already heard us talking. He'll shout something in Arabic, drag me from my bed, and start bashing me over the head with a Qur'an.

"Well, Mr. Smart Guy," my mother will ask, "who's laughing now, huh? Who's laughing now?"

When I was a young boy, from the time I was eight years old until I was eleven, I would spend my endless, restrictive Sabbath afternoons at the nearby Spook Rock Golf Course, walking across the grass in my Day of Rest best (forbidden), collecting lost golf balls (forbidden), and skipping stones in the water traps (forbidden). One afternoon, I was leading two of my friends across the golf course, showing them my favorite spots and arguing about the Yankees' chances that year, when a group of men lined up on a nearby hill and began hitting golf balls at us as hard as they could. We ran off the course, through the parking lot, and all the way to my house, where we breathlessly told my mother what had happened.

"Of course," she said with a shrug. "You think because they play golf they don't hate the Jews?"

My friends filled her in on all the terrifying details, some true (the speed of the balls, the number of them, how close they came to our heads), some not (the anti-Semitic slurs, the men chasing after us as we ran), as I stood silently by, biting my nails and shuffling my feet. I was unable to admit that I had realized, just a few moments after my friends and I began to run, that the men weren't hitting balls at us after all — that engrossed in the Yankees debate, I had inadvertently led my friends onto the driving range.

I was raised in an Orthodox Jewish community in New York State, but there were a few non-Jews on my street. There was Mrs. Petruolo next door, a *no-good Nazi*. Across the way was Mr. Delaney, a *classic Jew hater*. And at the top of the street was Mr. Rivera, who was *very nice for a shvartza, not like that anti-Semite Al Sharpton, he should drop dead*. I was raised on a toxic kosher brew of Biblical tales of persecution, Holocaust movies, and *The Jewish Press*, a weekly newspaper filled with paranoia and suspicion that, for ease of navigation, might have been more simply divided into sections titled "People Who Hate Us Now," "People Who Hated Us in the Past," and "People Who Will Hate Us in the Future." In the back, there were comics. Sabbath afternoon, my mother would sit in the living room with her paper and a cup of tea and read aloud: "Another bomber in Tel Aviv ... Synagogue torched in London ... The Reverend Jesse Jackson; we'll see what a reverend he is when he's throwing us in the gas chambers."

I didn't believe her. I didn't want to believe her — or the newspapers, or the rabbis in school who taught us to say "Never again!" but whose paranoia and fear made it clear to us all that it would most definitely happen again. Soon. Because I had also been raised on Rocky movies, and Adam-12, and Three's Company. The people who hated — Archie Bunker, George Jefferson — were buffoons, bigots, the butt of jokes. If anything, I decided, it was my mother who was the hateful one.

"The only good Arab," she told me when I was an angry young teenager, "is a

dead Arab."

"How can you say that?" I demanded. "How would you like it if they said the only good Jew was a dead Jew?"

"They do say that," she said.

I didn't believe her. I didn't want to believe her. I still don't. But it's becoming difficult.

On the subject of recent events both here and abroad — the Israeli offensive in Lebanon, the rantings of the president of Iran, the shooting at the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle, the alcohol-related anti-Semitism of Mel Gibson — much has already been written. Some of it has blamed the haters; some of it has blamed the hated. Some of it has mentioned the two-state solution; some of it has mentioned the war on Iraq. But very little of it has mentioned my mother, and I think that's a shame. Because I think that if they knew — that if Hassan Nasrallah, preaching that Jews are the sons of pigs and monkeys, knew; that if Mel Gibson, blaming the Jews for all the wars (except World War II, of course, which never happened), knew; that if Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who wishes to wipe Israel off the map, knew; and if Juan Cole, who later explained in the pages of *The New York Times* that Ahmadinejad didn't mean "wipe," he meant "erase," and he didn't mean "map," he meant "all of time," knew; and the shooter at the Seattle Jewish center, and the looters of the Jewish communities in Australia, and the neo-Nazis in Rome drawing swastikas on shop windows, and the *Guardian* with their cartoon of Stars of David as knuckle-dusters on a bloody fist, and the *Telegraph* with their cartoon comparing Lebanon in 2006 to Warsaw in 1943 — if they all knew they were proving my mother right, I am certain that they would cease.

I am not a Pollyanna; I know that we all have our differences. But there is a much bigger issue here than Islam versus the West, or the reunification of the three holy cities, or how many Jews really work in Hollywood.

This is about my mother, goddamn it.

Help me out here, Mel.

Work with me, Hassan.

That afternoon long ago, after the non-anti-Semitic attack at the golf course, my friends and I sat around the kitchen table eating brownies and waiting for Sabbath to end, and I casually suggested that perhaps the golfers, being 250 yards away, didn't even see our yarmulkes.

"Don't be ridiculous," said my mother. "You think they would have hit balls at you if you were Christian?"

And so I say this to Mahmoud, Hassan, and Mel in utmost seriousness: perhaps we can never agree. Perhaps we can never agree about Jerusalem, or Zionism, or my Grandma Pig and Grandpa Monkey. Perhaps the right will always hate the haters, perhaps the left will always hate the Jews. But I have to believe that we can all come together in hating my mother. In proving her wrong. In proving the rabbis and the Jewish Defense League and Abraham Foxman wrong.

Think about that the next time, fellas — the next time you organize a "Did the Holocaust Really Happen?" conference, the next time you deface the Holocaust Memorial in Brussels, the next time you throw a Molotov cocktail at the Jewish center in Baltimore — think about my mother, at home, reading about it in the newspaper, tutting and shaking her head and veyzmeering and saying I told you so.

Does anyone really want to live in a world where my mother was right? I know I don't. More importantly, I couldn't, because you'd kill me. You'd kill all of us. And then who would run Hollywood?

Just kidding.

Please help.