Several years ago I flew from Miami to Tel Aviv on El Al Airlines. Right after I got my ticket at the El Al counter, and long before I got anywhere near the airplane, a young woman from the airline gave me the third degree. Where did I live? What synagogue did I go to? What were the names of other members of my family? Why was I going to Israel? What was my name translated into Hebrew? And those were just a few of her annoying questions.

When I got to the gate, after going through security like everybody else, I was pulled aside for a second security check, this time by El Al. And this time they went through my luggage before they let me on the plane.

Did I like it at the time? Not especially. Did I feel safer flying on El Al to a part of the world where bad things happen way too often rather than on some other airline? Definitely.

Call it anything you want, but there’s no way around the fact that I was profiled. Israelis, who know a little bit about terrorism, don’t cringe when it comes to profiling. Let’s just say no one will confuse Israeli security agents with the ACLU.

But why me? I was different. Almost everyone on the flight was an Israeli. I was an American. Almost everybody on the flight was going home. I was merely changing planes in Tel Aviv, en route to Amman, Jordan.

El Al security agents had every right to profile me. So what if I wasn’t a terrorist. How were they supposed to know, unless they treated me as a special case? Unless they profiled me.
My trip on El Al comes to mind because of what we’ve been hearing recently about the “underwear bomber” who tried to blow up a Northwest flight en route from Amsterdam to Detroit on Christmas day. By now we all know the story: his father, a prominent banker in Nigeria warned the U.S. Embassy in Lagos that his son was becoming a religious fanatic and might be dangerous. His travel history included a trip to Yemen. He bought a one-way ticket. He paid for it in cash.

Did any of this set off alarms? Nope. Too bad he wasn’t wearing a sign that said, “I’m a terrorist and I plan to blow up your airplane.” But frankly, I’m not sure those eagle-eyed authorities would have noticed that, either.

Here in America we have the TSA, comprised of agents who try to make flying safe by taking away our toothpaste and shampoo. They do a bang-up job, these TSA folks – of making us dread going to the airport … where we will have to take off our shoes … our jacket … our hat … maybe our belt … take out our tiny bottles of mouthwash … put our computer in a separate bin … and if we have 12 cents in loose change in our pocket, we get to go through the metal detector all over again or get patted down by the magic electronic wand. I wouldn’t really mind any of this if it made me feel safer. Truth is, it doesn’t. Not like the El Al security check made me feel safer.

I know they mean well, but a lot of TSA agents remind me of Barney Fife on the old Andy Griffith TV show. Barney might hassle an old lady for jaywalking in Mayberry – because rules are rules. Same with the TSA agents. Got a nail file? Got to take it away. You might try to stab the pilot if they let you on the plane with one of those dangerous weapons. Besides, rules are rules.

And fair is fair: You can’t blame the TSA for what happened in Amsterdam. TSA agents didn’t let the “underwear bomber” on the plane. But I’m not all that confident they would have
caught this same guy if he got on a plane in Detroit and was heading to Amsterdam with a bomb in his underpants. Now, if he had more than three ounces of conditioner, there’s no way he would have made it through security.

So what’s the solution? No system is 100 percent foolproof. Granted. But profiling is a good place to start. And not just profiling anyone who seems especially nervous and is acting a little too fidgety. We need to do that, for sure. But we also need profiling – I pause here so that any liberal with a heart condition can get his medicine before continuing – we need profiling based on what you look like and where you come from. Young men traveling with passports issued, for example, in Nigeria, Somalia, or anyplace in the Arab world, should get special attention. They should be profiled! A 23-year old man from Beirut is not the same as a 78-year old woman from Peoria. They do not pose the same potential threat to our safety. That strikes me as beyond obvious. Besides, if liberals are willing to turn our economy upside down on the chance – no matter how slight – that global warming may harm us in a hundred years or so, they ought to be willing to profile potential terrorists who might try to blow up an airplane in an hour or so – no matter how slight that chance.

But liberals will say, “What happens when the terrorists recruit a blond, blue-eyed Swedish woman to carry the bomb? What good will your profiling do then?” Good question. When that happens, we should start profiling Swedish women, too.

But for now, we can be assured of just one thing: if you thought going through security at the airport was a great big pain in the ass before the “underwear bomber” surfaced, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.