

ATIME TO SPEAK

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RENEWING OUR SOULS

**EREV ROSH HASHANAH
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This sermon was delivered on the Shabbat following the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, DC, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

THERE ARE TIMES IN OUR lives when there are no words. Last week was one of those times.

There are still no words.

Like every other American, I watched the television in horror on Tuesday and Wednesday. Daniel Pinkwater expressed it so well when he said on NPR that he couldn't stand watching it, but at the same time he couldn't move from his television. On Thursday morning, I commented to Louise that I felt emotionally traumatized, numb. I still feel numb. It is the same sort of feeling I remember having in the days surrounding my mother's death. It is the feeling of strain, pain, loss of strength. We are all carrying a burden. Some of us suffered the loss of family members. Some of us lost friends. Each one of us knows stories of near misses: unusual decisions to simply not go to work, taking a child to kindergarten and arriving at work late, missing a bus. There are many such stories, but not nearly enough. Each of us carries a piece of this loss.

I am not ashamed to say that I want the feeling to go away. I want to be able to tell a joke. I want to be able to laugh. I want to

go back to my old way of reading the newspaper, sports page first. I want to feel normal again. I don't know when that will return, although I know that it will.

This week each of us thought of Israel. I cannot imagine how Israelis live with this every day, this feeling of vulnerability and loss, waiting for what comes next. I wonder. Is this the kind of feeling that you can get used to? I, for one, cannot imagine being used to it.

So on Tuesday and Wednesday I absorbed the horror, and by Thursday, like every other rabbi in the country, I realized that I had to scrap my intended sermon for this evening and address the crisis. I am haunted by words I wrote for this month's Temple newsletter, words that reflect my appreciation of these Holy Days: "They call on me to examine the challenges that face us in our lives through a Jewish filter." Never has that call been more daunting.

I have no deep words of insight this evening. Sometimes a filter can be cloudy. Sometimes you can't really get clear vision through a filter until the dust settles. So rather than call this wisdom, I will look for comfort and try to articulate three questions of what I am looking for through my filter:

1. Who did this, and why?
2. What did they do?
3. How will we recover?

Who did this, and why?

The "who" first, simply because I want to make one observation. The word "coward" has been thrown about—that these people are cowards. Calling them cowards may make us feel better, but I think it establishes the wrong category for us, for all Americans. I think it takes quite a bit of courage to steer a plane going 500 miles per hour into a building. These people are far from cowards. In fact, it is their courage that is so frightening. They will sacrifice

everything for their cause. Their faith is terrifying. It is powerful. It is desperate. They are far from cowards. I am also concerned by the word “coward” because I am afraid that it can be a kind of demonizing word in itself, intimating that we Americans are people who fight courageously and fairly, while these particular enemies are something other, “cowards” who hide in countries far away and send other “cowards” to spread terror and kill innocents.

I think that it is also so critical to say in this regard, which should go without saying, the “who” that did this are not “Arabs” or “Muslims.” The “who” are professional terrorists whose hearts are filled with hatred for the West. They are part of a radical fundamentalist storm that, as Amos Oz put it, using their own language, see America as “the great Satan and Israel as the little Satan.” I do not know how many of these people there are. But they do not represent all Muslims or all Arabs. The Arab world is not more represented by them than the Jewish word is by Baruch Goldstein or others of his ilk. That must be clear. Acts of terror against Arab Americans are abominable. They are shameful. We Jews know this from our own historical experience, and we should be the first to stand against such acts and those who perform them. We know what it means to be scapegoated for crimes we did not commit.

This brings us to the why: certainly to spread terror and fear and to show their contempt for us. But we must be very clear about one thing. In some quarters, suggestion has been made that America is a target because of our country’s friendship with Israel. I have seen suggestions of this in the press, and our children will hear this from their friends in classroom discussions at school. I believe this suggestion to be very wrong, and we must be very clear as to why. We must be able to explain this clearly so our children can understand and can respond so that we understand ourselves. Next week on Yom Kippur, I plan (once I get time to write it) to give a

sermon on Israel and this past horrible year. I will say this now and try not to repeat it next week. I do not approve of Israel's policies in the territories, but that has nothing to do with the situation in the Middle East that led to last week's horror. The Arab world uses Israel as a convenient punching bag to hide the real story. Poverty, misery, and hopelessness are the mix that give rise to demagoguery, violence and hate. Thomas Friedman says this so well and so clearly. Israel is not responsible for the poverty and all that goes with it that pervades life in the Middle East. In a recent op-ed, Friedman wrote: "I hear no anger directed to the major culprits—the oil rich, wealthy Arab countries—where all of the wealth is concentrated in a very few families and almost nothing is spent on poor Arabs in their own countries or elsewhere."

Whatever our faults as a community, we do not allow our brothers to live in refugee camps. An email friend asked the stunningly simple question: "Where are the Arab Rothschilds?" That great Jewish banking family that financed the up-building of the land of Israel beginning over 100 years ago, reflecting the Jewish value of *tzedakah*, that rescued so much of Eastern European Jewry from poverty and oppression. Where is this found in the Arab world? This is what revolutions are made from. The great Satan and the little Satan become convenient targets.

What did they do?

They, of course, destroyed the Twin Towers and part of the Pentagon. They violated our sense of security. They caused pain and suffering. They killed thousands. The ripple effect will be enormous from the devastation that was wrought. Children lost parents, husbands lost wives, wives lost husbands. Others lost brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles. The memories will last lifetimes, and the anguish caused by this day will never be forgotten.

We have also suffered a loss as a national family. Much has been written about the Towers and the Pentagon as symbols of American wealth and security, symbols of American power, economic and military. I even heard an NPR report last week of a woman who said that she wanted to organize a new group, Mothers Against Symbols, that they destroyed an office building, not a symbol. I very much like what the woman said, although I did not fully agree with her. The fact is that symbols were destroyed. The question is: what do they represent?

I considered this question through the perspective of another destruction, the destruction of the ancient Temple and Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 CE. The ancient Temple was everything to our ancestors. It was described as the most beautiful building in the ancient world. Pilgrims from all over the Roman Empire, Jew and non-Jew, would come to Jerusalem to see its glory.

For Jews, it was more than the most beautiful architectural edifice ever conceived or built. It was everything. Everything that provided our ancestors' identity and relationship with God, everything that tied them to their history. Their faith was destroyed. The Temple had been the center of civic life, cultural life, commercial life, education. The courts, the schools and the markets: all were destroyed. The Temple was considered the foundation stone of the world. When it was taken, our ancestors said, "Our lives are shattered. How will we go on? Where do we belong? Where do we now find God?"

The rabbis of that time provided an answer. Had they failed to provide an answer, Jewish life would have disappeared, and we would have become simply another ancient group swallowed up by Roman culture. But they reformulated Judaism to teach that the world stands not on a Temple, but on Torah, prayer, acts of love, truth, justice, and peace. The rabbis created a new conception of Judaism. The symbol was destroyed, but not the essence. From the

rumble, the rabbis reformulated the essence.

New York is our Jerusalem: the center of commerce, culture, finance, education, business, even sports. Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Broadway, Wall Street, Rockefeller Center, Yankee Stadium, Madison Square Garden. Even my own native Chicago takes its nickname, the Second City, from its relation to the Big Apple. New York is the center of our universe, just as Jerusalem was the center of our ancestors' world. Just look at that famous Steinberg *New Yorker* magazine cover. There is New York and there, incidentally, is the rest of the world across the Hudson. Our enemies knew just what to attack, knew where it would scar our national psyche the most.

Even with all of that, our challenge is not nearly so great as the challenge faced by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai and his students in the year 70 CE following the burning of Jerusalem. The collapse of symbols can be devastating, but foundations and core values can be eternal. We as a people have long known that faith based on sacred texts is transportable, even when structures are destroyed.

The essence of our country is found in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, words that stir our hearts and minds: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

We are a nation based on great ideas. The reason that our society is free and prosperous is because it is founded on the eternal truths of the universe. The Founding Fathers set as their foundation the equality of all people and the God-given rights of life and liberty. These political ideas drew on the spiritual notions of the Bible and its view of the world. No doubt, the way America applied these ideas has been far from perfect, and progress has

sometimes been slow. But even the imperfect application of these eternal principles has resulted in the abundance and prosperity that we see today. These values and ideas were attacked, but in destroying property, you cannot destroy the fabric of a people that firmly embraces these noble and sacred principles.

It is, in fact, these noble principles that we must now lift up, embrace and hold aloft to the world to show them to be truly sacred. Either we mean them, or we don't. There are those who would trash the Bill of Rights for the sake of security. They are religious Bible bigots, and what they preach is a scandal. We are Jews, and we know better.

It is our job to remind the world that the great dream that was the American Revolution is not over; that the great dream was not meant to be just for Americans or just for certain Americans who meet Reverend Falwell's approval; that from this catastrophe we can be rededicated to projecting and protecting those values all across the globe, as well as here at home. We can recommit ourselves to teaching those values over the long term, and instilling those values in others. If we as a nation are to go to war—let that be our order of battle—let those great ideas guide our policy everywhere. It is those eternal truths that make this country the great symbol it is, that and our commitment to them for all people everywhere.

Now, the third question: How will we recover?

I would like to think that in some small ways the recovery has already begun. Isn't this country amazing? It is a privilege to live here. We saw evidence of it this week. Lower New York in ruins, one third of the city cordoned off, the streets deserted. Yet nowhere is there any looting, breaking into store windows, robbing. The city is quiet.

Then you look and see the policemen, firefighters, and rescue workers. I almost cannot look at them without crying at their

heroism. People do the most remarkable things. We hear these stories and read them in the papers. The owner of the small deli right near the Word Trade Center who stayed open all night working with his son, giving away everything in the store to the rescue workers—food, bottled water, juice, sandwiches. He wouldn't take a dime. And this deli owner is an Arab American. One member of our community expressed it to me this way: "This week we looked into our television sets and saw ordinary people doing extraordinary things." This is the beginning of hope. We take hope from each other. That is a source of great strength.

Our mere coming here is a sign of hope. In many ways the major theme of Rosh Hashanah is the story of hope: hope challenged and hope recovered. This is revealed in the stories we read. For our ancestors, as for us, hopelessness is no future. The stories we read these days cast no future, as no next generation. But the childless Hannah has her prayers answered. This is repeated in a number of ways in the Torah portion of this season: the hope of a future challenged, but then overcome. God responds.

The prayer book itself wrestles with the motif of hope and human destiny. Nowhere does that come through more strongly than in the "*Unetaneh Tokef*" blessing we will be reading tomorrow morning and again on Yom Kippur. I gave an entire sermon on this prayer just a couple of years ago. This is the famous painful prayer. I will not analyze the entire prayer now, but remember that what we are talking about is the recovery of hope. Look at the bottom of page 108 [*Gates of Repentance*, CCAR 1996]:

Who shall pass on, who shall come to be;

Who shall live and who shall die;

Who shall see ripe age and who shall not;

Who shall perish by fire and who by water...

The poet who wrote this prayer couches our fate as the result of God inscribing each one of our destinies in a book. You may hate the metaphor. Two years ago I tried to mount a great defense of it, but that is all irrelevant now. The fact of the matter is that, even casting the metaphor aside, none of us knows what our individual fates will be in a given year. Some of us will flourish, while some of us will suffer.

The poet then offers a climax: “Repentance, prayer, and charity,” “*Ma-avirin*” (the evil decree). Let’s use my translation, which is better: “Repentance, prayer and charity overcome the evil of the decree.” What does this mean? We are all going to suffer at some points in our lives. Disappointments, tragic deaths of loved ones, illness, loneliness, financial ruin—you name it. No one goes through life untouched. We can either give in to it, or, says the poet, Judaism, these very days, offers us the resources to overcome the evil in the decree. The evil in the decree means losing our hope.

So, what do we do? How do we respond? We are offered three words:

Teshuvah: here it means heal. We need time to start to turn around.

Prayer: we look for inspiration beyond ourselves, we look to connect to something more.

Tzedakah: we begin to do for others.

Those firefighters out there are models of *tzedakah*, the ones who rushed into those buildings when they were aflame, the ones who gave their lives to aid others. There is a lot of hope right there. That is inspiration. Their courage and their sacrifice are holy and awe-inspiring. That is what this prayer says to me. We need not lose our hope. We have resources. We have stories. We have prayers. We have each other. We can have faith.

I would like to end with a word on hope written by Vaclav Havel

while he was in prison for political organizing. His words inspire me, and it is my hope that they reach you.

Hope...above all is a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul...It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons...its deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are...

Hope, in the deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious situation demands greater hope, and with time, hope strengthens us. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to do good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from “elsewhere.” It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live.

We enter this new year bowed in sorrow, but may we be renewed in strength. For this we pray.

L'shanah Tovah.

AMEN