



To Give Their Deaths Meaning

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What does a rabbi, anyone, say in a world in which nightmare has become reality, in a world of anguish, pain and death. We have watched, heard, read, hour by hour, day by day, as the unbelievable unfolded before our eyes. It began on an ordinary September day, a Tuesday, most ordinary of days. Sunny, warm, with the primaries on our minds, the very spirit of democracy in the air. America the beautiful at its best.

And then, first one plane, then another, human bombs, living guided missiles: into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the field in Pennsylvania. Disbelief, fear – what is safe?

We called our loved ones, “Are you all right?” And then we learned of the calls those doomed, innocent passengers made – and those in the World Trade Center. “I may not make it.” “I love you, take care of the kids.” A few brief words for a lifetime of conversations never to be.

We shudder as we think of what went on in those horrifying moments. We could have been on those planes and in a way we were. We went to work that morning as did those who are now lost. So part of us died too. We are not distant from them or their families.

On the second day we too in Great Neck began to smell and taste the smoke and soot, even faintly blowing in the wind. We knew this was our tragedy no less.

Yes, we are New York, and the degrees of separation are not great. Three of our Temple members, perhaps more, escaped, one badly injured. A fireman who helped save our building, died attempting to save lives. A neighbor from the Community Church, friends, relatives of some of us, have not returned. Sixty-seven cars remained parked at the Manhasset train station.

The immensity of the loss stuns us, the thousands, the police, fire fighters, rescue personnel. The largest number of casualties on our soil since the Civil War Battle of Antietam. We can't process the reality, get our minds around the tragedy; the dimensions are so vast.

We cannot find the words for the surreal events which took place. They haven't been invented: disaster, catastrophe, monstrous, mindless – we use them all the time. The movies become the metaphors. “Like in the movies,” we say “Towering Inferno” – “Die Hard II” – “Black Sunday”, “Independence Day”.

But beyond such make believe, would we have ever expected to see people jump out of buildings over a hundred stories high, a husband and wife holding hands as they fell; war ships

on New York City waters, military fighter planes flying cover over Manhattan and Washington. On Saturday we learned the startling news that our military was prepared to shoot down the United flight had it not crashed in Pennsylvania. We also learned the bravery of those who fought the terrorists on board and brought the plane down lest it become a missile aimed at our nation's capital.

What shall we do? What shall we tell the children? "Dad, a girl in my class lost both her parents." "Mom, why would anybody do that? Will we all die?" "Rabbi, why didn't God help?"

Can our faith help us? Help us to find any meaning at all? That, of course, is what these Holy Days are about. Dealing with the capricious vicissitudes of life, even when we cannot comprehend them. What is the reason for that which has befallen us? What can we redeem out of lifes' shattering blows?

The uncertainty and vulnerability we all feel is reflected in the great prayer for these Days of Awe, days in which our ancestors expressed the fear they felt about the unknown future. Thus we read the haunting words:

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed: 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: who by sword and who by beast...who by earthquake and who by plague....

A prayer written so long ago resonates within us as the images pass before our minds: men and women at work at their desks, so many young. Fire raging in the buildings, soon crumbling, shattering the foundations of the earth, the foundations of our confidence, of our society, of our civilization.

Yes, Judaism teaches we are *basar v'dam*, flesh and blood, vulnerable and weak. Life is uncertain and tomorrow is a mystery.

One message is clear – tomorrow's uncertainties must be transformed into today's priorities. We learned again what they are in case we had forgotten – our families, our dear ones. "Mom, I'm all right." "Joe, thank God you're there."

Oh, how we learned what matters. A bride who had been frantic about some wedding arrangements said to me last week, "I don't care about the details of the party any more. I am so thankful Glen and I, my parents and his are here – that's what matters."

That is what matters. But there is so much we cannot control. The randomness of evil is clear. Yet, we Jews acknowledge human accountability. "You O God open the book of our days, and what is written there proclaims itself for it bears the signature of every human being."

We are not a faith that justifies whatever happens, no matter how terrible, with the assurance God has reasons to punish us, to teach us. No! Job said no to that so long ago. We do not put it

all into Gods' hands, for we are Gods' hands, and we see our signatures on every page, sometimes even on scorched and blood soaked pages.

But this great tragedy, what does it have to do with us? Our signatures are not on what we have witnessed. Nor the victims signatures either, the yet uncounted thousands, the truly innocent. The signatures are those of evil, vile people not ours.

No, not ours. Yet Judaism teaches us: some are guilty but all are responsible. Responsible? If we could have done nothing about yesterday, what can we do about tomorrow?

A former director of the FBI was questioned in an interview, "Why couldn't we stop it?" "Because," he said, "We live in a free society, and that means we can't be certain." Other government and military leaders point to the sophistication, the preparation, and the death defying determination of the terrorists. The revelations of recent days have validated these comments. We now know the attack was carried off by a pernicious network of terrorists that involved dozens. It was astonishingly complicated, well coordinated, exactly planned.

The attack also represented a massive failure of intelligence and security. The evidence, stolen badges, rented cars, Arabic instruction manuals for the planes, a passport found near the Trade Center constitutes a trail of evidence after the fact that some how eluded officials on all levels. Some of the information we have received is more distressing. These men studied flying in our country. They were educated, lived middle class lives in American communities, in suburbs, next door neighbors to people like those like they planned to murder. Nineteen suspected hijackers have been identified. It is believed there are others – terrorists, some pilots, yet in the United States and there remain targets selected for their missions.

The security lapses are painfully clear. As you probably know in order to publicize the inadequacy of our airports, some American pilots have walked through security with knives, with corkscrews and with no identification papers.

How can we prepare against those willing to die, eager to die, to fulfill what they believe to be a sacred mission? The United States is portrayed as the great Satan. To perish as a martyr in the holy war against us, Jihad, is to be assured a place in paradise. As Bin Laden, addressing his followers, recently said: "You will not die needlessly, your lives are in the hands of God."

The irrationality dumbfounds a society such as ours. Especially when these terrorists are not disturbed, desperate loners who are caught up in religious fanaticism, the traditional profile of suicide bombers, but seemingly intelligent men recruited from all levels of Middle Eastern society. Yet they are willing to accept the idea that their martyrdom in the killing of innocent civilians, constitute acts of heroism for their God. The psychologists who study terrorism say that the book on suicide bombers will have to be rewritten.

Because of Israel, we Jews bring to these horrifying events a special perspective. We are surely tempted to say to our fellow Americans, "Do you get it now?" We know how our people in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv have lived, or try to live, with the fear a suicide bomber may enter the

market where they shop or the mall where their teenagers hang out. Every siren heard on the streets of Israel prompts the kind of frantic calls to loved ones we Americans made on Tuesday.

“You see what our people live with?”, we wish to say to others. The blood of a terrorist attack on an Israeli pizza parlor spatters on our faces in America. And you ask Israel to be moderate in response, condemning the assassination by Israelis of those who plot to kill again and again, thus preventing perhaps hundreds of needless, innocent deaths. Yes, clearly there is a connection, a linkage of terror that encircles the globe.

Some Americans will begin to understand. A colleague told me of a meeting of the Interfaith Clergy Council of his community the day following the disaster. At one point, one of the African American ministers turned to him and said, “I want to say to the rabbi that I now understand what his people have been going through for years. I thought I understood; I would look at events and say it was sad, but I never really understood. Now I do.” It is indeed an important lesson, but at too awful a price.

Of course, the magnitude of the catastrophe in the United States defies comparison. Yet we as Jews cannot help but be aware of the common threads of helpless fear, the need for constant vigilance. And just as for the violence that explodes on the streets of Israel is meant to break the will of the Jewish state, so too targeting the most visible symbols of American economic and military might, was meant to destabilize and demoralize our nation. Tiny Israel’s resolute determination to maintain its societal normalcy, even vitality, is a source of pride, a remarkable victory of national spirit, and it can be an inspiration to America now.

The crowds of Palestinians dancing in the streets of Nablus in the West Bank in America’s darkest hour, handing out candy and shouting. “God is great,” sends a chilling message indeed. America and Israel are joined as the hated enemy. And there are Americans who have begun to suggest that the U.S. support of Israel made it possible. We’ve heard this already, not only from leaders of militant Islamic groups. Our news commentators have asked those they interview, including Colin Powell, “Do you think our relations with Israel are somehow responsible?” The Secretary of State responded firmly no, but the suggestions are out there.

America is reviled and was attacked not because we like Israel, but because we are like Israel. We are a free land. Free to live as we choose within the law. Free to speak, worship, move about, whoever we are whatever our race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age or economic status. We know that. Israel, the only true democracy in the Middle East, cherishes those freedoms as well. Were the United States to abandon Israel, God forbid, we would be hated nonetheless. Blaming Israel is a classic case of blaming the victim. It is also a smoke screen for anti-Semitism.

The Rev. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, in a perverse and vile way, made the point that it is the liberal nature of our society that was under attack. In an utterly appalling statement on Thursday they asserted on television that an angry God had allowed the terrorists to succeed because the United States had become a Nation of “abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians” who support secular schools and courts and the American Civil Liberties Union. Falwell went

on, "I point the finger in their face, and say, you helped this happen."

Fanaticism of any faith, whether Islam, Christianity or, alas, Judaism sees democracy, civil liberties, tolerance, the Bill of Rights as values to be despised along with the nations that believe in them. America and Israel, linked in the democratic spirit, are the targets of such hatred. Americans will now understand, I hope, that this is not just a problem for Jews in the Middle East. In a sense all Americans are Jews in this battle.

Thus we Americans have to know who the enemy is and who it is not. It is not the religion of Islam, nor Arabs in general, nor for the most part, the states in which Arabs live. As Amos Oz, the Israeli author wrote last week:

"It is all too easy and tempting now to fall into all sorts of racist clichés about "Muslim mentality" or "Arab character" and other such rubbish. The horrendous crime committed against New York and Washington is a sharp reminder that this is not a war between religions, nor a struggle between nations. This is, once more, the battle between the fanatics for whom the end – any end, be it religious, nationalistic, or ideological – sanctifies the means, and the rest of us who ascribe sanctity to life itself."

Stephen Cohen, analyst and scholar, underscored this point when he recalled, "President Lincoln said of the South after the Civil War: remember they pray to the same God. The same is true," Prof. Cohen said "of many, many Muslims. We must fight those among them who pray only to the God of hate, but we do not want to go to war with Islam, with all the millions of Muslims who pray to the same God we do."

It will do us no good to throw the net of our understandable desire to retaliate fiercely across too wide a target. It will only drive others into the camp that worships the God of hate. A massive bombing campaign against the people of Afghanistan or some other land, might be cathartic, but it would be both clearly unproductive and exceedingly immoral.

As the anger within Americans seethes into rage and hate, we dare not become blinded by our vengeful feelings. The rash of vandalism and fire bombings of Islamic Mosques and businesses, as well as the threats of harassment of Muslim people, including children, by those waving American flags and railing against them and even assaulting them are desecrations of American ideals. It is scapegoating. It violates a preeminent lesson of Jewish history, the danger of group hatred, of imputing to a group the actions of a few individuals. A Pakistani Muslim family living in Westbury is no more responsible for the disaster in lower Manhattan than are you or I. They, too, are horrified by the violence and terrorism.

To most Muslims, the terrorist tactics and extremist ideology of fanatic Islamic fundamentalism are a terrible distortion of their religions teachings. In a sense Islam has been hijacked by these extremists. It is important that moderate Muslim leaders, especially clergy, speak out, as indeed some have and assert that the Koran forbids the murder of innocents. Let us not forget that American Muslims were at work on Tuesday morning in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, they were among the rescue workers who died seeking to save their fellow Americans.

Our former Associate Rabbi, Karen Bender, told me that she is preparing for her congregation in California, an emblem of a Jewish star and a Muslim crescent and star, reflecting unity, to put in their windows between these days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is reminiscent of the hundreds of Christians of Billings Montana, who after a stone was thrown through a window of a Jewish home displaying a Chanukah menorah, placed Chanukah menorahs in all their windows as if to say, we stand by you. Even as the African American minister said to the rabbi, "Now I understand," we too as Jews must make it known, we understand.

The battle against terrorism receives our fullest support. But it must be more than words and slogans, more than a flurry of attacks. It surely requires the broadest coalition of nations possible, including Arab states. The strong demand made by the State Department that nations choose sides either participating in this battle or risking isolation or worse, is heartening. For too long the United States has winked at nations we knew sponsored terrorism and harbored terrorist camps, because the United States had supposed valid economic or political reasons for maintaining relations with them. America has suffered as a result, even before last week. Consider how ineffective and short-lived have been our reactions to terrorism abroad against American targets.

Israel has suffered too because of our slack commitment to fighting terrorism seriously. At the beginning of his administration, President Bush, whose leadership at this time of crisis we heartily support, had tended to take a close to neutral position regarding Israel and the Palestinians: "let them solve it," was the theme. Now he must surely see the terrorism of the Islamic Jihad and Hamas in a larger perspective. We hope he will lead a sustained and effective campaign involving a coalition of nations against the terrorist scourge threatening humanity. It will be a long and difficult struggle, but our best hope.

Last week a reporter asked me, "When will the healing begin?" This difficult question reminded me of a poem by Archibald MacLeish.

The young soldiers do not speak.

Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses: who has not heard them?...

They say, We are young. We have died. Remember us...

They say: Our deaths are not ours; they are yours; they will mean what you make them.

They say: Whether our lives and our deaths are for peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say; it is you who must say this.

They say: We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.
We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us.

Those who died, in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania were our soldiers – and many so young. Healing will begin when we give their deaths meaning.

The process has begun. Their deaths have inspired an outpouring of courage and caring, on the part of thousands. New Yorkers have made us proud, they and others from throughout the nation have reached out to the fallen in so many ways. They ran in when others ran out, they gave their lives for the possibility of saving another, they stood in lines for hours to give blood, they reached out to the injured, the grief stricken, to each other with food, medical supplies, housing, transportation and kindness. The Mayor, Governor and President have inspired us. The fire fighters, police and rescue workers have become true heroes for our kids, heroes they have not had for so long.

We speak of our fears. We are told we are entering a new era and we don't know what that means. We know we must go to war with the enemy, and we don't know who or where they are.

But those whose lives were snuffed out would not want us to be afraid. They would not feel their deaths had meaning if we lost our faith in America. The enduring words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt speak to us from 60 years ago: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." For fear will turn us inward, it will isolate us from one another, it will cause us to lose confidence in this, the greatest nation ever established by humanity. Said Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav: "The whole world is a narrow bridge. The main thing is not to be afraid."

America is very great. We did not get this far in the history of nations out of weakness. The Twin Towers are gone, yes, but the Statue of Liberty is still standing in the harbor. When we sing about America we weep because we know deep down we love and trust this land. It welcomed us, it nurtured us, it will heal us.

But it will do so only if we preserve in every way we can, the values upon which America was founded. So many have warned, we must not suppress our freedoms in trying to protect them, and they are right. Tuesday's young soldiers died for them. Not for a nation that is intolerant of differences, demands conformity, invades privacy, that subscribes to one religious view or style of living or way of thinking. Security and liberty must be balanced as never before, delicately, sensitively. The Bill of Rights can never be stained by fallout from terrorism nor torn by forces of retaliation and fear. I believe we can learn from the prophet Isaiah who sought to comfort our people over 2500 years ago when Jerusalem was destroyed. He gave them a gift, a sense of mission. "Be a light to the nations," he cried. For us as well, the lamp held high in the harbor is our symbol. We dare not let that light go out.

And we seek to preserve and protect the diversity of this nation, the pluralism that gives us strength in a time of despair. In a brief conversation the other day with the sanitation worker who picks up our garbage, obviously a recent immigrant, I asked him how he felt about last week's terrorism. He said sadly, "I don't know what is going to happen. You know, a lot of people from a lot of different countries were up there." He clearly was afraid, and I think he wanted me to know that immigrant Americans like himself had died too.

Indeed when the list of names of the more than 5,000 dead becomes known, amid the great sorrow will be one inspiring fact, the diversity of the victims. They will represent a multitude of religions, cultures and nationalities, proof that in America people with many differences can work harmoniously together. It will dramatically repudiate the lie our enemies have tried to teach the world, that democracy is dangerous. Perhaps, too, it will remind us of the work yet to be done to rid our nation of racism, to remove bigotry from every heart, to teach the next generation to accept and welcome the stranger within our gates. That will be a source of great meaning and hasten our healing.

But the twisted metal and mountains of rubble remain to remind us of the vast devastation fanatic hatred brought to our shores. No more do our alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears.

Last night I walked along the bridge by the Great Neck Library, looked to the New York skyline and saw the smoke of death still rising. I walked amid the hundreds of candles burning in memory of the lost victims, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, neighbors and friends – burning there and across the nation.

Yes, their deaths are ours now, and we shall give them meaning.

The meaning that comes from dedication to the indestructible human freedoms for which this nation was born.

The meaning of acceptance and tolerance, of kindness and caring.

The meaning of bravery and courage. The meaning of family and love.

The meaning of a flag, a song, and a spirit that is America. God bless America.