

HOPE LIES BENEATH: SERMON FOLLOWING THE VIOLENCE OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

September 14, 2001 – 26 Elul 5761

So many words...so many images. There have been so many words spoken and written during the past several days...so many pictures – they overwhelm us. To me, they all coalesce into one large question mark – a question mark that howls its question into the moral abyss of this tragedy. How? How could this have happened?

In response...there is a silence. A silence almost as deafening as the tragedy itself.

The “How?” question is one that we Jews have been asking for centuries. In fact, there is a book called “How?” in our Bible. It is the book of Lamentations, named in Hebrew after its first word in the original text – “How.”

I hadn't ever studied that book in much depth until this week. There were so many other things to learn. It was written in the aftermath of the destruction of the first Temple, in Jerusalem, in 586 BCE. That Temple was the center of Jewish life at the time. There were no synagogues then, and to express their Jewishness, Jewish people would bring sacrifices of crops or animals to the Temple in Jerusalem. That Temple was the only place they could make those sacrifices.

That's why when, in 586 BCE, the Babylonians destroyed the Temple and sacked the city of Jerusalem, it was far more than a military loss for the now-enslaved Jews of Judea. Judaism as they knew it had been destroyed. Without the Temple, they didn't know how, or even if, they could be Jewish anymore.

One of those Jews wrote the book of Lamentations. I imagine him to have been looking back upon what was Jerusalem as they carted him off toward captivity in Babylonia. And there he saw it: The greatest city he knew had suddenly become a smoldering ruin; and its most magnificent edifice, the one that had dominated its skyline above all the rest, was now a heap of rubble. Life as he knew it would never be the same again.

The first line of his lament sent chills down my spine this week: “Alas, how the city, once so full of people, now sits desolate!”

It is a sad reality that we Jews have been here before. Throughout our history, we have faced national tragedy time and again: Egyptian slavery, two destroyed Temples, a failed 2nd century revolt and 600,000 Jewish deaths, the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust...the list could go on and on. After each, our responses were the same: We lamented our losses, we tried to understand the catastrophe, and then, even after the most painful of tragedies, we went on, continuing with the sacred work of our lives.

As Jews, we know what its like to have to endure tragedy. We know what it's like to face a catastrophe that, by all previous accounts, simply shouldn't have happened, and we know what it is like to have to go on anyway. We know what it is like to have to bury our dead...or to wish we could bury our dead when our enemies left no remains.

Unlike today's America, when we were victimized, we usually weren't in a position of power to retaliate. Instead, all we could do was pick up the pieces, scream to the heavens in pain and anguish, and move to a distant shore hopeful that it would be better there.

My friends, the world needs us today. The world needs us to show them how to face this horrible event. Our history has been painful at times, and now we have the opportunity to share what we've learned with others and thus, maybe, add a silver lining to some of the clouds of pain that darken our memories.

Being there for others will be difficult for many of us, because we, too, are Americans in need of comfort. Comforting others when we need the comfort ourselves is what we rabbis do sometimes. And as one who has often wiped away tears while shedding my own, I can tell you that one of the most comforting acts in a time of tragedy is the very act of providing comfort to others.

The psalmist asked how we can sing God's song in a foreign land – how can we ever again celebrate and feel joy after the tragedy? We sang songs anyway, because we knew we had to. America asks the same questions now, but America is asking them differently: When will life be joyful again? When will football and baseball resume? When will it be OK to laugh again? We need to tell them that it may never *feel* OK to do any of those things, and that's precisely why we need to resume those activities, and resume them soon. We've done it before, because we've known that when terror prevents us from living our lives to the fullest, then the evil people win.

We know what it is like to become statistics. There was so much death on Tuesday. It's not so much that there were *thousands* of people who died; no, it is rather that there were thousands of *people* who died: secretaries and accountants, police officers and fire fighters, Moms and Dads, and even, they say, some children. For each there are households destroyed, hearts torn apart, and so many tears. Let us provide the solace that we know well how to give.

I might add that we also know what it is like to be part of an entire nation vilified for the acts of individuals, and we must remind America that we must never, never condemn the many for the misdeeds of the few. You may want to know that, this afternoon, I went over to the Islamic Center of Tacoma and I pledged them our full support in the event of any unjust discrimination. They seemed to be genuinely appreciative, thanked me profusely and, and offered their support in return.

The world needs us, too, because now justice is possible. Let us implore our nation to seek justice at this time, for the perpetrators deserve nothing less than true justice, and, we must remember, nothing more, either. Our tradition teaches of the difference between justice and vengeance; it is a lesson that we must share with the world.

At times like these, we search for understanding. *Eicha?* How? I've known for a long time that tragedies lead to those questions, but this week I learned something more. The questions that we ask aren't really about the tragedy itself. "How did this happen?" We know how it happened! There were some people bent on doing evil who conspired to kill thousands and, tragically, they succeeded in doing so. We can make sense of the crime; what we really need is the ability to make sense of the world around it.

You see, we humans try to convince ourselves that the world is a predictable place – at least I do. I want to know that when I say goodbye to my kids in the morning, I'll see them again that night; I want to know that our economy is stable, and that there are no such things as economic crises, only temporary downturns and buying opportunities; I want to know that big buildings built to last forever either really will, or they will come down in pre-planned demolition galas that will make us want to say ooh and ahh and applaud.

And I want to know that the world is secure. I want to know that I won't die until I'm old and happy and have beautiful grandchildren. I want to know that those machines at the airport that beep at the metal clip on my ballpoint pen will also detect guns and knives. I want to know that when things *do* get bad, all I'll have to do is call the police or the fire department, and then it will be OK. I want to know that the bad guys get what they deserve in the end, and that the good guys get to ride off into the sunset with a pretty girl at their side.

In short, I want to know that the world will always work the way I think it is supposed to work. That's not too much to ask, is it?

Well apparently, it is.

You see, when people hijack and crash airplanes carrying hundreds of people like you and me; when two of our gigantic Temples of Commerce crumble to the ground; when our national defense headquarters goes up in flames; and when thousands of people just like you and me, who have just gone to jobs like yours and mine die in a gigantic, explosive inferno...when these things happen, then all of our assumptions about the predictability and order of life *simply stop working*.

We try to persuade ourselves that things will always be OK. But beneath this thin veneer of order lies a seething cauldron of chaos, bubbling with dreadful unpredictability. And the chaos terrifies us.

So I may *never* acquire that certainty I crave, for such certainty tends to elude us mortals. But let me tell you what I *do* know: I know that there are no guarantees in life, that each time I say goodbye to my kids may be the last, so I must make the most of each and every day. I know that sometimes the good guys die and the bad guys win, but we need to do what we can to prevent it from being like that. I know that sometimes policemen and firefighters will be unable to be saviors, and will become martyrs, instead.

I know that when the Pentagon falls, we can still be strong; when the World Trade Center topples, we can still achieve great wealth of spirit; when airplanes crash, our spirits can still soar through the heavens in love and care.

I know that thousands of innocent people have died. I weep for them and their families.

And I know that God exists, calling us to greatness and holiness. Now more than ever. With God's help, we'll find the strength we need for this crucial and sacred task.

This morning, I was watching a news program while I got ready for work, and they played a recording of a voice mail message that a woman in the World Trade Center left for her husband

on Tuesday. She said, “Sean, there is a horrible fire in the building; there is a lot of smoke, and I don’t think I’m going to get out. I just want you to know that I’ll love you always. Goodbye.”

Then, they cut to a shot of her young husband, sitting in the studio, weeping, and for the first time all week, I had to turn off the TV. I couldn’t bear to watch it anymore.

At that very moment, my five-year-old daughter, Shoshana burst into the room. She said, “Daddy, do you wanna see the book I made.” She had stapled some papers together and drawn some pictures.

Quickly, I wiped away the tears and pretended that everything was OK. I said, “I’d love to see your book, Shoshie. Tell me about the pictures.”

“Well,” she said, “this one here is a dog that’s really an igloo. This one’s a menorah. And this scribble here – this is a person’s dream.”

I took a deep breath and thought to myself, “Aah, here it is. I’ve been mired in the chaos this week, but here’s the hope that lies beneath it. Here is the promise of tomorrow.”

My friends, there are new structures to be built now – structures that we’ve never even imagined before. There are tears to be shed, and tears to be wiped away and spread over fertile soil. There are wild and colorful dreams of all kinds to be dreamed.

The world sits in darkness tonight, shedding tears and crying out in despair. But soon the sun will rise again – it always does. With the dawn, we will once again see the beauty and goodness gleaming all around us, and we will also see the many important and sacred tasks that still demand our attention.

And maybe our children will grow up in a world where they know that things really *are* OK. A world of *true* peace and love, where Moms and Dads really do come home every night; where each day is at least a little better than the last.

So may it be.

Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha. O God, return us to You, because right now, we’re not sure where we are going, and we need your help. *Chadeish yameinu k’kedem.* Renew our days as of old. Please, God, we implore you, make the world like it was on Monday. Do you think you could ever figure out a way to do that? If not, then all we ask is that you give *us* the strength to someday make the world *better* than it was on Monday. For this week we have seen some of the worst of it, and we’ve seen some of the best, too. Since it will never be the same again, we dare not fail in the sacred task of improving it.

Ken y’hi ratzon. So may this be God’s will...and from the bottom of my heart, Shabbat *Shalom*.