



Rosh Hashanah 2006

Fifth Anniversary Memorial to the World Trade Center Tragedy

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, the subway that took me to work in Brooklyn passed effortlessly and without incident under the World Trade Center around 8:30 in the morning. By the time I had emerged on the other side, some twenty-five minutes later, at my final destination at Kings Highway, our world had changed. American Airlines Flight 11 had already crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Minutes after I arrived at work, the second plane, United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the south Tower.

We didn't have a television in our office, so I went across the street to an appliance store and watched in horror and disbelief as the south tower collapsed. Meanwhile, United Airlines flight 93 had already crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. I felt fortunate to be spared the distinction of being an eyewitness, but by the time I had finished watching the video replays on television over and over again, I felt fairly traumatized and as if I had been one.

I did not know anybody who died in the buildings, but over the next few years I came to know several people who had been directly involved. As a therapist, I met shortly after with a man who worked at the buildings as an outside window washer. He was assigned elsewhere in the building that day and managed to get out, but he was devastated by the large number of people he knew who had died. This guy was a not the type to come into therapy and he only came that one time, just long enough to find out that his sleep problems and other symptoms were not unusual.

Some time later, for over a year, I had clients whose daughter had been on one of the upper floors and couldn't get out. She had worked for Cantor Fitzgerald - the name of a company many of us had never heard of before September 11, but now know all too well because of September 11.

Her parents feeling of desolation was overwhelming and enduring. On occasion, I felt a sense of secondary trauma with them. The mother's pain was particularly searing and debilitating. Gradually, she found a state of calm, even humor, and would increasingly divert her conversation from her loss to bickering with her husband, but the feeling wouldn't last and she would be overtaken again by inconsolable grief. It wasn't realistic to expect that I could take the pain away. But I could provide a safe place for it to be expressed and to normalize their anything-but-normal experience. Eventually, they decided to stop coming to treatment because it was just too difficult. While I regretted their leaving I also thought that this might have been a positive step in their healing process.

On the other hand, as a rabbi I was able to officiate at two weddings for individuals whose lives were moving on. The first was for a man who happened to be on vacation on September 11. Otherwise he would likely not have survived. He had also worked for Cantor Fitzgerald. A year or so later, I received a call from this man's mother-in-law, who had been divorced but was now getting remarried herself. The man she was marrying had become a widower when his wife died in one of the buildings. He had two older children from a first marriage and two younger children from the second. They all gathered round for the wedding. Despite the pain and the loss, there was lots of love in the room that day. The chirping sounds of the newest member of the extended family, a baby whose father had not been at the office on September 11, were a particularly welcome affirmation of life.

Each of us has our own distinct memories of that day and of the days that followed. We had feelings of fear and anxiety, sadness and grief, rage and anger, and also relief on being reunited with our loved ones. It took time to rediscover hope and safety.

We met as a community a week later to observe Rosh Hashanah. We were supposed to hold that event in this very building, but it was too badly damaged and, of course, inaccessible, so we had to relocate to midtown. What mattered most was just being together, to draw strength from our service and from each other.

I offered my thoughts on how the values of Humanistic Judaism could help us face the terrible tragedy that had occurred. I spoke about our conviction that this can not be part of any divine plan, however elusive, that a provident deity doesn't choose to spare some people and consign others to death. I said that what Humanistic Judaism does teach us is that life can be horribly cruel and painful without concern for justice or fairness. And yet what we can choose is to respond with fortitude, acceptance, courage and even heroism. Despite the adversity, despite the pain, we can choose to celebrate the gift of life and possibility, and the gift of life renewed.

A year later, in anticipation of our first anniversary memorial to 9-11, I had the idea that I might find some appropriate passages for that occasion in our own literature, particularly the books of the Biblical prophets, Ecclesiastes, Job, the psalms, and, of course, the Book of Lamentations, whose authors faced their own experiences of desolation and upheaval following the devastation and sacking of Jerusalem. As I reflected on these lines, I heard them speaking to us today, and I wove them together, with some interpolation of my own, to produce a new composition which I called, "A Modern Lamentation."

Here is a brief excerpt. "How lonely sits the city," it began, "that once was great among the nations! From on high, enemies stretched out their hands over all her precious things. Her young and her old have been slaughtered without mercy. We remember the day of our affliction, when panic and pitfall came upon the city, when her people fell into the hand of the foe. In all the squares there was wailing.

"The rulers of the earth did not believe nor did any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or enemy could enter the gates of the city. But the enemy has done what he purposed, he has carried out his threat; he has demolished without pity; and he has rejoiced over us.

"He sent fire deep into my bones. My strength was sapped. I am weary with my moaning, my eyes are spent with the weeping. Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician here? My groans are many and my heart is faint. I have forgotten what happiness is, and all that I had hoped for. How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day?"

And I answered, "Now hearken diligently, incline your ear. Let us learn to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom. We are but sojourners on earth. No person has the power to retain the spirit or authority over the day of death. As it says, for everything there is a season...a time to be born and a time to die. If a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let her remember that the days of darkness will be many."

And I asked, "How long shall the land mourn? How long shall the wicked exult? My soul waits - more than watchmen for the morning. May the day come soon when we can wipe away tears."

And then I read, "The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place. The city shall be rebuilt upon its mound. We will build houses and inhabit them; we will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. Our city will be a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm."

And I ended, "Comfort, comfort my people. Awake, awake, put on your strength, put on your beautiful garments, shake yourself from the dust, loose the bonds of your grief. And I added, "Let this be recorded for a generation to come. Peace, peace, to the far and near."

Five years have now passed. Our lives are moving forward. Just blocks from here our city is being rebuilt. Call it the power of denial or the power of healing, we are mostly less afraid. We may not be exactly optimistic but we are mostly more upbeat again. Perhaps nothing could be more symbolic of the passage of time than Hollywood's decision that we are ready for movies on the subject. Maybe, maybe not.

And so we gather once again for our Rosh Hashanah celebration to draw strength from our service and from each other. And to set aside this time as a memorial for the events that took place and for reflection upon the years that have passed.