

Rosh Hashanah 5787

ראש השנה תשפ"ז

A Civic Liturgy for 9/11: Reflections for the Days of Awe

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It was a week before Rosh Hashanah. Jewish communities all over the world had been preparing for the Days of Awe. Invitations and menus were set for holiday meals; rabbis' sermons had been written. But by 10:30 a.m. on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, it was clear that nothing would be as planned. Both towers of the World Trade Center had collapsed in massive plumes of ash after being struck by two hijacked airliners. Black smoke was rising from the Pentagon and the field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, where the other two planes had hit. Nearly 3,000 people had been killed, although we wouldn't know the exact number for some time. Fighter jets were flying over Manhattan. Israeli family and friends were trying to reach us on jammed cell phone lines to see if we were safe in New York.

I had just begun my final year of Rabbinical School at JTS. That morning, I was on my way to serve on the *beit din* for the conversion of a newly adopted baby. As I was hurrying to leave my apartment, I heard an early report on NPR about an explosion and fire on the upper floors of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. A few minutes later, I received a call from Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, my internship mentor at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (CBST). She was standing on Washington Street near the synagogue in the West Village, watching the fire in the North Tower, when she saw the second plane hit.

There was another *beit din* gathered at the *mikveh* for the conversion of a pregnant woman. Rabbi Roderick Young, then the Associate Rabbi at CBST, arrived for our *beit din*, shaken. He had seen the first plane flying too low over the West Village, and when he looked up at the Twin Towers as he descended into the subway, he saw the fiery hole in the first tower. We told him there had been a second plane. No one knew what was happening, but we all knew it was bad. It felt like a weighty day to cast one's fate in with the Jewish people.

Rabbi Young sat with me and my fellow intern, JTS student Tracy Nathan, and counseled us to be present to celebrate this

milestone with our congregant and his baby. When the father arrived, late and out of breath, he told us that he had emerged from the PATH train into chaos at the World Trade Center with his baby, who normally went to the daycare there. The bright blue sky was dark with dust, and bits of paper and ash were raining down. He said to himself, "I have to meet the rabbis," and went into the subway, getting on one of the last trains going uptown.

The weeks that followed saw ugly spikes in anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence, antisemitic conspiracy theories, beautiful acts of heroism in the face of tragedy, and people and communities uniting to comfort one another and offer healing. Soon the U.S. would be at war, the New York City skyline would be forever changed, and a previously unimaginable act of violence and destruction would become part of our collective memory.

For days after, we could smell the burning miles uptown. In New York and surrounding areas, Jewish communities gathered to register the shock and the horror and offer comfort and tried to account for every member. That night I joined the gathering at B'nai Jeshurun to sing and mourn. On Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Kleinbaum invited anyone who had been below Canal Street to *bench gomel*, and hundreds of people streamed forward to the bimah. That year, the endless sirens felt like cries of the shofar proliferating all over the city, emanating from the burning pile where the tallest buildings in the city used to be.

This year, when the first night of Rosh Hashanah falls on the 25th anniversary of 9/11, we reflect on the lessons from that day, on its inexorable connection to the season of the Days of Awe, and on the days and years since. The images from that day are imprinted on those of us who can remember where we were that morning. Yet 30 percent of Americans living today were born after 9/11. They never had to readjust to the new skyline. They never lived in a world where such horrific acts of terrorism were unimaginable. We have experienced too much

horror, too much revenge, too much loss. We also carry the legacy of those who reached toward each other to offer healing and comfort.

September 11 was a global and local tragedy that was mourned in both communities of faith and secular society. I found comfort and meaning in Jewish liturgy and in the popular and secular texts that became a sort of civic liturgy.

Former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins dedicated his poem "The Names" to the victims of September 11 and its survivors. The poem includes names of victims beginning with every letter of the alphabet, evoking the acrostics of liturgical poems. Its language is akin to the poems we reach for in a *Yizkor* or martyrology service.

Names etched on the head of a pin.
One name spanning a bridge, another undergoing a tunnel.
A blue name needled into the skin.
Names of citizens, workers, mothers and fathers,
The bright-eyed daughter, the quick son.
Alphabet of names in a green field.
Names in the small tracks of birds.
Names lifted from a hat
Or balanced on the tip of the tongue.
Names wheeled into the dim warehouse of memory.
So many names, there is barely room on the walls of the heart.

The recently deceased singer-songwriter Dolly Parton wrote a spiritual anthem in the wake of 9/11, which echoes many of the deep theological questions expressed and inspired by our High Holiday liturgy. We can imagine her song "Hello God in conversation with *Untaneh Tokef* or Leonard Cohen's "Who By Fire" its contemporary counterpart.

This old world has gone to pieces
Can we fix it?
Is there time?
Hate and violence just increases
We're so selfish, cruel, and blind
We fight and kill each other
In Your name defending You
Do You love some more than others?
We're so lost and confused
Hello, God?
Can You grant us
Love enough to make amends?
Is there still a chance

That we could start again?
Hello, God?

Bruce Springsteen's album *The Rising*, which included some songs written before September 11 and many written in its aftermath, explores deep themes of loss, grief, and the resolve to rebuild, carrying us through the varied emotions the *mahzor* evokes.

From "Into the Fire" by Bruce Springsteen:

May your strength give us strength
May your faith give us faith
May your hope give us hope
May your love give us love

In the days and weeks after 9/11, I volunteered as a chaplain in the family assistance center. I joined with multifaith efforts to counteract Islamophobia and anti-Muslim violence.

I found solace and meaning in my Jewish communities. These experiences shaped some of the lessons that I carry with me.

Seek connection. In community, we can find strength, start to digest the overwhelming events around us, and, through acts of love and kindness, start to rekindle hope.

Reach out. If you are worried that someone you know may be suffering or if they are in proximity to tragedy, reach out to them. Tell them they are in your thoughts.

Keep living. Make room for celebration. Seek out beauty and art. Sing. The Talmud tells us that when a funeral procession and a wedding procession meet, the wedding procession has right of way. We acknowledge the suffering around us with eyes open and hearts filled with compassion, and we continue to mark the daily and extraordinary moments in our lives.

The *Zichronot* section of the Rosh Hashanah *Musaf* service encourages us to remember in order to strengthen our covenant with God and our responsibility to our fellow humans. This remembering is not to inspire vengeance, but to evoke compassion and tenderness, spurring us to acts of lovingkindness.

As we turn to the texts and music of the Days of Awe on this somber anniversary, we can tuck these civic texts and others that speak to us into our mahzorim to accompany us into the new year.