

## **EREV ROSH HASHANAH 2001-5762 TRAGEDY**

Last Tuesday morning, as I sat in my safe kitchen and watched the TV screen as the World Trade Center fell, an old Yiddish proverb jumped into my head: “Human beings plan, God laughs.” God wasn’t laughing; but I did feel that for a moment, the veil of denial had been lifted for us all.

We plan as if there is going to be a tomorrow. We live each day as if our lives will go on forever. We function as if we had all the time in the world. And much of the time, we get lucky. Our plans unfold as we had wished. The check really is in the mail; the babysitter shows up; the newspaper gets delivered; the baby arrives on its due date. We teach our children to be safe; we say, hold my hand when you cross the street, make sure you look both ways, wear your seat belt, just say no to drugs.

But as I prepared to leave my house last Tuesday to run up to the supermarket, I stood looking at my alarm system, and said to myself, “Why bother?” What protection does a house alarm offer in a world like ours? And then I remembered the example of my teacher Rabbi Jakob Petuchowski *zichrono livracha* and how he would plan. Every year for umpteen years, he flew from Cincinnati, Ohio to Laredo, Texas to be the rabbi of the tiny Reform congregation for the high holidays. Every year at the end of the holidays, before leaving Laredo, he would announce his sermon topics for the next high holidays. I used to admire his planning and feel inadequate ever to emulate it. Besides, I used to rationalize, how do you know what topic will be relevant a year hence? But the truth is that Jakob’s advance planning was always relevant because he preached about the universal themes of these penitential holidays. He preached about how to live in a world where human beings plan and God laughs. So it is especially in the wake of tragedy on these holidays, when we feel that so much is beyond our control that we remind ourselves that we do have a plan, a spiritual one that has sustained us throughout the ages.

The first part of our plan includes taking an accounting of our souls and repenting our sins. Why respond to the tragedy of life by turning inward? It would seem that a more understandable response to tragedy might be external hatred and outward revenge. Certainly those were the immediate feelings of many of us last week. And yet we are told to turn inward and investigate ourselves instead.

Why not indulge in hatred and demand revenge? The late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach had an answer to that question. He was a folksinger born in Europe who came here from Vienna as a teen because of the Nazis. A few years ago, he returned to Vienna and to several other cities in Austria and Germany to give concerts. While there, he met with Austrian and German non-Jews as well as with Jews. Someone asked why he did it: “Don’t you hate them,” he was asked. His answer was: “If I had two souls, I would devote one to hating them. But since I only have one, I don’t want to waste it hating.”

Rabbi Harold Kushner says he has always been uncomfortable with the verse from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm when it says, “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine

enemies” – he says it sounds like getting even with your enemies is the goal. But he felt better when he heard how Reb Zalman Schacter understood that verse.

Once a year, Reb Schacter throws an imaginary dinner party to which, in his mind, he invites all the people he is angry with, everyone who has hurt him or disappointed him in the past year. In the course of that imaginary dinner, he goes around the table and thanks each of his guests for what they have taught him. Some have taught him not to expect too much of people because most people will put their own needs and their own well being ahead of other peoples’ needs. And he thanks them for that important lesson.

His philosophy has become, “When a friend makes a mistake, the mistake is still a mistake and the friend is still a friend.” Some of his guests have taught him lessons about himself, driving him to ask himself why he was so bothered by something they did. What is it about him, his needs, his vulnerabilities that made the encounter so upsetting to him? And is it something he would want to change about himself to make himself less vulnerable to being upset? When he has gone around the table, thanking everyone on his enemies list for the lessons they have taught him, he is amazed at how much better he feels, cleansed of all that anger and resentment, able to maintain pleasant relationships even with flawed unreliable friends and relatives. And he thanks God for preparing a table before him in the presence of his enemies. Reb Schacter doesn’t let hatred destroy his soul; he uses it as an opportunity for looking within and bettering his life.

This leads us to the second part of our spiritual plan. You see, by looking within and taking an accounting of our souls, we see that we, too have the potential for committing evil acts and causing tragedy. In his book about the Gulag Archipelago, Solzhenitzen wrote, “If only it were so simple: if only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?” It is better to understand what human beings are capable of, what we are capable of. The songwriter Leonard Cohen once wrote a piece called “All there is to know about Adolph Eichman”:

Eyes:

Hair:

Weight:

Height:

Distinguishing features: None

Number of fingers: Ten

Number of toes: Ten

Intelligence: Medium

“What did you expect?” Cohen writes. “Talons? Oversize incisors? Green saliva?”

Cohen would maintain that Eichman seemed quite average, not particularly evil. Yet we know that Eichman gave in to the power of evil within him. Our plan tells us: Don't give in to evil. These holidays tell us: Love the good within yourself. Love your life. Live as if you are really alive; don't wait or you might not get the chance again. Rabbi Jack Riemer expressed this idea in a piece he called "**The View From the Grandstand**":

"O God all these good seats in the grandstand. It's so comfortable to be a fan. Sitting here in the stadium, I play no ball, I fight no fights. Down on the field, they're making mistakes. I could easily advise a sounder, more successful strategy. Up here in the stands, it's easier to spot boners on the field. Up here, I'm safe; nobody can say I blunder or boggle or make a single error. But God, they can say that the reason I never make errors is that I don't go out on the field. I do wish I could be more content with this role of spectator. I wish that being an observer of the game would keep me satisfied. But I'm nagged by the thought that maybe I should be down there on the field, mixing it up with all I've got. Give me, O God, a spirit of adventure, a spirit of boldness, so strong that I will enter the lists against some of the injustices that I see. Give me such an impulse to support good causes that I will forget to be cautious. Grant me the willingness to invest whatever energy I have in deeds that will bring strength to the weak and help to the sorrowing. May I have such warmth of heart that I will champion those who need help."

This is all part of the plan: taking an accounting of your soul leads to repentance and repentance leads to new choices. This plan requires you not just to feel differently and see things differently but also to act differently. If you have been sitting on the sidelines of life, putting your energy into helping the sorrowing demonstrates how repentance can transform your life. In a famous Midrash, Elijah the prophet is standing at the gates of Rome. All about him, people are in rags, sick and starving. Elijah is bandaging the lepers one by one. A person approaches him and asks, "Pardon me, but aren't you the Mashiach ben David, the Messiah, son of David?" "Why yes," answers Elijah. "Well," continues the person, "In a world so full of pain and suffering, so surely in need of redemption, what are you waiting for?" Elijah lifts a fresh roll of bandages and thrusts it toward the stranger: "Indeed, and what are *you* waiting for?"

In the aftermath of the World Trade Center tragedy, people didn't wait. Some gave their own lives in an attempt to save others. Thousands of people donated blood. One of the most touching calls that I received was from Israel from my friend Varda. What a turn this was, I thought, to get a call from Tel Aviv asking if *I* was all right. I told her: Today Americans know better what it feels like to be an Israeli. Israelis live with this kind of fear and uncertainty every day. They understand from sad experience that the only way to respond is by behaving as a community of human beings. Our plan has a lot to teach the world about surviving tragedy. The answer lies in this Hasidic story of two people wandering alone and lost in the forest. "I am lost," said the first: "I am glad to find you. Can you tell me the right road?" The second replied, "I too am

lost. I do not know the right road. But let us join hands and continue our journey together.” When we are lost, we join hands.

Our plan challenges us to take a roll of bandages and wrap it around the world and even around God. Rabbi Arnold Turetsky tells the story of going to the hospital and sitting with a man from out of town whose wife was seriously ill. The man sat there day and night, next to her bed, with nothing to do and no one to talk to. Rabbi Turetsky felt for him and did what he could to give him some strength. The man said to him, “Rabbi, I am not a believer. I have not been inside a synagogue for many years.” Rabbi Turetsky replied: “If you would like to come to services this year, we would be glad to have you. You wouldn’t need a ticket. You can just tell the usher you are a guest of mine.” The man said, “Look rabbi, whatever I have to ask of God I can ask right here.” Rabbi Turetsky said: “That’s true, but maybe God has something to ask of you.” Because our plan is actually God’s plan; and what God would ask of us is simple: to know that the road to God goes through us. To know, as Buber would say, that God is found in our relationships. To know, as Elie Wiesel says, that there is more than one path leading to God but that the surest goes through joy and not through tears. Our plan, God’s plan, reminds us that eternity is present in every moment and that is how we should approach our lives, not despite but because of the tragedy of life. William James reminds us most clearly of what we know but had forgotten: “Any spirituality of joy is a spirituality of tragedy.”

We plan and God laughs, says the Yiddish proverb. There is another Yiddish proverb that relates to our plan: “Heaven and hell can both be had in this world.” We had forgotten that truth for a moment. We had lived like it wasn’t so. We had forgotten that if you want to bring heaven to earth, you have to have a plan. After God had rejected Cain’s sacrifice, God said to Cain: “Why are you so upset? And why is your face fallen? Isn’t this the way things are: If you do good, you’ll be elevated, and if you don’t do what’s good, sin crouches at the door waiting and eager to get you. But you, you can rule over it.” That, too, is part of the plan: We can rule over it and have known that since the days of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

The Midrash speaks of Adam at the termination of the first Sabbath when the sun sank and darkness began to set in. Terrified, Adam thought, “Surely indeed the darkness shall bruise me.” God inspired Adam with knowledge and made him find two stone flints. One was marked with the name *afelah*, which is darkness; upon the other was inscribed the name *mavet*, which is death. With inspired knowledge, Adam struck the flints against each other. The friction produced a spark with which he lit a torch. It comforted him through the night, and in the morning Adam saw the rising of the sun. He then observed: “This is the way of the world. Out of darkness and death, a spark is created. There is darkness and there is light, the fear of death and the hope of survival.”