

## **This Is Our Darkest Hour: We Shall Overcome**

For Rosh Hashanah Evening

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I customarily begin my high holy days sermons with my best jokes for the New Year. To my delight, I've been told by more than a few members of this congregation how much you look forward to hearing what I've come up with next...but not tonight. No one is in a joking mood. And what we must talk about tonight and tomorrow morning is not conducive to humor.

Not unlike Dicken's *Tale of Two Cities*, tonight and tomorrow I want to talk with you about New York and Jerusalem, about America and Israel.

Since September 11, every American knows who is our one and only true friend in the Middle East. We know who declared a national day of mourning in solidarity with us. We know who danced in the streets at the sight of our pain. Since September 11, the United States and Israel have truly become kin. Our two countries are now brethren who have always shared the same values, but now share the same pain.

This is a time of "stern sobriety" for America. No words can capture the horror of the images we saw. No words can do justice to the anguish and wrenching heartbreak we feel. No words can express the magnitude of the trauma we have suffered. We live in a post-holocaust world, a post-Columbine world -- and now a new term has forced itself into our lexicon -- a post Twin Towers world.

Before September 11, America thought it was invincible. We are accustomed to the carnage of war taking place on another continent, far away from our shores. Never in our wildest imagination did we conceive that ground zero could ever take place on American soil.

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001 -- a day that will live in infamy alongside December 7, 1941 -- all these assumptions, along with our now obsolete concept of what constitutes national security, disintegrated in the rubble of what was once the world trade center.

We have looked straight into the face of the apocalypse and it terrified us. And now we are frightened about what might be next. And what makes it even worse is that, even though we have modeled calm and control for our children, they are frightened about what might be next too. The possibility of terrorism is now part and parcel of American

daily life. Danger is a variable that must be factored into every equation.

This is also a time of "stern sobriety" for Israel and for all who love her. Israel is once again under savage terrorist attack by the Palestinian authority and its extremist allies. Through lethal force against Israeli soldiers, police and – especially -- civilians, the Palestinians seek to compel Israel's unilateral retreat from the west bank and Gaza, from the temple mount and from east Jerusalem.

Until last Tuesday, we had no idea what a suicide bombing attack was really all about. It was a pure abstraction to us. We sympathized with Israel, but we didn't really get it. Some of us made excuses for the terrorists, citing Palestinian grievances. Some of us criticized Israel's pre-emptive strikes against known Palestinian terrorists. But now, we get it.

Now we truly comprehend what the people of Israel have been going through. Our national nightmare is the very same nightmare as theirs. Israelis have not known one moment of rest, one moment to let down their guard for over one full year. There have been 66 suicide bomber attacks, exacting an enormous emotional toll. And since Israel is a small country, everyone knows at least one person who has been killed or grievously wounded.

Now, we get it. No matter how just the cause, the premeditated murder of innocents can never, ever be morally justified. It is heinous. It is despicable. It has nothing to do with justice, everything to do with vengeance. It must be unequivocally condemned.

Now we finally get it. And our hearts go out to the people of Israel.

As a nation, as a community, as families, as individuals, this is truly our darkest hour. We are afraid that we cannot bear what we have to bear. After having lost 350 comrades, fire commissioner Thomas von Essen spoke truth when he said, "The fire department will recover, but I don't know how."

But that is only the way we feel today. It does not dictate what strength and what resolve our spirit may find tomorrow. A Chassidic folk saying that I learned in my youth holds new resonance for me now: "the world is a narrow bridge. The essential thing is not to be afraid."

But the loss of life has been so staggering, so incomprehensible. How can we stand it? Our elders, the men and women who fought in World War II, will guide us. Those of you sitting in this sanctuary who lived through pearl harbor and d-day, who rebuilt this country and rebuilt Europe, you will teach us how to survive this.

The ghastly, horrific images we witnessed that day continue to haunt us and give some of us nightmares. How are we going to exorcise the demons of those images?

The passage of time and opportunities for catharsis will help. This fall Temple Sinai will become a facilitator site for rainbows, a support group for grieving children. And we are looking to soon provide posttraumatic stress disorder support groups here at your temple.

We must actively replace images of horror with images of beauty. As so many letters to the editor of the *New York Times* observed, the twin towers are gone but the statue of liberty still stands. Let us think of that image in our minds' eye.

But how are we going to live with the possible threat of terrorism? Our Israeli brethren will teach us how. After all, they've had to live with this, in some fashion, for 53 years.

In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, an Israeli writes, "in your shock and despair, remember what Israelis have learned so well: while there are wounds that never heal, we cannot let those who hate and kill us to conquer our minds or our lives. Life will go on, and that will be our moral victory."

Although it has been 53 years since the United Nations divided the land of Palestine into two countries, one Jewish and one Arab, the Arab world remains openly hostile to the existence of a Jewish homeland in the middle east. The Arab world and its supporters still actively seek to deligitimate the right of Israel to exist at every turn, of which the campaign to brand Israel a racist state at the united nation's world conference on racism two weeks ago is the latest and most pernicious example.

Israel desperately needs our political solidarity and our emotional support. The American Jewish community must get our act together and come together on behalf of our Jewish brethren in Israel. "Our task now," says Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the reform movement, is "to embrace Israel, to hold it near, and in so doing, to reconnect our future with our most sacred past."

Since Camp David, the Israeli government and public have demonstrated their readiness to make painful compromises for the sake of peace. Is the Palestinian leadership prepared to discuss not just what they will get but also what they will give up for the sake of peace? Will Arafat educate and ready his people on the street for peace and co-existence?

Only time will tell. In the meantime, the Israeli people have resolved to hang tough. They are determined never to reward Palestinian terrorism. Without falling into a sense of hopelessness, they are reconciled to taking the long view.

It makes no difference whether you are a religious Jew, a cultural Jew, or a secular Jew, Israel has the power to sweep you off your feet!

One cannot fail to be awed by the land where our ancestors walked, amazed by the sight of Jews of every color and nationality living together, mesmerized by the sound of a vibrant Hebrew language. Israel is the national homeland to which our people have prayed to return for 2,000 years. Israel is our collective dream come true.

It is incumbent upon each of us to reassess our own personal relationship to the state and to the people of Israel. At this moment, Israel is being tested by her enemies... and so are we. Neither our apathy toward Israel nor our ambivalence toward Israel will do.

So what can American Jewry do? There are two concrete political actions we can take:

**First**, we can publicly hold Palestinian leaders morally accountable for their strategy of terrorism and urge the united states congress to impose economic and political sanctions upon the Palestinian authority until it implements a complete ceasefire and returns to the principle of negotiated settlement with Israel.

**Secondly**, we can unequivocally condemn the appalling Palestinian practice of deliberately pushing children and teenagers to the front lines of the *intifadah* in order to exploit the inevitable casualties for purposes of propaganda.

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, this national nightmare has brought our country together. On September 10<sup>th</sup>, our country was morally adrift, unsure of its values. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, our country rediscovered its values.

I am thinking of the heroic defiance of those on doomed united airlines flight 93, the courage of those fleeing the twin towers who stopped to help others, the valor and self-sacrifice of firefighters, police officers and emergency medical workers who deliberately put themselves in harms way.

Such inspirational deeds have awoken a new spirit of patriotism among us. They have rekindled our concern for community and the common good. They have reignited our yearning to be of help to others. They have reminded us -- especially my generation, the baby-boomer generation --that there are principles worth dying for, there are causes more important than our own personal fulfillment.

Our individual and collective response to this ghastly nightmare shall be the test and the measure of our humanity. What shall we choose: to curse the darkness or to bless the light? I hope and pray that each of us will choose to bless the light!

What balm can possibly heal us from overwhelming evil? Overwhelming love and compassion, overwhelming courage and concern is the only solace that can heal such a pain as ours. That is worth repeating. The only solace that can heal such a pain as ours is overwhelming love and compassion, overwhelming courage and concern.

Over these next ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, let us reach out to those who are in pain and in need. Let us continue to donate blood, to drive more courteously, to wait in line more patiently, speak more gently to each other, to engage in many more random acts of lovingkindness.

My dear friends,

**We will recover.**

**We will put ourselves back together.**

**We will rebuild our lives and the lives of those we care about.**

**We shall dry every child's tear.**

**We shall mend every spouse's broken heart.**

**We shall be strong and we shall be courageous.**

**We shall overcome.**