

This is Our Darkest Hour: The Essential Thing Is Not To Be Afraid

For Rosh Hashanah Morning

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Rabbis often quip about how the high holy days never come at the right time. At first blush, this didn't feel like the right time to be celebrating a new year either. However, on second thought, our high holy days may be precisely the catharsis we need.

This is a time of "stern sobriety" for America. We grieve for 6000 human beings, an unimaginable loss of precious human life. We mourn for the death of our innocence, our sense that life was safe and predictable. America will never be the same...and neither will we.

This national catastrophe has provoked a profound existential crisis in us. We are stunned by the realization of how uncertain tomorrow is for ourselves and our loved ones. It has utterly shattered our construct of the way the world works. It has brought home to us as never before the sobering reality of random chance. At any given moment, anyone of us can just happen to be in the right place or in the wrong place.

This disaster has exposed for all of us to see the powerful role that denial plays in our daily lives. We go about our business thinking that nothing bad could ever happen to us. Someone else, perhaps, but not me.

We behave as if we're going to live forever. We imagine there will always be another time to get our papers in order. There will always be another time to say everything we want to say. There will always be another time for that kiss, that hug, that holding of hands.

Tuesday's madness shocked us into the realization that another time may never come. You can mundanely board a plane or go to your office and never come home.

This is also a time of "stern sobriety" for every Jew in the entire world. The fight between Israel and the Palestinians is not just about the conflict between two different nationalisms. It is not about anti-Zionism. It is about anti-Semitism. It is about the Arab

world's hatred of Jews.

Hidden behind anti-Zionist rhetoric, the truth of this hatred sometimes slips out. At the United Nations world conference on racism, some Arab groups distributed anti-Semitic literature, including posters of Jews with big noses and bloody fangs.

Syrian president Bashar Assad greeted Pope John Paul II in Damascus last may by comparing the Israelis' treatment of Palestinians to the Jews' "betraying and torturing of Jesus."

After the breakdown of the Camp David peace talks, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, spiritual leader of Hamas, told worshippers at Friday prayers: "have no mercy on the Jews, no matter where they are, in any country. Fight them where they are. Wherever you meet them, kill them."

The Arab Middle East is rife with anti-Semitism. Egypt is the largest producer of anti-Jewish literature in the world. Many Arab governments sanction state-sponsored anti-Semitism. The Arab world teaches anti-Jewish hatred through school textbooks, government-controlled newspapers, and Friday sermons in mosques calling upon the Muslim faithful to "eradicate the Jews from Palestine."

The Arab world continues to scoff at the Jewish attachment to Jerusalem and the temple mount and to "deny, trivialize or laud" the holocaust. Appearing in the Egyptian-government-sponsored newspaper al Akhbar was the following statement: "thanks to Hitler, of blessed memory, who, on behalf of the Palestinians, revenged in advance against the most vile criminals on the face of the earth. Although we do have a complaint against him for his revenge on them was not enough."

In the 21st century, Arab anti-Semitism has superseded Christian anti-Semitism as the most dangerous threat to Jews around the world.

As I discussed last night, Israel needs American Jews and the rest of world Jewry to stand by its side right now. But American Jews and the rest of world Jewry need Israel to be by our side as well: there must be at least one secure refuge for Jews of every color and nationality. Israel provides that safe haven.

There must be at least one sovereign state that will protect Jewish lives. Israel saves Jews. Had the state of Israel existed in the 1940's, I daresay that the 6 million Jews who perished in the holocaust might still be alive today.

There must be at least one place on earth where our Jewish holidays, language, and symbols prevail in the public sphere. In the diaspora, that is, outside the land of Israel, our minority Jewish culture must always accommodate itself to the majority Christian culture. But in Israel, Jewish culture is the majority culture. Even if you don't observe Shabbat, you still feel that it is Shabbat, in Israel.

There must be one place where it feels easy and natural to be a Jew. Here in America there are times when it feels lonely to be a Jew. It cannot be denied. But in Israel, you never feel alone as a Jew. When you are in Israel you feel at home.

For all these reasons and more, Israel deserves an esteemed and valued place within our Jewish lives. Her survival is important to every Jew in the world. Her survival and her flourishing is important to you!

The Talmud teaches, "You never know which day will be your last." I used to think this statement was somewhat morbid. In a post twin towers world, I recognize that it is not at all morbid. It is realistic. It is pragmatic. It is a catalyst to appropriate action.

We cannot heal from this tragedy, there is no moving forward, unless we forthrightly acknowledge that, yes, we are fragile, vulnerable, and finite beings. This realization will not destroy us. It will empower us. This axiom of the human condition will not lead us to despair. It will motivate us to a renewed urgency to embrace life fully, with all our being.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis observes, "The art of living successfully consists of being able to hold two opposite ideas in tension at the same time. First, to make long-term plans as if we were going to live forever; and, second, to conduct ourselves daily as if we were going to die tomorrow...life's greatest achievement is the continual remaking of yourself so that at last you know how to live." Oy! But do we know how to live? The reality of random chance and our vulnerability to it compels us to rethink our own personal priorities in life.

Soon we are going to return to work and some sort of normalcy. But will normalcy mean that we still won't make the time to spend with our children and our spouses? Will normalcy mean that we still won't put any boundaries on our work obligations? Will the return to normalcy mean the return to a life consumed with regrets?

Let us remember: Life is lost not only by dying. Life is lost when we waste the precious moment, the here and now, thinking we'll get to it later. Life is lost when we take our wives, our husbands, our children for granted. Life is lost when we hurry through it, refusing to slow down and smell the roses. More important than putting our papers in order is that we put our priorities in order.

Sixty years ago, as the Nazi nightmare was unfolding in Europe, American Jewry was painfully slow to rise in defense of our Jewish brethren across the Atlantic Ocean. We did too little and we acted too late.

Sixty years later, will we make the same mistake? Will we once again respond with complacency and indifference to the suffering of Jews elsewhere? Or will we finally recognize that an attack on Jews anywhere is an attack on Jews everywhere?

The Al Aksa intifadah is a premeditated act of Palestinian armed aggression against the

Jewish state. It is a calculated effort to force Israel to make all the painful compromises and the Palestinians none. It is a cold-blooded strategy designed to take from Israel through violence and propaganda what it could not win from Israel at the negotiating table.

For those of us who care deeply about Israel, this is no time for apathy. For those of us who feel distanced from Israel, this is no time for your ambivalence. This is a time when American Jews need to stand up and speak up for Israel.

While it is not like us reform Jews to speak with one voice about anything, the urgency of the hour demands something more from us:

It requires our unity.

As Israel defends itself against brutal Palestinian aggression and yearns for a partner for peace, it is the responsibility of every Jew to support Israel with all your heart and soul. "Some moments define who you are as a Jew. This moment is one of them."

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

It is not enough for us to feel close to Israel. We must become more actively and concretely engaged with Israel and we need to foster more face to face contact between American and Israeli Jews.

In fifteen years or less, the Zionist dream will come true. Israel will become the home of the largest Jewish community in the world, surpassing American Jewry. It is crucially important that we build strong institutional and human relationships between American and Israeli Jews.

In light of the many times that our Rabbi Emeritus, Morrison Bial, took the Christian clergy of summit to Israel, and in celebration of our upcoming 50th anniversary, I therefore propose that Temple Sinai "adopt" a sister reform congregation in Israel. The time is nigh for American Jewry, for this Temple Sinai, to forge a new and more honest relationship with Israel, to get to know and to appreciate the living Israel, the real Israel, in all its sometimes bewildering complexity.

Secondly, the American Jewish community can financially support the many Israeli-Palestinian institutions that promote pro-peace and pro-coexistence attitudes and endeavor to build bridges between the new generations of Israeli and Palestinian youth.

One such well-regarded organization is interns for peace. I call to your attention that the American founder of interns for peace, Dr. Bruce Cohen, a reform rabbi, and Mr. Hisham Kullab, the Arab founder of the Palestinian branch of interns for peace, will be our guest speakers at shabbat services on Friday, October 5th.

I hope you will mark October 5th on your calendar and make a point of coming to services that evening to hear both a Jewish and a Palestinian perspective on the future of peaceful co-existence between Palestinians and Israelis.

As a nation, as a community, as families, as individuals, this is truly our darkest hour. We feel overwhelmed by the sobs and screams of our friends and colleagues who have been robbed of their loved ones. We feel that a return to normalcy is an insurmountable task. We feel distraught, inconsolable and beside ourselves with grief. But as I said last night, this is only the way we feel today. It does not dictate what strength and what resolve our spirit may find tomorrow.

But there are so many spouses, so many children, so many families to be consoled. How can we mitigate their awful pain? We will hold them in our arms. We will cry with them. And when they fall, we will pick them up. We will help them put one foot in front of the other. We will help them to take one day at a time.

The road ahead is not going to be easy. The task is daunting. The journey will be long and it will be painful. Once the magnitude of the losses truly sink in, we shall be tempted on many an occasion to allow our fear, our grief, our fury to get the best of us.

But let there be no mistake about it. We can choose not to let our fear overwhelm us, not to let our grief paralyze us, not to let our fury consume us. We can choose not to give terrorists the power to intimidate our lives.

One week ago today, America was the victim of overwhelming evil. Since that awful day, the American people have responded with overwhelming goodness. As Monsignor Harahan said at the interfaith service last Wednesday,

"the shadow cast by human hatred cannot withstand the power of our human hearts to love." that is worth repeating. "the shadow cast by human hatred cannot withstand the power of our human hearts to love."

At the same interfaith service, reverend southern observed that the opposite of love is not hate but fear. Her comment reminded me of a Chassidic folk saying that I learned in my youth. It holds new resonance for me now: "the world is a narrow bridge. The essential thing is not to be afraid."

My dear friends, we are Americans and we are Jews. We shall find the strength to endure. We shall dig down deep into the well of character of our American heritage and our Jewish heritage.

We shall not be afraid.

We shall be courageous.

We shall be compassionate.

We shall be strong.

We shall find the wisdom and the grace that the urgency of the hour require.