

DVAR TORAH -- REFLECTIONS ON THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11

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On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, I may have been the last person in New York City to know what had happened to the Twin Towers. I was home with Alex that day. He was two at the time. Our plan was to go and vote in the primary election; it was the end of Mayor Giuliani's term in office. Before that, we had taken out boxes of Alex's clothes from the past winter, so we could find things to take on our upcoming trip to Minnesota. It would be the celebration of my father's 65th birthday, and then Rosh Hashanah, and I was the rabbi and cantor for the small group that my family was a part of. Alex and I were sitting on the floor of his bedroom, trying on long sleeve shirts. The phone rang several times in the other room starting around maybe 10:00. I didn't feel like getting up.

Then, maybe around 11, I finally answered. It was Laurie calling from her office in midtown Manhattan. I started to tell her something Alex had done that morning -- she interrupted and said to me something like, "Did you hear what happened? It's the biggest terrorist attack ever." I assumed she meant some horrible thing happened in Israel; that's what terrorism meant to me. But she told me about the World Trade Center.

Laurie had heard after being delayed in a stopped subway car, which was unusual but not unheard of. When she got off, the buses in midtown were also slow due to the extra people. At a couple of stops someone got on and told about the planes crashing into the towers, but no one believed. It was even hard to believe as people were gathered on the street watching TVs in the windows of electronics stores. Laurie didn't believe what she had heard until she got to a place on Lexington Avenue, where she could see the smoke with her own eyes.

The whole day was surreal, but of course it was the most real thing of all. Against the backdrop of something you could hardly imagine -- not just an attack, but a non sequitor; something so large, something dropped from another reality -- we did the human-sized things you would do. We talked about being safe. Laurie's office was a couple blocks from the UN, and across the street from the Israeli consulate, and for the time being people at work were being told to stay inside but away from the windows on that side of the building. We checked in a couple more times, but the phone circuits into the city were soon overloaded. I called Laurie's sisters and other family members

to reassure them that we were okay, and eventually found out that Laurie and my sister Ellen, also working in midtown, would walk home to Queens since mass transit was shut down.

Of everyone in America I may have spent the least amount of time watching television that day. Burning buildings and scenes of death and destruction would make their impression on a two-year old. I turned the set on briefly, and there was a view from one of the network's cameras on top of a building, and Alex looked and said, "Helicopter." I immediately turned off the set. We went out for a walk in the neighborhood; I pushed his stroller, tried to make phone calls but couldn't get a line, while F-16s occasionally flew over us on a clear, beautiful day.

I didn't see anything with my own eyes for another day. I drove to Kids R Us for some of the clothes to replace the warm things Alex had outgrown -- if there would even be flights anytime soon. From the Van Wyck Expressway, on a bridge just beyond Shea Stadium, I saw the smoke where you used to see the towers. Radio stations of all kinds were playing only patriotic music for days; we taught some to Alex. His version of one song was "Gonna Bless America." I told friends about it and said, "Alex is already a Reconstructionist, a follower of Mordechai Kaplan."

I had an obligation for the holy days, as the leader of a congregation, but was it safe to fly? To make that decision for our baby? Plus I felt strange thinking about leaving New York. With the whole world focused there, it felt like I was a part of history. I hadn't lived through any truly historic event before. Being anyplace else, how could that matter? It would be like disappearing.

We eventually got a flight, and driving through quiet, cool, cloudy St. Paul on the weekend did seem like being far from where God's eyes were focused. But when Rosh Hashanah began, on Monday evening, September 17, I felt differently. It was comforting to have a place we needed to be. I remembering saying three things to the congregation of maybe 40 people, gathered in the appropriately named Jewish War Veterans room at the St. Paul Jewish Community Center. One was: Thank God we have *this* place to be -- to be together with people we know and care about, with our families; thank God for two days when we are already supposed to be thinking about right and wrong, good and evil, and the destiny of the world.

I said, or maybe I just remembering thinking, that now that our country was declaring itself in a struggle not just with an enemy, but with evil itself -- how could one man, the president of the United States, or even one great country, bear that burden? To take on all of evil, only God is great enough, and good enough, at least at the moment. We

need these two days to hide from that struggle before we enter it too soon. To humble ourselves, to give to God the fight against evil, to trust it to God at least for a time. While we try to sort out what our role is, and how to equip ourselves to live up to that mission. Which is, of course, the mission we already had, even the day before 9/11.

The last thing I said was: look at the power of the nineteen hijackers -- how many they killed, how they have brought the entire world to attention, to a complete halt. Yet we even in this room, a tiny congregation, are twice their number. Surely we can do at least double that amount of good. That would mean to bring blessing to thousands of lives. To radiate a focus of peace and justice that would reverberate just as much around the world.

This Shabbat, our remembrance of the tenth anniversary of 9/11 coincides with **פרשת כי תצא**. The opening words say, "When you go out to war against your enemies." The Torah says when, not if. The Torah says, you have enemies. The Torah says, you will at certain times be making war against them.

9/11 was the work of enemies. Enemies of America, enemies of freedom, enemies of Jews. For some, the lament of 9/11 is tied up in the decade of war that we are still involved in, and the focus of this year's anniversary is a prayer for peace. The enemy is war and hate, and terror in all forms.

To which I say *amen*...but. The Torah reminds us that enemies are real. Some are not merely adversaries, but they are like Amalek, whose war is mentioned at the end our *parasha* -- whose cause desecrates God and is a blot on humanity, who kill and maim the weak and innocent. We were attacked. We were hurt. We, because of who we are and what we represent. The path that will bring peace to America, or to the Middle East, includes a reckoning with the fact of enemies. Enemies who cannot be persuaded, or incentivized, or bought off.

So my contribution to the pamphlet for tomorrow's gathering for peace at the labyrinth in Nashua was the evening prayer we say each day. We ask God to spread a sukkah of peace over us, and then we list all the real things that are in the way of peace. Including enemies, including the past, including Satan, the force of evil. No prayer for peace is real that wishes away the intractability of enemies. It is hard work to bring peace out of war. As the famous Israeli song, *Shir L'Shalom*, puts it: you can't simply whisper a prayer.

כִּי־תֵצֵא לַמִּלְחָמָה עַל־אֹיְבֶיךָ *kee tay-tzay la-milchamah al oyvecha* "When you go out to war against your enemies." As you may have read on your study sheet, the word *tay-tzay*, "go out", comes with a lot of other associations. Those who go out are like Moshe, who went out from the easy life of Pharaoh's home, saw the realities of slavery, understood a larger world, and was changed forever. The going-out from Egypt was of course an experience of danger and fear, of possibility, of growth and learning. Going out is maturing.

The United States has been at war for these ten years, attacking enemies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places that shield the al-Qaeda network. But have we grown? Have we learned or matured? Do we know more about the larger world?

I have to say and it may surprise some of you, but I was in favor of the war in Iraq when we began it, even with the doubts about the weapons. As I said, enemies are real and war is sometimes necessary. But has the United States learned, or grown? No. We have not.

We -- not just our leaders, but you and I -- we haven't learned about Islam and the Muslim world. I'll speak for myself: I don't really know any more about Islam than I did ten years ago. I don't have any more Muslim friends. I have tried to reach out to Muslim colleagues, clerics -- but not as hard as I could. Our government's engagement with the Islamic world, other than through fighting, has been shallow and almost laughable, at the level of PR.

We haven't grown past very many of the illnesses of our own country. *We*, most of us, or most of us in more affluent segments of America, didn't really go to war. We continued to consume, rather than invest in coming together as an American community, or even fund the wars out of our own pockets. And here we are with so many out of work, fueled in part by disastrous new forms of finance cooked up where? On Wall Street -- just a few blocks from the ruins of the Twin Towers.

We are mired in the same fights between liberals and conservatives as we were in the '80s and '90s, as if nothing has changed. You can say the president hates America, you can compare a political opponent to a terrorist, as if there was no risk to that, as if nothing were at stake.

The wars we are in now are like a movie, or a bill we have to think about paying some day. We didn't really go to war, we haven't felt danger or fear from the outside for a while. So we have not enlarged our vision as a nation. We have not grown, let alone

been transformed.

I hope the anniversary tomorrow will be, first of all, a day that passes safely. We need to take the day to reflect on these things, because we are in a difficult situation as a nation, because of what we have and haven't done since 9/11. If leaders and citizens take to heart any of these lessons, we can change our path. If we truly feel the weight of this anniversary, then we won't say that our problems are too complex, or wait until after the election. We don't have long before the power of 9/11 to move us slips away.

What I remember as much as anything from the day of 9/11 was how quickly the rescue and cleanup began. Alex went to bed that night, and Laurie and I turned on the TV and could see what was happening. Already in the afternoon, there was a perimeter cordoned off, there were ambulances and fire trucks from other places, there were trucks hauling the rubble. There could have been pandemonium, or riots, or paralysis. Instead, the very best of human organization was in place immediately, in service of the very best of human compassion.

Sometime in October or early November 2001, after Sukkot and Simchat Torah, I decided to go down toward Ground Zero. A part of me felt that though I had been in New York on 9/1, I hadn't really been a part of it. At the time, I actually had a workspace in Manhattan not far from downtown, where I went for some hours a week for a project I was working on. I had this strange feeling that I wished I had been there on the day. From the window of my office building I would have seen the towers burn with my own eyes. Then I would have really have been part of history, then my life that day would have been connected. What a foolish thought! How fortunate we were that one of us was home with our child on 9/11.

Before going in to my cube that day in the fall, I took the subway as far downtown as you were allowed. From a few blocks away you could smell a kind of burning unlike anything I had ever smelled. All the smouldering metal and materials of the buildings, I thought. There was a fence set up around the perimeter of the Trade Center site, and it was covered with a black canvas that you couldn't see through, which annoyed me. But I found a little slat, and I looked through. As I looked at the wreckage and the smoke I had previously only seen on TV, I understood why the covering was there: this was a mass grave. I stayed only a few minutes, to say a prayer for those who had died there, to chastise myself for being a voyeur, and I left.

May our remembering today do honor to those who died on September 11, 2001. May our actions, inspired by our memories, be as courageous and generous as those who rushed in immediately to help us, ten years ago, begin to mourn and heal.