

After the 9/11 Attack on the World Trade Center

RoshHaShanah, 2001

This year the entire world is observing Rosh HaShanah. In a single hour, last Tuesday's terrorist attack brought us all immediately to the central concerns of this season. Not just the Jews, and not just the United States. The entire world has been living for a week now with the fundamental existential questions posed by our Days of Awe: *Mi yich-yeh umi yamut?* Who shall live and who shall die? Five thousand human beings boarded planes, or left home for work, just under a week ago, on an ordinary Tuesday morning, and now lie buried under a mountain of steel, concrete and glass. Since then, much of the world has been praying... to whoever would listen,, some variation of the central theme of our liturgy: *zochreinu l'chayim, katveinu l'chayim*— Remember us for life; inscribe us for life.

In most years, in normal years, we modern Jews have not dealt much with the darker, frightening face of Rosh HaShanah. We have munched our apples and honey. We have oohed and aahed with pleasure at an impressive *t'kiah g'dolah*; we have perhaps taken a bit of time to examine our personal relationships. But this year, we—together with the rest of the world—suddenly feel the relevance of the ancient liturgy. At this time of year, for centuries, Jews chanted and trembled at the words, "*toleh ertz al blimah*. The world hangs suspended over the void." When 5,000 innocent human lives are taken, deliberately, after years of careful planning and premeditation, an alarm goes off in our collective consciousness: the scales have been tipped, the cosmos is out of balance. Our world feels suspended in a state of disequilibrium. This year, the entire world trembles with us, awaiting a rebalancing of the scales of justice.

This has always been, from ancient times, our season of fear and trembling. And so I would like to explore with you tonight the old, deep, universal experience of fear... and what, on Rosh HaShanah, our tradition suggests we do with it.

Beginning exactly one month ago, and throughout the month of Elul which leads up to Rosh HaShanah, the Jewish prayer book has us add a psalm to the morning and evening service every day... as part of the daily preparation for Rosh haShanah and Yom Kippur. It is Psalm 27, which begins "*Adonai ori v'yishi. Mimi ira?* The Lord is my light and my deliverance. Whom shall I fear?" Every day, for the past month, traditional Jews have been moving toward this night... always with the meditation: God is guiding and protecting me. What is there to be afraid of?

Many Jewish holidays feature an enemy: Purim has Haman. Hannukah has Antiochus. Passover has Pharoah. The enemy at Rosh HaShanah is... Fear. The psalm for this season goes on: "If an army shall encamp against me, my heart will not be afraid. If a war rises up against me, still will I trust." Courage, trust and hope are the pillars of this psalm, which sets the tone for this season. What, then, is courage? And what is fear? And why is it our enemy at this, the holiest season of the year?

The greatest rabbi of the Middle Ages, Moses Maimonides, explained that a single, essential pillar of Jewish belief is at the core of this season. Even more basic than belief in God, perhaps, is the Jewish belief that human beings have free will. Judaism is a religion premised entirely upon freedom, and this holy season of Rosh HaShanah and

Yom Kippur is entirely about choosing freely to make a change in our lives. But fear corrodes free will. Fear enslaves us. We all know it.

Fear prevents us from speaking against injustice. Fear prevents us from communicating with those different from ourselves. Fear prevents us from extending our hand to fellow human being stricken with poverty or illness. We want to do all these things; we want to live right.. .but all of us, at one moment or another, are gripped and paralyzed by fear. Fear is the enemy of free will.

In last week's violent events, a new set of fears was born upon the earth. Americans across the nation suddenly found themselves wondering, in a completely new way: Am I safe? Is it safe to travel? Is it safe to go to my office? Muslims across the country found themselves the target of a wave of hate-crimes and wondered Wit was safe to walk on the streets, or to send their children to school. And we Jews, also, have felt a new set of fears. . .not knowing if or when an anti-Israel and anti-Jewish backlash will strike. We know that some people are already saying that this attack would never have occurred had America not been Israel's ally. And how many more will think it before this war is over?

The shadow of fear, moreover, stretches far beyond the borders of the United States, to Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and to the entire Arab world.. .whose people wonder in dread what will be the limits of American vengeance. And our brothers and sisters in Israel take no comfort whatsoever in the spectre of a Middle East in flames. Many fears were born this week. As columnist Ellen Goodman put it starkly: "the goal of terrorism is terror. Mission accomplished."

Like many of you, I am finding it difficult to enter this New Year season, this season of return, finding it difficult to feel confident about the future... .I feel oppressed, and even trapped, by the shadow of fear.

The rest of my talk tonight, therefore, is as much for myself as for anyone here. I believe that we need to make a fresh start in thinking about the future. Tonight is our New Year... .and if we are going to live it right, then we need to plant for ourselves new seeds of hope. How then shall we think about our future?

To begin with, I think we need to take a lesson from Osama bin Laden, or whoever was behind the attacks of last week. I despise him and his arrogant cruelty, but he can teach us something. The lesson that we have yet to learn is the incalculable value of patience. Those killers knew---and their colleagues around the world know---the power of being able to wait. Not merely days and weeks, but years. One human being who is able to discipline him or herself to be still and to prepare.. .by waiting for the right moment, can change history. We saw this this week.

Our holy Torah, by the way, teaches this same lesson over and over. Abraham and Sarah waited.... ninety years, one hundred years.. .and after a lifetime of waiting, bore a miracle child, Isaac, whose name means laughter. Jacob worked and waited for his wife Rachel for seven years, and the Torah makes the point so that we cannot miss it:

Vayehiyu b'ainav k'yamim achadim b'ahavato otah. And it seemed to him but a few days, because of his love for her."

We modern Americans seem to be incapable of patience. We have long known that our society is based upon an ethic of instant gratification, and we have chuckled at ourselves

about it. But now, in a crisis, it is no joke. I heard a commentary on the radio yesterday which observed that a whole week had gone by since the attack without a military response. . . and that this was to be regarded as a long time.

The terrorists know otherwise. And we need to change our thinking too. A week is not a long time. Even a year is not a long time. Our ancestors waited for forty years before entering the land of Canaan, and our people waited two thousand years in the diaspora before returning to our land. We the Jewish people have survived because we have known how to wait. We need to learn again how to be patient.

Must there be an immediate display of America's enormous military might? I hope not. Everything I am reading and hearing lately indicates that bombing Afghanistan will not touch Osama bin Laden, and will only increase the suffering of the already devastated Afghan people. We know, in fact, that bin Laden wants the war. Must we give it to him? I personally would much rather see a very quiet, carefully planned, well-funded campaign, which without fanfare would methodically track down and eliminate every terrorist cell in the world. Let it take seven years. Let it take forty years.

There are those in Washington who are trying to speak to us of the importance of patience. Let us support them, and not join the clamor for immediate, dramatic results.

When we begin to take the long view, to think of the future in terms not of weeks but of years, then suddenly we can breathe again. Terror loses its grip. We can plant trees knowing that they will not bear fruit for years.. .but that the fruit will one day come. We can wait for justice, knowing that it will one day come. And we can enter into dialogue with an enemy, knowing that it may take years for the dialogue to produce understanding, but that the understanding will one day come.

Call it active patience. Or patient activism. In my opinion, this is what Rosh HaShanah has always been about. We strive at this time of the year toward perfection. We imagine ourselves as better people and the world as a better place. We picture it, and we reach for it. This is the activism.

But we also know, if we are honest, that we have been here before. We promised to be better and we promised ourselves a better world. . . .but we are still imperfect and so is the world. And this is what takes patience. We can only return to Rosh HaShanah and to Yom Kippur, year after year, century after century, if we are able to be patient with ourselves, and with each other, with the world and with God.

I would like to leave you this evening with a thought, along these lines, regarding tomorrow morning's blasts of the shofar.

As you may remember, there is one long blast, followed by multiple blasts, and then in the end a very long blast... *.the t'kiah g'dolah.*

The first blast, the *t'kiyah*, I would suggest is a siren, an alarm, signaling to us that our world is under attack. We heard this siren this week. The multiple short blasts— the *shvarim t'ruah*—are the gasping for breath, the desperate cries for help, the panic-stricken calls for revenge. We heard those cries this week.

And the *t'kiyah g'dolah*, the blast that goes on and on and on.. .let it be the long, patient, work.. . of rebuilding, rebalancing, and restoring. Let it be long. It's worth the wait.
Amen.