



“Repent Two Days Before Your Death”
Rabbi Joshua Heller
Day 2 Rosh Hashanah 5779

Today is September 11th.

17 years ago, today, we woke up thinking it would be just another day, but 17 years ago today, the world changed.

17 years ago, today, the world changed for almost 3,000 people murdered on planes, at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, for their families and communities.

17 years ago, today, the world changed for America.

17 years ago, today, my world changed in an instant.

Today we observe Rosh Hashanah.

Today are our worlds changing? We’re sitting in the same chairs, saying the same prayers we said yesterday.

Today, I want to tell you a story of American history, of world history, but also a moment of personal history. Some of you have heard parts of this story before. I hope that you will indulge me as I reflect on what this story has to say to each of us about how we live our lives, and about how lives can change in an instant.

17 years ago, I was a young rabbi. No grey hairs, no beard, no kids. Wendy and I had just bought our first home in Riverdale in the Bronx and I was Director of Distance learning at JTS.

In those days, I was glad to be one of those rabbis who had Shabbat off, but I relied on having a High Holiday pulpit to supplement my income. Plus, my shpilkes were as just bad then as they are now, and I couldn’t imagine sitting in the pews as a civilian. In late summer, I found myself sitting in a living room in Battery Park city, in the shadow of the Twin Towers, interviewing to be the High Holiday rabbi of a start-up, breakaway congregation in Lower Manhattan, which would meet about three blocks from the World Trade Center.

My first day on the job was September 9th, 2001, just over a week before Rosh Hashanah. I taught a class, a “get to know you” over brunch. I taught a story, found in the Talmud, tractate Avodah Zarah 18a. It’s a story that we read a version of each year as part of the Martyrology on Yom Kippur. It’s a story that tells us how life can change in a moment:



It was a time of oppression by the Roman empire. Teaching Torah was forbidden. Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion, was violating that decree, teaching Torah, holding the scroll close in his arms.

The Romans grabbed him and wrapped him in the Torah scroll, and surrounded him in bundles of kindling, and lit them. They took sponges of wool and soaked them in water and left them over his heart, so that he would not die quickly.

It was a particularly cruel form of torture, taking place in front of all, so that he would serve as an example not to violate the Roman decree.

His daughter said: "How can I see you this way?"

He said to her: "If it were just I alone who was burned, it would have been difficult for me. Now that I am burned and the Torah scroll is with me, the One who seeks to avenge the Torah scroll will also avenge me."

He was willing to suffer, to die, because his faith was meaningful to him. There were things more valuable to him than life itself. He knew he was dying for a cause.

As the flames leapt around him, his students asked him: "Rabbi, what do you see?"

He said to them: "The parchment is burning, but the letters are flying free."

This is where most people finish teaching the story. What a hero Rabbi Hanina Ben Teradion was, living and dying for his faith. When he spoke of the letters flying free, he was speaking metaphorically of himself. The flesh was consumed, but the letters and words that it contained now burst forth unconstrained. Had he died in bed, an old man, he would not be remembered. But because he died in flames, his words continue to resonate through the generations.

His students asked him why he should suffer so. They encouraged him to take his own life: "You should open your mouth and let the flames enter."

He refused: "Better that it should be taken by the one who gave it, rather than harm itself."

This rabbi was in pain, being burned alive. But he refused to give up his soul, his life. He clung, tenaciously to life.

Then we hear from a totally unexpected quarter. The Questionarius.

The Questionarius is the roman torturer, the executioner. The Questionarius said to him, "Rabbi, if I fan the flames and take the woolen sponges from your heart, will you bring me with you to the world to come?"



This is amazing. This is a guy who gets up every day, goes to the office and tortures rabbis. Through granted, in some synagogues, that would qualify him to serve on the board He looks like a normal person, but he's actually the angel of death.¹

He asks "Rabbi, if I kill you, will you take me to heaven?" He's so blown away by this man's faith, that he says, "If you are willing to go through this, then whatever is waiting for you in the afterlife is clearly really amazing."

In other words, he hears the sounds of this rabbi being tortured and says: "I'll have what he's having."

More astonishingly the rabbi says: "Yes."

"Swear to me?" And he swore to him.

The Questionarius immediately fanned the flames and took the woolen sponges from Rabbi Hanina's heart, and the rabbi's soul departed quickly.

The Questionarius, too, jumped and fell into the flames.

A heavenly voice called out "Rabbi Hanina Ben Teradion and the Questionarius are both on their way to the world to come."

Rabbi Judah the Prince, upon hearing the story, cried out: "There are those who earn the world in an instant, and for others it takes a lifetime."

Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion lived a whole lifetime of righteous behavior. The evil executioner who had been torturing him, had a moment of regret, and went to the same fate in a blaze of glory. It is possible, it would seem, to change your life in one moment. Of course, the catch is, in order to truly change the path of his life, he has to end it. He is remembered not for how he lived, but for how he died.

Do you have to die a good death to live a good life? Another text I taught on September 9, 2001 (Talmud Shabbat 153) gives a perspective. It's a story of Rabbi Eliezer- the rabbi who got over-ruled in yesterday's sermon!

Rabbi Eliezer said: "Repent one day before your death."

His students asked him: "Can a man know the day of his death?"

He responded: "Repent today, lest you die tomorrow, and thus you are all your days in repentance."

1 Today's Sermon Bingo: When Harry Met Sally



We all want to be better people, in principle. I'm reminded of the young woman who before heading out for the evening, prayed "God, please help me be a better person, tomorrow."

Even if you don't have to actually die, fear of death is certainly a powerful motivator. People talk about living each day as if it were your last. If this hour was one of the final 24, what would you do with it?

Repent one day before your death, lest you die tomorrow. That's what I taught. Turns out I was only off by one day.

On the morning of September 11th, I had slept in because I was up until very late the night before doing technical support for the students in the online program I was directing. I remember waking up to the sounds of screeching tires and scraping. We lived up in a working-class neighborhood in the Bronx, and my neighbors on each side were a NYC fireman and police officer. They were called to emergency duty and one of them had scraped his side view mirror tearing out of our shared driveway. My wife called me to tell me what was happening, and I turned on the news.

We were all absolutely stunned. When many of us first started watching, we assumed that it was some sort of horrible accident. Then we watched in real time as the second plane hit, as the towers fell. We slowly began to realize the enormity of what had happened. Firefighters and police ran into the buildings, not knowing that they were running to their deaths. The passengers on flight 93 fought back. People streamed northward, faces caked with dust, walking home with no subways or busses. Airports shut down. Many of the cables that provided phone and internet for New York were destroyed as well, so communications began to break down. And so began a rescue effort that yielded precious few survivors, and a recovery effort would continue for years. Human remains are still being identified.

It was a story of a single day, that started out so ordinary, on which so many lives changed forever. So many lives changed in minutes. Almost 3,000 lives ended. 3,000 families waiting for loved ones, office workers, flight crews and passengers, heroic first responders who would never return home. Thousands of American servicemen and women who would go overseas to fight, seeking to punish the perpetrators. We would never see air travel the same way again.

It happened because 19 hijackers, 19 villains, 19 Islamic terrorists, though they had never read the story of Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion and the Questionarius, had a similar idea. They thought that they could be assured entry to heaven with just one violent, fiery act. When I read their biographies, I was surprised to learn that many had not grown up as desperate fanatics. They grew up, for the most part, in middle class, secularly leaning families. Some of them had engineering degrees.

Quite a few had lived non-religious lives, and were trying to make up for it. They wanted to change their lives in one day. Change they did.

Then, there were our heroes- the people who fought back on the planes. The first responders. They will always be remembered for their bravery on that day- they have found their place in heaven. Andy



yet, they too are remembered for how they died, not for how they lived.

Whatever other things they had done in their lives were overshadowed by that moment of heroism. Sometimes we are marked, we are known, we are remembered for one great mighty act that changes the course of our lives.

It's clear, when we tell the story of 9/11- that it is possible to define the book of your life by its last chapter, and to achieve immortality through your death.

Woody Allen said, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality through not dying. I don't want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen; I want to live on in my apartment." Most of us, deep down, would prefer Woody Allen's immortality.

I was one of thousands of people who responded to 9/11 by trying to make a difference in smaller ways. I started by looking for technical problems I could solve. JTS's internet had gone down with the towers, and we were trying to figure out how to get things up and running again. The Rabbinical Assembly, which serves every Conservative rabbi around the world, was also down. It took an evening to rebuild the mailing list that hundreds of Conservative rabbis were relying on to share information and inspiration. I remember that the question arose as to at what point people who were known to be on the planes or in the towers could be declared dead according to Jewish law. This was an important question because it would determine when families might begin the process of mourning their loss, and ultimately allow widows and widowers to remarry. I took dictation from the chair of the "Law Committee" of our Rabbinical Assembly, writing a response to get out to the new emergency list.

What was a more fateful turn. I began to establish contact with the congregants of the Downtown synagogue, many of whom I had never met.

They had seen these horrible events out their bedroom and living room windows. There were people in the twin towers who faced the same horrible dilemma as Rabbi Hanina Ben Teradion. Would they remain alive to be consumed by fire? Or, would they choose to end their own lives. My congregants, looking out their windows, had seen people falling, and even leaping from the flames, 1,000 feet to their deaths. My congregants had fled on foot with only what they could carry, evacuated across the river by boat.

By the time I could contact them, they were widely dispersed. The lucky ones had hunkered down in second homes at the shore or the mountains. What would we do? It was now less than a week before Rosh Hashanah. The decision was made that we had to go on. This was a little bit ironic, if only because on the evening of September 10th, I had a phone call with the president, who mentioned that the membership drive was not going so well, and asked, just out of curiosity, if I would be really upset if they decided to fold before the holidays. Now, however, if we did not have services, well, then, we would be letting the terrorists win.

We went knew we had to go ahead. I called colleagues, and called in favors, around the New York area. "You know, I'm the rabbi of a synagogue, we were affected by 9/11, we don't have mazhorim."



“Hey I’m the rabbi of a shul in lower Manhattan. We need two Torah scrolls.” Again, I failed to mention that we hadn’t had these things before the attacks. The shul where I grew up, Temple Emanu-El, lent us prayer books. Another lent us two Torah scrolls, another lent a portable ark. Town and Village Synagogue lent all kinds of logistical support, and the 14th street Y gave us space.

It was Sunday and I drove around the tri-state area picking up all the accoutrements for a synagogue. It was the first day that the Lincoln tunnel was open, and I remember pulling up to the toll plaza. My car was basically a rolling synagogue. The back was crammed with boxes of mahzorim, there was an Ark sticking out, tallises draped over everything, with a Torah scroll strapped into the front seat. There was a National Guardsman at each toll gate. Needless to say, I was waved over for further inspection.

Meanwhile, across the country, you could hear the sound of rabbis ripping up their sermons. How could you stand in front of a congregation and not address what had happened? I learned my lesson, and to this day while I may think about my sermons for months, I don’t start actually writing anything down until about a week before Rosh Hashanah.

That Rosh Hashanah was one of the most incredible spiritual experiences of my life. We had a service that was open to anyone who walked in off the street, no tickets. There’s a prayer called gomel that one says after escaping a lifethreatening situation. We said it together. Imagine a whole gymnasium full of people, some of whom had not been inside a synagogue in years, truly thankful to God that they had reached another Rosh Hashanah. What was most astonishing to me was that members of the community who themselves were out of their homes and not sure when they could return were worried that the rabbi would have a place to stay, and lunch invitations, no less.

Yom Kippur was no less intense. The enormity of what had happened continued to set in. When you walked around Manhattan you could still see the haze in the air, smell the burning. It was about three hours before the holiday that Wendy and I Rosh Hashnah 5779 Day 2 Page 7 of 9 learned, after doctors had told us that it would not happen for us any time soon, that we were expecting a child. Caleb was born June 12, 2002. (If yesterday’s sermon wasn’t embarrassing enough for the boy, you can do the math on the dates). Needless to say, we weren’t alone, all of the maternity wards were full.

My life changed on 9/11 as I found a new purpose. What was supposed to be a 3- day job lasted 3 years. I spent many shabbats and holidays staying over in the Embassy Suites Battery Park (imagine getting a Manhattan hotel suite with complementary breakfast for \$99 a weekend night! It’s possible when the room has a view of the hole at Ground Zero). We had bar mitzvahs, we had conversions, we had weddings, we had funerals. I learned how to do healing services with Debbie Friedman Z”L. We built a sukkah on a 20th story rooftop overlooking the hole where the towers used to be. For a few seconds it was also the world’s holiest box kite. Sukkot is a reminder that all human structures are temporary and fragile, that only God’s protection really matters. Nothing reinforces that like celebrating in a temporary hut, overlooking the hole where two of the greatest feats of human engineering used to be.

It was supposed to be a part time commitment- one weekend a month, an evening here or there. Not



surprisingly, it was kind of synagogue that was high maintenance but thought it was low maintenance. There was quite bit of politics. There were politics within the synagogue as the board included a number of people who had never been shul members before, let alone tried to run one. They had very different ideas of how Judaism mattered, what a congregation should even be. There were politics in the larger neighborhood as people tried to figure out how to rebuild life in a neighborhood that would take a decade to recover.

I was changed forever. In Rabbinical school, I had been voted least likely to succeed in the pulpit (I'm sure there are those in the crowd today who would have seconded the motion). I wasn't much of a schmoozer. I would think to myself, "It is so nice when you can sit with someone and not have to talk." Had 9/11 not happened, I'm sure I would have continued serving in administrative roles, been a teacher, a dean, directed some sort of institute. That day, and the weeks and months that followed, made me realize what really mattered to me most. I care about being with Jews, in their daily lives, in their joys and oys. It's how I came to be here.

I was not the only person whose life was changed that day. The synagogue folded soon after I left, but left behind a really remarkable alumni association, of people who went on to change the Jewish world. One board member started City Winery and then was the first president of Lab/Shul, an innovative worship community in Manhattan. Another board member went on to become the president of Ikar, one of the hippest non-synagogue synagogues in LA. Dr. Judith Hauptman, already a brilliant Judaic scholar, started Ohel Ayala, an organization that offers free religious services to hundreds of young people in NY. Our founding president went on to become a rabbi. They were all great people, but, if 9/11 hadn't happened, I'm not sure they would have turned their energies outward to do such amazing things in the Jewish world.

Many people were looking for lives with purpose. Some decided to enter public service. Teach for America applications sky rocketed. Our neighbor, a NYPD officer, decided to re-enter the armed forces. The young man who was our first Bar Mitzvah at the synagogue joined the Marines and fought in Afghanistan. Wendy realized that she did not want to get up every day and do a job in Jewish education she did not enjoy and began a degree that would eventually lead her to a new career in corporate America. The upside is that she is happy and she can now keep me in the manner to which I have become accustomed. But it was an even trade. Dr. David Abusch-Magder, was a physicist working for a big corporation, and decided to pursue a degree in Jewish education and is now the head of The Epstein School.

That's all history. 9/11 is now like the Kennedy assassination. If you are of a certain age, you know exactly where you were when that happened. Now there's a generation that would ask "Lisa Kennedy was shot?" It was seven years ago that U.S. special forces took out Osama Bin Laden. Lower Manhattan has been rebuilt; the freedom tower now rises symbolically 1,776 feet into the air. There's a beautiful memorial, which I have never visited. Some things seemed like they had changed forever. Our country was united in purpose. The world was on our side. Rudy Giuliani, once a marginal figure, was a beloved voice of righteous integrity. So, not all of them stuck.

In fact, the books have still not been closed on 9/11. Those brave troops who first set out to 17 years



ago to continue the fight that was brought to us have come home, some alive, some wounded, and some having paid the ultimate price. But, three presidents later, new ones still go to take their place.

My life changed on that day, 9/11. So many lives changed on that day. Maybe your life changed on that day. Maybe you were personally affected. Maybe you have your own story to tell? Our own past president Brian Mand collected a book full of letters telling the stories of the families of those who perished on that day.

So, in these closing moments, I want to leave you with a question: What would it take to make today, or any day, a day that changes your life? Maybe you have been through the experience of almost losing your life, through an illness, an accident, a close call, and you see each day with new meaning, new value. Maybe the first part of Rabbi Eliezer's teaching rings true. You stared death in the face and chose to live differently. But that's a tough way to find meaning in life, and it's not something I wish on you.

It's impossible to achieve immortality by actually living forever. Ironically, it's possible to achieve immortality by dying, like Rabbi Hanina and the Questionarius. It's even possible to achieve immortality by almost dying- like Isaac on the Altar in our Torah Reading this morning.

The tougher half of that question is this: How will you achieve immortality by living?

We cannot choose when moments of terror, moments of destruction, moments of loss will overwhelm us. But we can choose any moment to make meaning.

You can choose any moment to express your love for family in the morning, even if there is every reason in the world to expect you will see them again that night.

You can choose any day to ask "Is this a day when I am making a difference in my own life and in the lives of others?"

The world, our lives, can change on any day. There are things that you know, today, about how you want your life to be different. What is holding you back?

When there is something bad in your life, why wait to get rid of it? I'm not talking about some ugly wagon wheel coffee table in your living room. I'm talking about all of the real negatives in your life. Why keep them around? What positives are you waiting to grab hold of? When you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible. Why wait?

I mean, I suppose you could wait until after musaf and lunch, but don't worry, at the end of the service, we'll have a reminder for you. We sing a song- Hayomtoday.

Today- Hayom, strengthen us.



CONGREGATION
B'nai Torah

Today- Hayom, bless us.

Today- Hayom, give us greatness.

Today we sing: Hayom Harat Olam, today is a day on which the world can change, a day on which a new world can be born.

We never know, and we can never decide, when today has the potential to be the last day of our lives.
We can make it the first day of the rest!