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9/11, Twenty Years Later

Twenty years ago, on the day after 9/11, Alex Chadwick, a correspondent for National Public Radio, put it succinctly: "We Americans," he said, "woke up today in a new country." We woke up in a country where the unthinkable could happen, where the very essence of our American way of life could be threatened. And we knew that things would never be the same again. Our innocence, our belief that America was different, somehow protected by two oceans, has been lost forever.

We became a new and chastened people living in a new and fearful world.

For us Jews, however, especially if we had visited Israel, the world seemed hauntingly familiar. We knew all too well that feeling of emotional quicksand when every day is filled with uncertainty and dread. Where in an instant our lives can change forever. Writing right after 9/11 in the New York Times, Clyde Haberman spoke the words on many Israeli lips, when thinking about Americans: "Do you get it now?" This question wasn't meant to be a smart-alecky response to a tragedy. It's not meant to be a "We told you so." It's simply reflective of a country that has had to live with terrorists for so long. Unfortunately, as of twenty years ago this week, America and Israel became members of the same bitter fraternity. It became not a matter of reading in the papers of someone else's nightmare. It became personal. Twenty years on we add to this terrible tragedy the destruction of so much and the killing of so many in the wars that followed 9/11, and the horrific events in Afghanistan in the past few weeks, not to mention the toll taken by this pandemic and the senseless gun violence around us. We certainly look to our religion for direction.

What is the religious response at such times of tragedy? There are actually many responses. There is prayer. There is silence. There is coming together as a community. And there is a turning to our sacred texts. When the 9/11 disaster struck, and I had a moment to reflect on its implication, I turned to our religious texts in hopes of finding some perspective. The first text I read, from the prophet Jeremiah, was filled with pain for those suffering from dreams destroyed. The prophet, who witnessed the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem 2500 years ago, declared: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: 'Is the Lord not among us? The harvest is past, the summer is ended, we have not been saved.' Because my people is shattered I am shattered; I am dejected, seized by desolation. Is there no balm in Gilead? Can no physician be found?....O that my head were water, my eyes a fount of tears! Then I would weep day and night for the slain of my people. Thus said the Lord of Hosts: Listen! Summon the dirge-singers, let them come. Send for the weeping women, let them come. Let them quickly start a wailing for us, that our eyes may run with tears, our pupils flow with water."

The pain and sorrow that Jeremiah felt seems so real to all of us now, witnessing this era's own continuing tragedies. But Jeremiah felt more than pain. He also felt contempt for the enemies of his people. And he knew that, in the end, they would be vanquished. "He who sows the wind," he declared, "will reap the whirlwind." Those who engage in vile acts of wanton terror and murder will be brought to justice. For we will not rest until such justice is served.

And as I considered the magnitude of 9/11, I also thought about other role models in the Bible and how they responded to tragedy. I thought of David's lament for Jonathan and Saul: "O how the mighty have fallen," and there came to mind the firefighters and police officers who gave their lives in New York. Or the brave passengers who managed to divert the fourth plane from its murderous course. And I also remembered the countless people who came forward to help sift through the rubble, give blood, or counsel the grieving families. All of them are heroes.

In my reading I also came across a midrash, or rabbinical comment, from two thousand years ago. According to the midrash, three biblical characters lived through unthinkable disasters. Each of them witnessed great catastrophes. Noah saw the destruction of the world through a flood. Daniel saw the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. And Job saw the destruction of his family and his home. Unfortunately, all three characters lived through experiences that, thousands of years later, still resonate, even now.

This morning I want to think about these three men and their experiences, for they have a lot to do with the spiritual challenges laid before us. At this time of remembrance, and continued pain and fear, I hope that the insights of our biblical tradition can grant us some vitally needed perspective.

These days, it's far too easy to identify with Noah. Like him, we have witnessed the destruction of the world as we knew it. True, most buildings in America are still standing. And yes, the flood waters have not swallowed us up. But certainly, our lives will never be the same again. According to the Bible, Noah's world was destroyed because of hamas, which translates as evil. Unfortunately, we associate the word Hamas with the root evil of so many dire circumstances facing Israel and the world, through the main sponsor of Hamas, Iran. Maybe the Islamic terror groups like Hamas weren't directly responsible for what happened here twenty years ago, but their dancing in the streets as our people were dying, sends us a clear message: these people are our common enemy. And their hatred cannot be tolerated.

It must be pointed out that the majority of Muslims are peace-loving people, and we are wrong to chastise them. But at the same time, there are fanatical Islamic groups who wish us harm, as Americans and as Jews, and until they are stopped, our world will be flooded with fear.

In one way, Noah was luckier than we, for he was able to see the rainbow. He received the promise that never again would the world know such trauma. But we are still awaiting that rainbow. We have yet to greet a new and better world. The hatred and envy, the unimagined cruelty, still reign and will reign for the foreseeable future. I grieve therefore for ourselves and our children.

If we can identify with Noah, we can also relate to Daniel. For in our age the destruction of religion is rampant. Yes, people go worship, and many believe in a good and loving God. But religion is also abused in horrific ways. People blaspheme God by praying words they never practice. Their weekday lives don't reflect the piety of Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. And the worst by far are those with the chutzpah to claim that their acts of terror are in the name of God. How anyone could witness such blasphemy and not recoil in utter disgust is beyond my ability to understand. Shame on any religious leader who sends terrorists out in the name of God. Such acts threaten the integrity of all religion. Likewise, those who try to explain that God has a plan for us that includes such suffering miss the point. God doesn't want such suffering. But God has created a world with free choice, and unfortunately, this means that there will be monsters who use their freedom to undermine everything that genuine religion holds dear. And the Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons, who had the audacity to claim that the terrorists were aided by a vindictive God, angry at America, were shameful. Not only did they blame the victims. They attacked the integrity of religion and turn God into a hideous creature.

What they didn't understand is that God is not sitting up above and judging us, meting out punishment for our sins, any more than God sends terrorists into action.

Where is God in such tragedy? God is in the compassion we feel for all the bereaved children, parents, spouses, siblings, and friends. God is in the sympathy and support that friends give to the survivors. God is in our resolve to apprehend those responsible for these heinous deeds. God is in the healing that will come slowly but surely to those in grief. And God is in the power of the human spirit to rise above sadness and rededicate our lives to remembering and rebuilding.

Noah was able to see a rainbow and have hope. Daniel, according to tradition, was able to see the Temple destroyed but also rebuilt. Will we see a world in which false practitioners of religion are discredited for the charlatans they are? Will we see religion understood throughout the world as a cradle of compassion and peace? Will we see a world where God is understood as One who suffers with us, and not the cause of our suffering? I fear it's still too soon to tell.

If we can identify with Noah and with Daniel, then we certainly also can identify with Job. Like Job, we have seen people's lives destroyed. We have seen families torn apart. And like Job we are left with more questions than answers. We have seen the storm of terror and search in vain for God in the whirlwind. But unlike Job, whom God did visit, we feel alone and abandoned during our time of grief.

Job's questions still resonate in our ears: Why do bad things happen to good people? Why did God create a world of so much pain and misery? And how can we explain the injustice and cruelty we see, especially now?

Job was given answers, while we are left only with questions.

These three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job are like us. We all have seen our world flooded with hate. We have seen religion abused and sullied. We have seen families destroyed. The Jewish word that comes to mind is "Churban" -- the destruction of everything we thought we knew.

In a sermon delivered 100 years ago, a rabbi named Israel Levinthal, spoke of these three role models. At the time, the world was still recovering from the First World War. But the lesson of these three men is still relevant. They all saw destruction and rebuilding, death, and rebirth. We have seen destruction and death and await the rebuilding and the rebirth. But we cannot wait for God to start this process. We must take it on ourselves. We must work to build bridges of tolerance and understanding. We must reach out for others. We must better protect our children and our businesses, and synagogues and our homes. And we must understand that we can only be effective by working together.

Like Noah, our universe will never be the same. But we can establish safer airports and safer cities. And we can work with like-minded nations to eradicate the worst offenders of terrorism.

Like Daniel, we have seen religion blasphemed; its integrity questioned. But we can dedicate ourselves to blending responsibly the realities of our time and the religious insights of our tradition. Killing people in the name of God is wrong. But what is right about religion is when it helps us reach out to bring the sick comfort and to rescue the victims of others' hatred. When religion ennobles us, there's nothing better. We need, each of us, to be ennobled by religion. Only then will our world benefit from the genuine goodness religion can offer.

And like Job, we have seen terrible calamities befall us. But we can dedicate ourselves to comforting those in sorrow while we strengthen the bonds of our own family. We can learn to never take each other for granted, and to struggle on, even with our broken faith and doubts, somehow knowing that God is good, that God cares, and that even in our pain God is with us.

We have witnessed such destruction. I pray that this New Year will be a year of hope. A year of rebirth and rebuilding, and a year in which the sorrows of the past will be softened by a new and better world.

After the Revolutionary War, a young Jewish father said to his son, "We have the world to begin again." Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world. Every Rosh Hashanah is a time of new beginning. Alex Chadwick was right. We have awoken to a new and fearful world. But we pray that God will help us live with hope. Hope to resume our lives. Hope to rebuild our buildings. And hope to restore our faith in the power of humanity -- and that of this great nation -- to rise above fear and greet the world again as a place of dreams and blessings. Amen.