

**Soul-Searching and the *Tochacha***  
***Parashat Ki Tavo***  
**September 9, 2006**  
**By Rabbi Carl M. Perkins**  
**Temple Aliyah, Needham**

There's a well-known passage in the Talmud (Berachot 5a): Rava (some say Rav Hisda) once said: *If a person sees that afflictions have come upon him, let him examine his conduct, as it is said, "Let us search and examine our ways."* (Lamentations 3:40).

I naturally thought of that text the other day, because in only two days, we will commemorate the fifth anniversary of 9/11.

I hadn't given much thought to this *yahrzeit*, but the media certainly have. Oliver Stone's movie "9/11" (whose release was timed to take place one month before the anniversary); the movie about Flight 93; the recent announcement by the president regarding moving 14 suspects to Guantanamo, and appealing for new laws to try them; *The New Yorker*; the *New York Times*: all are setting us up for this commemoration.

To paraphrase *The New Yorker*, five years is both a little bit of time and a long time. On the one hand, it seems like it wasn't so long ago that we didn't have to take off our shoes before we got on an airplane. On the other hand, think of it: our bar and bat mitzvah and their friends—they were just turning 8 years old. As far as they're concerned, this is the norm!

A lot has changed during this time, not just as a result of 9/11, but also as a result of its aftermath. Just to give you an idea, let me remind you that a front-page headline in the French newspaper *Le Monde* the day after 9/11 was: "*Nous Sommes Tous Américains*"—"We are All Americans." There was at least a widespread expression of empathy and support right then which has certainly dissipated. Whether it was sincere or not at the time is maybe beside the point. The fact is, Europe and other parts of the world were certainly willing to cast their lot with America in a struggle with Islamic terrorism, Islamic imperialism, Islamofascism, call it what you will. Today? Who knows?



This week we read the *Tochacha* (“the rebuke”). It is one of two places in the Torah where Moses, in God's name, sets before the people blessings and promises; and curses and threats.

The Talmud teaches us that when the curses and the threats are read, they are to be read without interruption, lest more than one person bear the burden of being honored as they are read. The reason is that when we hear this long list, it's only natural that we feel a bit frightened. We get worried. “Maybe saying it will make it so.” We associate a magical quality to the words themselves. Maybe that's why we usually refer to the *Tochacha* as a collection of “curses” rather than “curses and threats.” A “curse” sounds more powerful, impossible to defeat. A “threat,” on the other hand, is negotiable.

The juxtaposition of 9/11 and the *Tochacha* raises the questions: “Why did this happen to us?” and “What should we do about it?” In a sense, we as a nation have focused on the second without giving much thought to the first. We've focused on trying to prevent another catastrophe, without trying hard—or hard enough—to understand why it happened in the first place.

Now, asking the question, “Why did this happen?” is disturbing. It suggests somehow that we're buying into the notion that somehow “we”—as opposed to Islamic terrorists—are to blame. It sounds defeatist. Even though, that is the purpose, after all, of the *Tochacha*: to get us to think about what we're doing and to try to improve our behavior.

The *Tochacha* has often been misunderstood—dangerously misunderstood. It's often been read as a set of predictions rather than warnings. The danger is, when they're read that way, we may come to dismiss them, rather than to pay attention to them. For, as we all know, sometimes bad things happen to good nations, and vice versa. So that realization calls into question the value of reading the *Tochacha* in the first place.

And yet there's a profound truth in reflecting on the message of the *Tochacha*—namely, that if you behave badly, you deserve to have bad things happen to you. Don't we want to believe that Right makes Might—rather than its inverse? Isn't there—or don't we want to believe that there is—a connection between the evil of Nazi Germany and its defeat in World War II? Don't we want to believe that virtuous nations triumph and evil ones disappear? After all, Imperial Rome which destroyed the Temple and which threw Christians to the lions is gone. Medieval Spain with its Inquisition is gone. Czarist Russia is gone. Communist Russia is

gone. Don't we believe, deep down inside, that the fate of these nations is somehow tied to their flawed morality? Whether it is or is not true in actuality, the Tochacha is part of a matrix of texts that are designed to motivate individuals and nations to examine their conduct, and to strive to do the right thing—lest they suffer dire consequences.

So why did 9/11 happen to us? Unlike many in the media today, I don't happen to believe that we should decide whether we're doing the right thing or not by taking polls around the world, by taking the pulse of the so-called Arab Street, or any street for that matter. It's much simpler than that. America is at its finest when it lives up to its own values. Those values include freedom, of course—freedom of speech and of the press, freedom to practice religion and freedom from governmentally imposed religious practice—but also, decency and fairness, generosity and compassion.

There are those in the world who hate us for being who we are. 9/11 revealed that. And then there are those who despise us for being less than who we can and should be. We have to be willing to fight the former—for enemies of democracy, enemies of freedom, those who would wish to return us to the Middle Ages—they must be fought and they must be defeated. But we also can and should do more to live up to our promise, and thereby attract the support of those who have been disappointed by us, those who are looking to us, or looking up to us. We needn't, we shouldn't, go it alone in this world. We should try to exemplify the values we would like to spread around the world, which will then, we can hope, engender support.

What's true of nations is true of individuals. We're in the middle of the month of Elul. It behooves us *l'fashfesh b'ma'aseinu*—to examine our conduct; to do some *heshbon nefesh*—some soul-searching; and to make some resolutions.

That passage I cited earlier continues: *Pishpesh u'matzah—ya'aseh teshuvah, she-ne-emar, "v'nashuvah."*—If someone examines his deeds and finds [something amiss]—let him do teshuvah, for the verse reads, “[Let us search and examine our ways]—and let us return”—that is, “let us do Teshuvah!”

May all of us use these days before Rosh Hashanah to do the collective and personal soul searching they're designed to produce, and may we do Teshuvah—sooner, and not later.

*Amen.*