

The Tower of Terror
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This past summer, I took a bike ride in the Lexington area. It was hot, and the bike ride was long, and so, when I eventually came upon that quintessentially American institution, the Ice Cream Shop, I turned off the bike path and stopped for some ice cream. As I was waiting in line to be served, I happened to notice the T-shirt that the person in front of me was wearing. Rather absent-mindedly, I read the caption that appeared on it. "I survived," it read, "the Tower of Terror."

Frankly, it took my breath away. For a moment I was dumbstruck. Just a few days earlier, I had been reading about how, after nine painstaking months of sifting through and hauling away tons of debris, the recovery effort at the World Trade Center had finally come to an end. For a split-second, I just couldn't understand, I couldn't make sense of that T-shirt. "I survived the Tower of Terror?" What was this T-shirt talking about?

Within a moment, I realized that the person in front of me had probably gotten the shirt at Disney World. Yes, there's a ride there called the Tower of Terror. (Incidentally, it's billed as "the world's most intense elevator ride ... you descend 13 gut-wrenching, faster-than-gravity stories again and again and again." Sounds terrific.) The shirt was obviously a souvenir. But somehow, given where my head was at, when I saw that shirt I wasn't thinking of Disney World.

And I'm not thinking of Disney World now. I'm sure I am not the only one. For many of us, things haven't quite returned to normal. After all, things just don't feel the same as they did before 9/11.

There are all sorts of little changes. We now have to get to the airport sooner than we used to. Many of us – myself included – are asked to take off our shoes before boarding a flight.

There's a heavy metal rock group called, of all things, AnthraX. Shortly after 9/11 and the subsequent anthrax contamination cases, there was talk that they were going to change their name. That doesn't seem to have happened, but something



else has: If you go to that group's web page (www.anthrax.com), you will find – as a public service, they tell you—a prominent link, smack in the middle of their website, to another site that provides information on the anthrax bacterium and what to do if you are exposed to it. Could one have imagined such a thing before 9/11—a public service announcement on a heavy metal rock group's webpage?

These are just symptoms of a more fundamental change that has taken place. We are now conscious, as we weren't before last September 11, that we have mortal enemies in the world—enemies who have plotted and who are probably continuing to plot to murder thousands, if not tens of thousands or millions of Americans. As a result of that realization, our nation is now at war. And we may be widening that war considerably before too long.

That's all very scary. How are we supposed to deal with this? For many of us, this is very new. What does our faith, our tradition, teach us about what our response should be, and how we might deal with the fear and the anxiety that this situation creates within us? How are we supposed to raise children in such an environment?

The challenge is actually not new at all. Today we read about Abraham. Why was Abraham chosen by God to be the father of our people?

The familiar story told in a *midrash* tells us that Abraham smashed his father's idols, and that's why God chose him. But there's a different *midrash* in *Breishit Rabbah*, the great *midrashic* collection on the Book of Genesis. In *Breishit Rabbah*, we come upon a *midrash* that, in this context, is astonishing. It talks about, of all things, a tower of terror.

The *midrash* asks, What drew God's attention to Abraham? The answer it gives is this: It's like the story about a man who was traveling from place to place, who saw a "birah doleket"—a tower in flames. He wondered, "Is it possible that no one's in charge here?"—whereupon the owner of the building looked out and said, "I'm in charge here." Similarly, Abraham looked around at the world in which he lived--a world filled with violence and corruption--and said, "Is it possible that the world is without a guide?" The Kadosh Boruch Hu—the Holy One, Blessed be He—looked up and said, "I am the Guide, the Ruler of the Universe," and so the Lord said to Abraham, "*Lekh l'kha* – Go forth!"

This is an enigmatic *midrash*. Somehow the burning tower symbolizes the world, but how? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Britain, explains it as follows: The world was created by God, but the world, like that tower, is on fire. The fire represents evil, which is threatening the world. God doesn't seem to be able to put

that fire out—it's the fire of human evil. Only Abraham stops and notices that there is something terribly wrong with a world aflame, a world being consumed by evil. That's what draws him to God's attention, as someone worthy to partner with him in redeeming the world with a life committed to "tsedakah u'mishpat"—"doing what is just and right" (Gen. 18:19).

This is what it means to be a Jew, Rabbi Sacks explains: to follow in Abraham's footsteps. To be willing to follow God's lead in a world beset by evil—indeed to strive to address it.

The question is: are we also willing to do the same, to try to put that fire out? We might bewail the fact that evil exists—but that wouldn't do anything about it. We might be anxious about the future—but that's not going to affect it. We might ignore it—but then we wouldn't be acting like the children of Abraham. Judaism gives us a path to follow on that great journey that began with the words "*Lekh L'kha*" and to participate in that process of tikkun olam, of being God's partner in repairing the world.

That's our mission. It has long been our mission and, as long as the world looks somewhat like it does today, it will continue to be.

But how do you maintain that commitment in the face of the burning tower?

Jews have been asking that question—and answering it—throughout Jewish history.

Rabbi Nehemia Polen, who teaches at Hebrew College, wrote a beautiful book entitled *Esh Kodesh, The Holy Fire*. It is an analysis of the teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, known as the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto. In the early 1900s, Rabbi Shapira had been the rabbi of a small community outside of Warsaw known as Piaseczno, and so he became known as the Piaseczner Rebbe. When the war broke out in September 1939, he was living in Warsaw with his son and daughter-in-law and his daughter. (His wife had recently died.) Although those close to him tried to insist that he leave Warsaw for a safer location, he refused. "How can I abandon my hasidim, my followers?" he asked. And so he remained.

Within a few weeks came Rosh Hashanah and then Yom Kippur, and then a terrific assault by the Germans on the city took place. On the Monday after Yom Kippur, bombs fell on Rabbi Shapira's house, and his only son was killed. Later that night, another bomb fell on his daughter-in-law, killing her as well.

Rabbi Shapira was faced, almost immediately, with what most of us would consider an impossible task: to continue to function as an individual through a period of tremendous personal grief, and to continue to function as a public figure, leading his community through an equally tremendous collective anguish. Yet this is precisely what he did. For almost four years he remained in the ghetto, preaching week after week to his hasidim and encouraging them, writing down his thoughts, his interpretations of events.

How did he do this? What was the secret of his ability to overcome, to transcend the assault? To continue living in a world where the tower of evil is burning, with no end in sight?

If you read *The Holy Fire*, you come away with several important principles.

First, Rabbi Shapira taught that, no matter how much we are assaulted, we should try not to allow ourselves to become estranged from God and from our tradition. He did this with creative *drashot*, creative explications of the Biblical text.

He reminded his people what they already knew: namely, that the Torah was given in the Sinai desert, in a vast wilderness. “Why?” he asks. Why was it given in the wilderness? Why wasn’t it given in some civilized place—a city or a town—rather than in the lonely, desolate and dangerous desert?

The answer is to teach us that that is when we might find we need the Torah most, when we might find it most inspiring: when times are uncertain, when we too are in the wilderness. We might think that the Torah is there for us to turn to, to find inspiration in, only when times are good, when things are going well for us, when the world around us seems civilized. Yet it is also—perhaps especially—a guide for us when the world around us seems to be going mad.

Rabbi Shapira, living in the Warsaw ghetto, reminded his flock of that famous verse in Psalms, “Out of the depths I call upon you, O Lord—*Mi-ma’amakim k’raticha Adonai*” (Ps.130:1) That verse uses the plural, “depths” rather than the singular “depth.” Why? Because, he says, it must be that the author of that psalm knew of true despair. After falling into a depth, he must have called upon God, yet God did not answer him or save him. Not only wasn’t he answered or saved—he then fell into a second depth—a depth within a depth. Nevertheless, he says, the psalmist must have gathered his strength and once again called out to God.

We must do the same, he told his followers, out of whatever depths—or depths within depths—we may find ourselves.

Second, Rabbi Shapira urged his people to continue to share with one another—never, no matter what, to become insensitive to the suffering of others. There is a hasidic value called *dibbuk haverim*, the bond between hasid and hasid in fellowship and friendship. Rabbi Shapira broadened this. Even when one has no material resources to give, he said, it is still possible to share.

“When one hears the troubles of other[s] ... and does all that he can to help them; if his heart is broken ...; if, motivated by his broken heart he repents ... and prays to [God], then this too is a gift which we receive one from the other; we receive the broken heartedness and the repentance, and [those for whom we pray] receive the compassion and the good effects which we perform for them, as well as the prayers which we offer on their behalf.” (p. 50)

Finally, Rabbi Shapira recognized that, as horrible as were the physical and emotional losses those around him were suffering, there was one loss that they must try to avoid, and that is the loss of the inner self.

There is a verse in Isaiah (27:13) (recited as part of the Musaf service on Rosh HaShanah) that refers to “*ha-ovdim b’eretz ashur v’ha-nidakhim b’beretz mitzrayim*”-- “those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were cast away in the land of Egypt.” Some people, Rabbi Shapira taught,

are in a state ... referred to as “cast away,” while others are in a state called “lost.” “Cast away” [refers to] an individual who is merely banished from his place to another far away; he remains, however, recognizable and discernible. The individual called “lost,” however, has been destroyed; he is neither discernible nor recognizable.

Due to the many persecutions and unbearable, unimaginable torments, people [can] even lose their inner identities. This process can go so far that the individual loses himself and does not recognize himself. He cannot recall his self-image as it was a year ago on the Sabbath, or even on a weekday. Now he is crushed and trampled, so much so that he cannot discern if he is a Jew, a human being, or rather an animal who does not have the capacity for feeling. He is, then, “lost” in the scriptural sense

There is nothing worse, Rabbi Shapira wrote, than the loss of the inner self. One must never forget one’s own nobility. If that happens, one is truly lost. Nonetheless, as Rabbi Shapira concluded his drashah, “The Talmud ... teaches [us] that ‘the owner of a lost object returns to find his object.’ When an object is lost, [even] when it cannot be seen or recognized, the owner returns to search for it, to

find it, to lift it up and bring it to him. Is not God the Master who is in search of his lost object?" (p.39)

Through all that Rabbi Shapira endured, he kept his focus on his values, his way of life, his people—not on those of his enemies. In his writings he never once mentioned Germany, he never once mentioned the Germans. He always used euphemisms, such as "*Amalek*." Even when he painstakingly prepared his writings and placed them in a secure metal container, which he then buried deep in the ground – so that they might survive, even if he wouldn't, the cover letter that he placed on top was not in Polish, or in German, but in Yiddish.

Rabbi Shapira was deported from Warsaw toward the end of the period of the Ghetto revolt in April or May of 1943. (p. 152) He was held for a while in a labor camp. It appears as though there was an effort made to rescue him. The Jewish underground had sent messengers into the camp in order to save some of the prisoners. But apparently Rabbi Shapira was in a group of about twenty artists, physicians, and communal figures who made a pact among themselves that none of them would leave the camp without the others.

In a book by the Jewish educator Michael Rosenak entitled *Tree of Life, Tree of Knowledge*, he shares a philosophical puzzle told by the sociologist Peter Berger:

A child wakes up at night, perhaps because of a bad dream. He finds himself surrounded by darkness. He is alone and feels threatened. He cries out, and his mother comes into the room. She comforts him. She may turn on a nightlight, she may sit by him on the bed, she may cradle him or cuddle up with him, perhaps sing or speak to him. She tells him, "Don't be afraid; everything will be all right." Eventually, the child is reassured and falls back asleep.

Peter Berger's question is: when the mother comforts that child, saying, "There, there, everything will be all right," is she lying to him?

Now our immediate reaction might very well be, "Are you kidding? Enough with the philosophizing! Of course the mother is not lying: she's just trying to put her baby to sleep!"

But it's a serious question. Because we know all too well, especially after September 11, that everything is not all right. Death and destruction, anthrax, or smallpox, or dirty bombs, or shoelace fuses – they're all right out there. Ground Zero may have been cleaned up, but the tower of evil is burning right outside our windows.

Was Rabbi Shapira lying when he encouraged his flock? When he exhorted them to continue to study, to continue to observe mitzvot, even to continue to experience joy? When he taught them to look out for one another and to preserve the core of their identity?

Rabbi Shapira understood that, whatever we may fear, we must remain true to our values, our practices and our identity. He understood that if we abandon those values, if we abandon that behavior or that identity, then we truly are lost.

We are not, thank God, in the terrible situation in which Rabbi Shapira found himself. But we can learn from his wisdom and his courage and his faith. He understood that we can never let the perpetrators of evil have the last word. The fires of evil must be confronted with a holy fire.

In Psalm 130 we read, "*Esah einai el he-harim, me-ayin yavo ezri?*" "I lift up my eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my strength?" Where do we get the strength to carry on, to create what many survivors of 9/11 are calling "the new normal?" Where did Rabbi Shapira get the strength to keep teaching, week after week, in the Warsaw ghetto?

Generosity and kindheartedness, integrity and morality—these are not less worthwhile striving for because the world is a scary and dangerous place. The opposite. Lives devoted to those values bring us strength.

We are not the first to experience suffering and we won't be the last. Living a life that matters never did—it never could—promise relief from suffering. But it can help us endure it. It can help give us the strength to see beyond it.

There's a poem by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore entitled "Fruit-Gathering," which includes the following lines:

Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers
—but to be fearless in facing them.
Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain
—but for the heart to conquer it.

That mother comforting her child is certainly being honest if she knows who she is, she knows the values in which she believes, and she lives her life according to those values. In the presence of evil, which we may or may not be able to eradicate in our lifetimes, we can still believe in the power of the good deed, the power of presence, the power of love. We are not lying when we hug, comfort and reassure

our loved ones. That passage in the 23rd psalm, “*Lo irah rah, ki atah imadi*”—“I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me” can be a profoundly true statement, whatever may happen to us, whatever may happen to our loved ones.

As Abraham realized, our world, like a tower on fire, is threatened by evil. But it’s also true that a Holy Fire—a source of generosity, love, compassion, courage and faith—has been burning since Abraham-- spreading its glow, its illumination, its warmth. We are the children of Abraham. We are here today because we have been warmed and inspired by that fire. It burns in each one of us. As we enter a New Year, let us pray that through our commitment to our faith, our people and our way of life, we will continue to be illuminated by its glow, and let us pray that we will do our part to keep it burning for many years to come.

Amen.