

After the Ashes and the Attack: Anger

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We have just heard, and shall hear again more fully, during the musaf service the sound of the shofar blasts. Maimonides explains in the Mishneh Torah that the blasts are meant to summon us to arise from our slumber, so that we may search our deeds and repent. Its purpose, he wrote is so that, “Those who...indulge throughout the year in the useless things that cannot profit nor save you, will look into your souls, amend your ways and deeds to give up your evil ways.”

But this year, the piercing sound of the shofar evokes thoughts and images of other blasts. The sounds of bombs exploding, of ambulances and rescue vehicles rushing to save lives, the sounds of muezzins, (supposedly holy people) calling from their minarets for jihad, the slaughter of non-believers.

Originally, I wrote this opening passage to describe what has been taking place in Israel since last Rosh Hashana, and to introduce a sermon about Israel. But now, these words seem eerily to apply to what happened this past week in our country.

This is supposed to be a day when we celebrate the gift of life, when we Jews recognize the universality of our mission, a time of hope and new beginnings.

But it is difficult to feel the usual sense of optimism this year.

There are no words to express the indignation and mounting rage I have felt all week long, which has not diminished, but intensified with each revelation. Like you I have experienced a myriad of emotions this past week: Sadness and grief, a sense of loss and shock. We have shed many a tear this week, as we watched the horrifying images unfold before our eyes, and we have also been moved and touched by the stories of mercy and compassion shown by so many.

I know that I am supposed to stand here today and offer you hope and comfort, but I also have to be honest. How can I offer a message of faith, hope and human decency in the face of such premeditated evil?

And so, I, your rabbi, stand before you and confess that, on this Rosh Hashana, I am angry.

Who is the object of my anger, and what is the outlet for the anger that I feel?

First and foremost, I am angry at those who perpetrated such a terrible act. How can anyone, much less a *group* of individuals set out on a mission to attack innocent people for no reason other than the fact that they are citizens of a nation whose essence, ideals

and existence they both abhor and envy. I am upset with those who have irreparably altered our lives and deprived us our ever feeling safe and secure again.

Was there no one, not even one person, among all those who planned this attack who had the decency to pause and say: “Comrades, this is wrong. Innocent, good people will die, and thousands of families will suffer as a result of what we are planning to do.”

Did not any of them pause for a moment and realize that they were taking the lives and destroying the worlds of mothers and fathers, of sisters and brothers, leaving behind bereaved parents, siblings, children, and friends.

Who could not hear the story of Howard Lutnick, who lost all 700 people who worked with him, and cried as he spoke about the tremendous loss he and each of the families was experiencing, and not share his pain.

The more I think about the cruel-hearted calculated action, the angrier I get. You may think it is inappropriate for me, as a religious leader to feel or express this. But I am also a person, with human emotions. I read that a number of ministers preached on Sunday the importance of remaining calm and not getting angry.

But, it is precisely because of the religious teachings of my faith that I feel such a sense of indignation and moral outrage. It is precisely because our heritage teaches me to have compassion for others, because it maintains the importance of caring for and loving all of God’s creatures and upholds the value of human life, that I am so incensed when these basic principles which should be shared by all religions and people are violated. As a religious person, I am offended that people would use religion as a mask for primitive unbridled hatred.

After all, on this day Jews around the world affirm the beauty and value of all life. The Torah reading this past shabbat proclaims, “I have set before you this day, the blessing and the curse, uvecharta b’hayyim: Therefore, choose life!” Our tradition teaches that all people are created in God’s image, b’tzelem elohim.

I am angry at religious leaders who incite hatred and condone such an act.

I am angry at the nations who harbor these criminals and derelicts and at the regimes who finance them. I am angry at those who attempt to explain, rationalize and justify these crimes. I am angry at those who dance in the streets and who pass out candy to children to celebrate cold-blooded murder. I am angry at those who come on American television and speak sweet soft words in English to assuage and deceive us into believing that they deplore the act, but who say the opposite when they turn their backs and speak in their native tongue to their people, and whose very society celebrates and lauds these individuals as heroes. I am angry at those members of the news media who underreport, downplay or ignore the demonstrations of support and who naively overlook the connection between the terror we witnessed last week and what Israel has faced for years.

And I am especially angry at a world which has been silent and indifferent when the objects of these same kinds of attacks were Jews and Israelis, but which now suddenly realizes that since they may be the next target, something needs to be done. What hypocrites! Just imagine if the nations of the world would have stood with Israel in a concerted effort and assisted in combating terrorism instead of cowardly worrying about appeasing so-called “moderate” Arab governments.

As many of our nation’s leaders and commentators have reminded us, we must be careful not to assume that all Arabs or Moslems condone this terrorism. Needless to say, as Jews we understand what it means to be the subjects of prejudice, and must be careful not to assume that people are guilty by virtue of their religion or national origins. We should welcome the support of those who sincerely and honestly stand with America as it mourns the loss of these precious souls.

But by the same token, let this be the time when we hear from the Arab and Moslem community more than their justifiable concerns about the injustice of ethnic stereotyping, or rationalizations attempting to diminish the horror of the crime by discussing the sense of victimization which the perpetrators feel. Rather than merely denounce the attack on America, let them unequivocally reject the tactic of taking the lives of innocent civilians. The sick notion that suicide bombers merit a place in heaven must be renounced by all.

A few months ago, I had a simple idea, although nothing ever came of it. I wanted to circulate a petition among religious leaders throughout the world with the simple statement – “there is no place in heaven for people who take their own lives in order to kill others.” Period. That is all. Unfortunately, while many Islamic scholars say that suicide killings is a misinterpretation of Islamic teachings, the reality is that those voices are usually muted or threatened, and thus are all too rare.

There are all too many unchallenged citations from fanatic Islamic leaders that God will compensate the martyrs who sacrifice their lives with 70 virgins in heaven. As Naomi Ragen put it in the Jerusalem Post, a few weeks ago, “Horny Arab teenagers are being convinced the way to sex in the puritanical Arab world (where fathers routinely murder daughters who are even suspected of losing their virginity) is through hate-filled mass murders.”

The time has come for there to be a full “din vaheshbon”, soul searching in the Arab and Moslem world, the kind that we Jews did after a single crazed assassin acted alone and took the life of Yitzhak Rabin. Israel outlawed the political party of Meir Kahane because of the anti-Arab sentiments they expressed. During the summer, I saw a small article by a Palestinian who had the courage to ask tough questions. “What kind of society are we,” he wrote, “that celebrates sending young children into battle, uses them as human shields, and produces and promotes such hatred.” Let us promote, encourage, and differentiate between those who condemn, not just the bombing of the World Trade Center, but any and all suicide bombings. All the hateful, bigoted, anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist, anti-Western teaching and preaching which foments and creates an environment where these acts are incubated and bred must not be tolerated. Radical fundamentalism must be isolated and purged from their society.

And the western world cannot continue to be blind to the problem of this venomous hatred which is so pervasive in the culture of so many Arab nations. The number one song in Egypt is, “I hate Israel.”

So far, only one European nation has said that it will no longer pay for the publication of Palestinian textbooks until the anti-Semitic references are deleted—and that was Germany.

I am justifiably angry that Israel has had to go it alone for so long, and be condemned for any response, regardless of how measured, to terrorist attacks against its citizens. Its all right for America to protect its citizens, and avenge and fight these acts of terror, but not Israel?! Now it is ok, but two weeks ago it wasn't? It's ok for the United States to defy the terrorists, but Israel is supposed to negotiate with them and consent to their demands.

We must stand with our president, as he has committed the full force of this great nation in the battle to once and for all eradicate this evil from our planet. It is easy now to rally around the flag. It is all theoretical, visceral, and distant. The enemy seems so clearly to be evil incarnate. I hope our determination will not wane when the effort will take time, or after our media shows us pictures of the victims of our inevitable response, or after they counter-attack and there will be additional casualties.

I am angry, but I must admit, I am also worried. This battle will not be easy or short, and there will be additional loss of lives. But doing nothing will not solve the problem, for sadly, we have no alternative. And people who kill thousands of innocent people are not the kind of people one can sit and reason with.

I have heard some child psychologists counsel children that they should not harbor feelings of anger. And then I heard these children, wise beyond their years disagree and say that it is appropriate to want to punish and strike out against the people who have done such terrible things. After all, we also teach our children that there are consequences to our actions.

We must not forget or sugarcoat what these terrible people did, and the banality and depth of the evil we are fighting, and of our obligation to fight it with all our might.

While firmly advocating the zealous pursuit of peace, our Torah does not call for turning the other cheek. That is found in the part that was added later. The Torah says, “Haba l'hargecha, hashkem l'hargo: If one comes to take your life, you should rise up and take his first.” This is not anger or even revenge. It is called self defense, and is a tactic which ultimately preserves life.

Is there no source of hope and faith to come out of this tragedy? The stories of heroism and sacrifice that have emerged out of the ashes affirm and remind us how good a people we Americans are.

I am reminded of what Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai told his disciple, Rabbi Joshua after the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Looking at the ruins, he said that deeds of lovingkindness will now be the means to draw near to God.

His message is not lost on us. The goodness of our society and people will prevail, as we rebuild and resurrect that which cannot be torn down.

And we are also reminded by this terrible tragedy, a central theme of the holidays: to focus on what really matters, those nearest to us, and how precious life is. The precarious and tenuous nature of life itself has been indelibly impressed upon us by the horrifying images which will forever be emblazoned and seared upon our conscience after what we saw this past Tuesday.

Who among us is not moved and does not feel for the grieving families.

As we ask in the Unateneh Tokef, a prayer composed during the time of the Crusades, when Jewish martyrs had their lives taken: Who shall live and who shall die, who by fire and who by water?

How heart-wrenching to hear of the calls made to family members leaving one final message, that they love them. No messages about the mail or the errands which still had to be done. When confronted with certain death, ultimately, it was just the simple expressions of love, encouragement and concern which endure.

Jeremy Glick told his wife not to be sad, that he loved her, reassuring her that whatever he would respect whatever decisions she made in life, and to take care of their daughter.

Some did not get through and left messages on answering machines. One passenger told his wife to have fun in life, do the best she could, and that he would see her again.

28 year old Veronica Bowers called her mother from the restaurant where she worked, Windows on the World, the 106th floor, and said, "Momma, I can't breathe. The smoke is coming through the walls." And after a pause, "Momma, I love you." And those were the last words she ever spoke.

And that, too, is part of the meaning of Rosh Hashana. Life is limited. It calls upon us to put our priorities in order. It is a time to turn to those near to us -- friends, colleagues and family, and put aside the insignificant, petty differences which occasionally come between us. Let us tell them we love them. We forgive them. Hold them close. Enjoy and savor every moment together.

In light of all the senseless loss of the lives of so many good, decent people, how can you feel anything other than anger? Let this anger be channeled to give us unity of purpose and the resolve to defeat and overcome injustice, so that good will triumph. And let us not succumb to fear, for to do so is to give the terrorists a victory.

I could conclude my sermon here, on this point, but it would not be complete.

Allow me to share with you one last subject of my anger.

I confess to you that in addition to all the objects of my anger I have mentioned today, I am also angry at God.

Yes, in good Jewish fashion, I am angry with God. And the truth is I have been angry for several months --- for allowing all this suffering to occur, for allowing these forces of cruelty and agents of destruction to wreak such havoc. I know that these terrible people do not act in the name of God, although they try to invoke God and Allah as being on their side. Nevertheless, I sure wish there would be a sign of God's disgust – like if one of those big Buddhist statues the Taliban blew up would have fallen on the guys who were blowing them up.

When I hear about the children in Israel who have become orphaned, of the innocent individuals killed for no reason other than the fact they are Israeli, or American, I find it difficult to forgive God.

Earlier this year, a tender faced, bespectacled 11 year old, Dor Hershkowitz, stood over the open grave of his father who was shot while driving his car, and asked, “Who will prepare me now for my bar mitzvah?” And then three months later, Dor stood over another grave, this time of his older brother Assaf, also killed by Palestinian snipers, and cried, “You were like a father to me.”

Sometimes I cannot help but wonder if this God is deserving of our prayers and praise.

I am not being blasphemous. Our tradition teaches that God is big enough to accept our anger, and even encourages us to question and challenge Him.

Abraham railed against God and said, “*Hashofet kol haaretz lo taaseh mishpat?* Shall not the judge of all the earth act justly?” The story is told of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev challenging God one Yom Kippur. He stood before his congregation and said to God: “Your people may have sinned by occasionally forgetting to say some of the prayers, and doing other misdeeds. But that is nothing compared to your sins. You have separated parents from their children, and caused great suffering among your people. So let's just call it even – We will forgive You, if You forgive us.”

Do not misunderstand me. Like Rabbi Levi Yitzhak, and the Jews of old, I will yet love and cling to Him and to His ways. I will continue to pray to Him, believe in Him, teach His message, try to draw you closer to God, and to observe His mitzvot. I do all of this, in spite of His actions, or lack of action.

So, *Ribbono shel Olam*, I ask, no, I demand that You show us Your compassion. Mend Your ways. I am tired of being your apologist, of having to defend You and to make excuses for you. We will continue to do our part, to turn to You in prayer, to study and

practice our tradition, and to show our tenacious devotion to you by performing the commandments and deeds of lovingkindness.

I, Yehezkel ben Shmuel demand that you send healing. Help us to be strong and stay united and remain determined in our resolve. Help us to defeat thine enemies. Give us strength and courage. Let us win this battle, and then, maybe then, I will forgive You.

And if you cannot do that, then at least help us, when we are angry and afraid, so that yea, though we walk through the valley of death, we shall fear no evil, for thou art with us.

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