

“The Blessing of a Funeral”

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Erev Rosh Hashana 2001/5762*

How interesting and ironic – that words which were prepared prior to the tragic events of the last few days seem to be almost prescient.

In an article I wrote for the Potomac Almanac, which appeared in this week’s paper, I commented:

“It has been a difficult year as many innocent victims have been the targets of cruel and malicious deadly attacks. And so, part of the attraction and pull of the holidays may also be the need and desire to identify with one’s fellow Jews, even and perhaps especially in times of trouble.

We pray that the New Year will bring its blessing of peace, hope and prosperity for all.”

The editor told me, when she read it, at about 11 am on Tuesday morning, September 11, she did a double take. She saw that I had faxed it over to her at 6 am, several hours before the attacks in New York and Washington.

And I suspect that this year, there will be plenty of times when the words and prayers we recite, words of our prayer book will take on a special, unanticipated poignancy.

I have seen this happen already – where some of the liturgy which I have read hundreds of times, suddenly jumps out at me, with new meaning, as if calling out from the page to my consciousness to pay attention. They seem in an eerie fashion to be relevant and to express my longings, grappings, and inner emotions.

One such example is the interesting passage, which I have always thought of as being almost quaint – that we pray that for the residents of the Sharon Valley that their homes not become their graves. And now as we have witnessed people’s whose offices have become their graves, these words also acquire a new status.

So this is my message to you as we usher in this evening these Yamim HaNoraim, the Days of Awe. Pray with all your heart, and all your might, and listen to the words, let them enter your heart.

With that in mind, I tell you now the story I had planned to share with you this evening – long before I ever knew what would transpire on September 11, 2001.

I wanted to tell you a story about a funeral I conducted this past year. After we had finished the service, and placed the dirt on the coffin, while still standing at the graveside,

an elderly woman stepped forward to say a few words. It was unusual. She did not even ask for permission to address those gathered. She just started to speak.

She wanted all of us standing there to know how lucky this person was to have a funeral, a proper burial, with friends and family in attendance. How fortunate this individual was to be laid to rest in accordance with Jewish customs and rituals.

The remarks were puzzling. But not if you knew that the person who spoke and the one whom we had just buried were both Holocaust survivors. She explained that so many Jews never had a proper burial, that their graves are unknown, and their loved ones were not with them and could not perform the mitzvah of hesed shel emet, the final act of kindness we can do for another person.

She said how fortunate this person was to live to see his children and his children's children; to know and enjoy the freedom offered by this land, and to have a grave.

That is the story I intended to share with you this evening.

I never before thought it was a blessing to have a grave and burial. But as I said, at the outset, everything seems now to have a new and different context.

As we think about the brave firefighters, who lost their lives rushing in to save others, of the people who perished in the destruction of the buildings and planes exploded last week, and who are buried in the ashes and debris, we mourn their loss, and understand the words expressed by this woman.

As we enter the days of Awe, may we be grateful for the blessings we enjoy, and may the prayers of our people be a source of comfort.

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Erev Rosh Hashana 2001
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