

September 11: One Year Later -  
How Much Has Changed, How Much Has Not

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All year long, I collect material which I consider using for the high holidays. A few weeks or months before Rosh Hashana, I begin the process of reviewing what I have gathered. When something doesn't make the cut one year, I often keep it and put it back into the file in case I might be able to use it sometime in the future. As I was reviewing articles a few weeks ago, something jumped out at me, not so much because of the subject matter, but because I couldn't help but notice the date.

The article was about the firing of volatile Indiana University basketball coach Bobby Knight. I had thought about using the example in a sermon exploring issues about temper and temperament, judgment and evaluation, as well as the matter of responsibility and decision making. Since I did not address those issues at the time, I saved the article in the "out-takes" file.

It turns out I am not speaking about those themes this year, so when I came across it again, I was about to re-relegate it to the file for future consideration, or to chuck it altogether, when something caught my eye. The article was dated September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

It just so happens, for whatever reason, I had not saved just the one story, but the entire paper. I eerily scanned the pages, as if I could find some clue or foreshadowing of the ominous and foreboding events that would take place exactly one year later, and which would come to overshadow all other associations with that fateful day. But alas, it yielded no clues.

Our world is so different than it was before those apocalyptic images became seared into our consciousness. It is impossible to hear the numbers 9-11 and not instinctively connect it with collapsing buildings, planes crashing and a world torn asunder by the horrors wreaked upon our nation by evil terrorists. So embedded in our psyche is the date that someone apparently attempted to patent the words, "September 11, 2001."

More than just the skyline of New York was destroyed and changed that day. And the closer we get to the anniversary, the more we are reminded of things we may have finally succeeded in repressing, including memories of the unprecedented horror and uncertainty of what it felt like to have the foundation of our world taken from us. We cannot help but be overcome by feelings of emptiness and sorrow when we think about the 3,000 families robbed of people precious and dear to them.

We no longer take for granted so many things we used to overlook. Things like freedom, patriotism, the flag, public service officers, virtue and valor, and what it means to be an American.

So many aspects of our routine and way of life, as well as our perspective on what is important and what really matters, have all been permanently altered.

Has anyone taken an airplane lately? We have adjusted to long waits, random checks, metal detectors, emptying our pockets, answering questions about the whereabouts of our luggage, being “wanded”, and shoe inspections. Gone are the days when you could travel in socks with holes.

Our very notion of security is radically different. Americans feel uncomfortable in their new role as victims and targets. People express fears not previously known in this country. Tall buildings and being in a crowd evoke previously unheard of concerns. We live with a new-found sense of uncertainty, vulnerability, and even impotence.

Just a year ago, when word of the magnitude of the catastrophe took hold, people ran to bring their children home from school. I tried to understand why it was so important for people to be home with their families. It may be because people needed to know that the ones they cared about were safe and to reassure their loved ones that they were all right. They may have felt most secure in the sheltering, protecting, embracing shield which can only be found in the comfort of one’s family.

The tragedy reminded us of the importance of families and loved ones, as well as the value of each individual life, concepts fostered by Jewish teachings, which affirms that whoever saves a single life, saves an entire world. The New York Times series, “Portraits of Grief” put a face and story to each of the lives taken, giving us the chance to share the pain of the hopes, dreams and aspirations that were destroyed in an instant. One cannot read about these innocent people without thinking of the fathers who will not be there to attend soccer matches, the mothers who will not share the joy of a child’s accomplishments, the parents deprived of the love of their children.

Our collective brush with death renewed our appreciation of those closest to us.

The fixation over the plight of the nine minors recently trapped in a mine shaft and the celebration of their rescue reflected this reality. The incident once again brought out the best in us, as qualities of cooperation and self-sacrifice triumphed. They exemplified the legacy of 9/11 about interdependence and reminded us that our fate as humans is literally and figuratively tied together and to each other. Trapped for three days in a deep underground shaft flooded with water, the men tied themselves together to preserve body heat and so that they, in their words, would, “live or die as a group.”

In the aftermath of the attacks, and the juxtaposition of those seeking to save and preserve life at the very sight of destruction we reassessed and redefined our concept and understanding of heroism. We were touched and inspired by new heroes, such as Brian Clark, Rick Rescoria, Harry Ramos, and countless others who worked in the World Trade Center and repeatedly risked their lives to rescue total strangers, as well as the thousands of fire fighters, police, medics and rescue workers who put aside personal instincts of survival and self preservation to sacrifice for others.

By the end of that fateful day, which started as such a beautiful, clear day, there were no distinctions between black and white, white collar or blue collar, rich or poor. United as never before, no longer were we a nation of strangers.

Indeed, things have changed. Or have they?

At first we were reluctant to leave our homes. All activities were canceled. Eventually, however, we set out -- somewhat tentatively, and cautiously. Then, slowly but surely, we started to resume our normal schedules and daily routines, with only minor accommodations and nuisances caused primarily by our new found obsession with security.

One of the first places people instinctively turned to was their houses of worship. Synagogues and churches around the country experienced a significant increase in attendance in the days and weeks immediately following the tragedy. There was a noticeable turn to religion for comfort, answers, and as the place to raise and ask difficult questions.

But unfortunately, that phenomena was short-lived. All too quickly, people reverted to their normal routines and absented themselves from regular attendance at worship services.

People seemed more courteous, humbled and respectful of others, at least for a time.

Those prolonged hugs and long good-byes have given way to our old ways and more perfunctory salutations.

Dr. Alvin Rosenfeld author of *The Overscheduled Child* said in a recent interview that one of the ancillary benefits of our national tragedy was that we started talking with our children about things that mattered. Parental discussions focused on things other than just the logistics of who is picking up whom when. It is important, he maintains to let children know that they are not the center of the world, and that there is a world beyond them. He lamented that the conversations of substance about worldly affairs have subsided.

Even those first few baseball games were patriotic acts of defiance. But, the national pastime has become, once again, business as usual.

It did not take too long for people to resume less than admirable business practices of questionable ethics. The landscape of false promises and failed companies is littered with once proud and trusted names such as Enron, WorldCom, Adelphia, Rite Aid, Tyco and yes, even Martha Stewart. Thousands of employees and shareholders have lost jobs and billions of dollars due to the corruption and greed of a few who cared only about lining their own pockets. Our current fiscal crisis stems from more than just greed. The very economic security of our country is shaken by the unbridled egocentric avarice of a few and their blatant disregard for others. The Financial Times of London estimates that

executives of the 25 largest public companies to go bankrupt since January of 2001 pocketed \$ 3.3 billion, by means of deception and by selling their shares before the true condition of their firms became known to the investing public and their employees. This is what happens when people think only about themselves and their lust for greater wealth, ignoring the impact their actions will have on others. This is what happens when there are no constraints of conscience or consideration of the consequences of one's actions.

Did we have to forget so quickly that we are supposed to care about things of more lasting value than material things and how much money we can accumulate? Did we have to ignore so hastily the lesson that life is lived with others.

People are left wondering who can they trust?

And speaking of trust and bears, (as in the current bear market), the joke about two men being chased in the woods by a bear comes to mind. The first man pauses long enough to put on a pair of sneakers, explaining, he needs to outrun the bear. His companion says, "I look at it differently. I'm not worried about outrunning the bear. All I have to do is be able to outrun you."

Or in our current climate, I am reminded of the man who asked his attorney if he would answer two questions for \$ 500. The attorney responded, "Sure. Now tell me, what's your second question."

It really is quite remarkable how much and how quickly things have gone back to normal.

Why is this, and what does it tell us about human nature?

It is prompted, in part, by the fact that people can handle only so much. A recent article in the Washington Post reporting on the state of the media post 9/11 detailed how editors and journalists agonize over the dilemma of balancing their coverage with people's need not to dwell upon that which is excessively morbid and sorrowful, while at the same time not being overly superficial by reporting on gossip, showbiz personalities and other trivialities.

It is necessary and even healthy for us to get our lives back to normal, for that is how we humans cope with trauma and make sense of reality. We would not be able to live in a constant state of alert, or in a constant state of mourning. Judaism, through its practice of shiva and observance of yahrzeit offers a framework for mourning which gently guides us back to the land of the living and to resuming our lives, while recognizing the importance of and retaining the ability to remember.

In the quest to preserve the moment and honor the memory of the victims, communities have struggled with the appropriate means of marking the upcoming anniversary. Should the time the planes crashed into the buildings be commemorated, or should it be the time the Twin Towers collapsed? And what should be the nature of the memorial? Do we

mark just this first anniversary, or should we sustain it by marking the anniversary each year?

We Jews know the power of ritual and of setting aside time and designating days to recall sacred events. Holidays are celebrated by individuals with various rituals and ceremonies in the context of home and family, communities and synagogues. It creates the mechanism which permits us to move on, while still holding on.

How fortunate we are to have these yamim haNoraim which give us the opportunity to pause and reflect, in the presence of our community, upon these issues, to assess where we fall short, and to renew our commitment to align ourselves with the ideals of our prayers .

Ironically, the same ancient practices which offer us stability and moorings call upon us to recognize that we have the capacity to make changes. Clinging to our tradition is precisely what allows us to be liberated from the shackles of those habits we must abandon and make the changes in our character which God demands of us. Our heritage holds out the possibility that teshuva, growth and character development is possible. If we do not come away from such a profound experience with a lasting appreciation for what should truly matter in life, what hope is there that we will ever “get it.” Whatever we as a society learn from the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> is precisely what we Jews affirm each year through our observance of these holy days.

It is illustrated in a moving, well-known story told in the Talmud. One shabbat afternoon Rabbi Meir was holding his weekly shabbat discourse when unbeknownst to him his two young sons died suddenly at home. Their grief stricken mother, the learned woman, Beruriah carried the children to her room and covered them with a sheet. Her husband was puzzled when he returned from synagogue, as to why his sons had not joined him there, but she did not say anything until they had made havdalah and shabbas was over. Once shabbat had officially concluded, she turned to him and said, “Not long ago, some precious jewels were entrusted to my care. Now the owner has come to reclaim them. Shall I return them?” Rabbi Meir replied, “Of course. The law is clear that they must be returned.” At that point she revealed their loss, and Rabbi Meir burst into bitter weeping. Tearfully, Beruriah comforted him by saying, “Did you not say that we must restore to the owner what He entrusted to our care? Our sons were the jewels which God left with us and now their Master has taken them back.”

Whether one agrees with the theology of the tale or not, I share it with you because it illustrates the message that we should recognize that life, and indeed all things precious are not permanent, but lent to us. It is when we recognize the fragility and tangential nature of that which we cherish that we appreciate and value it that much more.

If there is any one lesson we should have learned from September 11<sup>th</sup>, as well as from the teachings of our sages it is that we should treasure the loved ones with whom we share life’s journeys, for we know not when they will no longer be with us.

And we also should have learned that the material objects we have are best used when shared rather than hoarded on ourselves.

And what about God? What about those who expressed anger at a God who allows cruelty to have the upper hand?

Sometimes we have to be forgiving, even of God. As Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev said, "You have to be a fool to believe in God, and an idiot not to believe."

While we may never be able to fully comprehend the source behind such evil, and how people could be so intent upon wiping out and tearing down and who could spend years and all their energy and resources planning such a violent act, we can appreciate the forces of good which rallied to overcome the destruction. God is present in both places, and God is clearly absent as well. The question is which voice of God do we respond to and ally ourselves with. The choice is ours.

Engraved on the wall of the home for children in Calcutta founded by Mother Teresa are words she wrote to inspire people to live life with hope and purpose:

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered;  
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;  
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;  
Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;  
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;  
Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;  
Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;  
Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough.  
Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God;  
It was never between you and them anyway.

Her advice and insights are certainly inspiring and a good way to lead one's life. I would however, contest her concluding words. In the final analysis, I would say what is between adam l'havero, between people is of fundamental import to God. Our tradition teaches us that God cares about how we treat His creatures, for it is all interrelated and intertwined, for we are each created b'tzelem elohim, in the image of God.

And so, as we approach the anniversary of this travesty which still defies comprehension, and as we stand today on this Yom HaDin, Day of Judgment, transformed, and yet the same, may we take to heart and reaffirm all that is good in life. May we be granted the wisdom to change that which You call upon us to change and to preserve that which is of lasting value.

Zochrenu l'hayim, melech hafetz b'hayim, Remember us unto life, O king who delights in life. May we affirm that we will do all we can to ensure that life and goodness is triumphant. Bayom hahu, For on that day, the Lord shall be one, yehiyeh adonai echad, ushmo echad, and His name shall be one.

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