A Thought For Shabbat

By Rabbi Shaul Robinson

Shabbat Shalom

I was viewing a picture of the twin towers during an online memorial service for 9/11 and an association I had never made before occurred to me. Shabbat Candles. Those two towers - to be commemorated tonight, as every year - in the form of mighty beams of light - reminded me of Shabbat Candles. Not just physically, but philosophically two.

Shamor  Vzachor Bidibur Echad - “Guard and Remember, was stated in one utterance” , in the words of the Friday Night Prayer ‘Lecha Dodi’.

This is a reference to the two ‘versions’ of the 10 Commandments - which contain these two different instructions for how to keep Shabbat.

Shamor - means to ‘guard, to keep’ - it is a reference to the laws of Shabbat - specifically to the ‘negative’ prohibitions - what we are not allowed to do on Shabbat in other words , the 39 Melachot (categories of Labor).

One who breaks Shabbat violates the commandment ‘Shamor’ - they have failed to guard it from desecration.

What is Zachor? How does one ‘remember’ Shabbat. According to the Rabbis, in two ways. One is to declare its holiness, to, for example, recite Kiddush when it arrives, Havdalah when it ends. This means to ‘remember’ why we have Shabbat - a day that commemorates the Creation of the Universe and the Exodus from Egypt.

But there is an additional element to Zachor as well. Rashi, quoting the Sages, says “ take care to remember always the Sabbath day — that if, for example, you come across a nice article of food during the week, put it by for the Sabbath “

Zachor in this sense means to anticipate the coming of Shabbat. We name the days of the week - (Rishon, Sheni) as a count towards Shabbat. When we come across a particularly nice item of food - we buy it for Shabbat. We don't merely ‘remember’ Shabbat on Shabbat itself. We ‘remember’ it by awaiting it, looking forward to, preparing for it - all week long.

Perhaps this thought is particularly relevant as we enter the last Shabbat of the Jewish year 5780 - every Shabbat should be kept this way. Not just by observing the laws, and by recalling why we keep it - but we remember Shabbat all week long. Certainly there have been Shabbatot this past year that have felt to me, personally at least, as a life boat in a storming sea. I have yearned to be able to finally turn off my phone, stop checking the news, stop responding to a situation that is both permanent and seemingly constantly changing.

But it’s a relevant way of thinking about 9/11. So much changed - all over the world - on 9/11. People discovered threats and dangers that they had been previously unaware of. The world revealed itself to be dangerous in unthinkable ways. And ‘Shamor’ - protect - became the urgency of the moment. Security, anti-terroism - wars happened. Defense, in every sense of the word, was urgent. And it still is. (Let us not forget that this year 5780 was also marred by a series of horiffic anti-semitic attacks, including the Jersey City murders and countless violent attacks on Jews all over New York.)

And then of course there is Zachor - to remember. To remember the victims, the heroes, all those who died, those who sacrificed themselves to save others.  We must never forget.

But when I see the  beams of light , the ‘Shabbat Candles’ of 9/11 I think about the other type of Zachor. The looking forward Zachor. Because as we have seen, Zachor / memory does not merely refer to the past, it refers to the future as well.

Can we remember 9/11 that cause us to imagine a better future? That the innocence of life before that terrible day may be regained. That we will not ALWAYS need to live with layers and layers of security. Can we remember for the future such a time? And on 9/11 so many people learned that life was about more than work, the office. And on 9/11 this country was united in ways that seem today to be frankly impossible. Can we ‘remember’ all of this that makes a better world possible? Without going back to the terror of these days, can we use the memory to strengthen and inspire us to be builders, fixers of the world.

Let us remember that Rosh Hashanah is called in the Torah ‘Yom Hazikaron’  - the day of Memory. Yes of course on Rosh hashanah G-d recalls our past deeds, the past year. But Yom HAzikaron is actually all about next year - about reminding ourselves that we can do wonderful things in the coming year. Its about looking forward - with resolve, and anticipation - to a year of blessings.

Even the worst of times pass. Even in tragic times, we dont only remember what has been lost, we anticipate what will improve, what will recover, what we will celebrate.

Perhaps appropriately (in fact, most definitely appropriately) for 9/11 as I finish these words, I read of the announcement that Bahrain has recognized the State of Israel and the two countries will normalize relations.

The world can get better. The world does get better. Please, always - zachor - remember that.

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