

9/11, 20 Years Later
Yom Kippur 5782/2021
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If you ever need a large quantity of lettuce washed, checked for tiny bugs, and prepped for lunch service, I'm your rabbi. That was my work-study job as a sophomore undergrad at the Jewish Theological Seminary in the city, and I was elbow-deep in cold water and lettuce leaves on that bright-blue Tuesday morning seared in all our memories. The cooks in the JTS kitchen loved listening to the radio, so we heard the news immediately and gathered around.

For some reason, I think I went to my first class that day, and pretty immediately got sent back to my dorm. Perhaps the gravity of what had just transpired hadn't sunk in yet. Our dorm room phones weren't working, and I'm not even sure I owned a cell phone that long ago. Our entire college gravitated to the basement common room of the Mathilde Schechter Residence Hall, where we tried to comprehend what we were seeing on the TV. At some point, I walked down to St Luke's Hospital on 113th Street to donate blood, and the line wrapped around the block. The streets were packed with cars trying to get out; not a horn honked. People were walking home, dazed, from Manhattan to Westchester, to Connecticut, to New Jersey. I don't remember when I finally reached my parents that day. A college classmate reminded me this week that we learned a new word that day: upwind. We couldn't see Ground Zero from Morningside Heights, but we could smell it.

This past Shabbat, September 11, 2021, I invited congregants at Friday night and Shabbat morning services to share their 9/11 stories. Each of us has one, and if you're like me, you've got this *drive* to share it when the occasion arises. I learned of Harvey Hennes, who worked right there and escaped--thank God; and Don Shaefitz, who witnessed from his office window the towers crumbling. I learned of David Hirshfield, who was on a train headed downtown that got stopped, then crawled downtown to pick up as many passengers as could squeeze in before heading back north. I learned of Deborah Gordon, who was on her way to a meeting in the Towers but rerouted to a hospital because of contractions--thank God for Sarah. We're New York-adjacent, so we've all got our stories and our close calls. They will stay with us forever.

September 11, 2001. 20 years ago. As clear as day for millions, and, unbelievably, *history* for so many.

We are gathered together on this sacred Day of Atonement, just 5 days after this momentous anniversary. Today we engage in the twin charges of pursuing our own *teshuvah*, our realignment with our true selves, and remembering the horrific losses of that

day, the worst attack on American soil. And lest we think that these ideas don't or can't come together on this day, let me assure you--it's all in the machzor. Like we did on Rosh HaShanah, we will turn today to the words:

בְּרֵאשִׁי הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתָּבוּן...וּבְיוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחַתְמוּן
מִי יִחְיֶה וּמִי יָמוּת, מִי בְּקִצּוֹ וּמִי לֹא בְּקִצּוֹ

“On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed...who shall live and who shall die, **who will live a long life and who will come to an untimely end..**”¹

This past Shabbat, we read of Moshe transferring the mantle of leadership to his disciple, Joshua. He says to the people: “I am now one hundred and twenty years old, I can no longer be active, for God has told me that I will not cross the Jordan River.” 120 years is a long life by all standards. In fact, it's THE standard in our tradition. Someone has a birthday? We wish them “Happy Birthday! May you live to 120!”

More crucially, as Rabbi Robyn Fryer Bodzin notes, Moshe arrived at his ripe old age with the knowledge that his life was going to come to an end. He had time to prepare himself *and* time to prepare the entire nation. Time to share his deepest wishes for them, time to encourage them to follow the mitzvot--see the entire book of Deuteronomy--time to grieve *with* them, time to be appreciated *by* them, time to gaze into the Promised Land, time to say goodbye. *Mi b'kitzo?* Moshe lived a long, full life.

One of the most painful parts of the 9/11 attacks, which features so prominently in every 9/11 story, is the sheer abruptness of it all. “They had no idea they wouldn't come home that day”, we've heard so many times over these 20 years. Lives cut short, relationships ended in tragedy, families ripped apart without warning, babies soon to be born to grieving mothers. Most never had the chance to say goodbye. *Mi lo b'kitzo?* 2, 977 beloved individuals met an awful, tragic, untimely end.

I learned this week of reports of Orthodox men scrambling to call their wives from the crumbling towers--yes, to say goodbye, but more specifically, to tell them that they were going to jump and would certainly not survive. The reason? So their wives would not need to worry about becoming *agunot*, halachically chained to them in case they were still alive--somewhere, somehow--and therefore forbidden from remarrying.

I suspect that these men did one other thing before they jumped, although they wouldn't necessarily have told anyone. I'm sure they followed a well-known piece of advice given by Rabbi Eliezer in the Mishnah², some 2000 years ago. He told his students: “Repent, even if only one day before your death.” It was a great piece of advice, but his students raised the

¹ Mahzor Lev Shalem 315

² Babylonian Talmud Tractate Shabbat 153a

obvious issue: "Does any person know what day they will die?" Rabbi Eliezer responded: "Then all the more reason that you should repent today. For should a person die tomorrow, their entire life will have been spent in repentance."

It haunts me to return to this teaching in light of 9/11. I'm sure it wasn't only the Jews facing their death who paused to pray, to shout or mutter something meaningful before they died--if they had that chance. The Lord's Prayer. The Shema. A whispered "I'll love you forever". It's human nature to seek control within the chaos, to bring meaning to our final seconds, to get our affairs in order--if we possibly can.

Today, we hold the memory of that day, even as we examine our own souls. We hope for a death *b'kitzo*, in good time, like Moshe; and yet it would behoove us, too, to follow the advice of Rabbi Eliezer, for we certainly do not know when our time will come.

Our traditional liturgy contains a multitude of opportunities for us to heed that call. We are most familiar with the prayers of this sacred day, with its repetitions of *Ashamnu* and *Al Chet*, begging us to acknowledge where we have missed the mark, pleading with us to make ourselves vulnerable for the sake of repair. But we need not wait until Yom Kippur. The Amidah in every single weekday service--morning, afternoon, and evening--includes an ask for forgiveness for sin--*S'lach lanu Avinu ki chatanu*--"Forgive us, *Avinu*, for we have sinned"; *M'chal lanu Malkeinu, ki fashanu*--"Pardon us, *Malkeinu*, for we have transgressed--for Your nature is to forgive and pardon." Whether or not you engage in daily formal prayer is your own purview, but this notion of continually attending to our relationships, of regularly examining our own souls--well, that feels like prudent advice for every Jew, for every human being.

There's one other Jewish opportunity for repentance, and this stems directly from Rabbi Eliezer's advice to his students. This opportunity comes once in a lifetime, at or near the end of our lives. We call it the *vidui*, or confession, and it is an extended version of that daily prayer, asking God to accept our death as atonement for our sins, should we die. It concludes with the recitation of the Shema, the final time a person utters or hears these sacred words. Woven among the words of the *vidui*, we hope, are reminiscences of a person's life, reassurances that they are not alone, and expressions of love and gratitude as they near their final breaths. As a rabbi, I have to say that being present near the end of someone's life and reciting the words of *vidui* is an unparalleled honor. Sometimes I've recited them alone, other times holding hands with the family and caressing the hand of the person who is transitioning from this world. I hope each of us has the opportunity to experience this loving ritual at the end of our days. How I wish there was even one minute for it 20 years ago...

Over the last 20 years, we have witnessed and participated in the transformation of 9/11 from an active national trauma to the most tragic event in American history, part of our individual and collective memories. Ritual helps. As the summer fades each year and the air turns a bit crisper, we know to look for the Twin Towers-sized light beams in Lower Manhattan; for the bells sounded at 8:46am and 9:03am, 9:37am, and 10:03am; for the salutes to the first responders; for the reading of the names--so, so many names.

As we mark this 20th anniversary, we ask ourselves: What have we learned from the September 11 attacks? Quite a lot. We learned that America isn't as impenetrable as we once thought; our national psyche has surely changed because of that. We learned that there are people who hate American progressive values, who hate our passion for equality and freedom. We learned about PTSD in droves and through the generations. We learned a lot about politics and war, even to this day. And we learned that our country can indeed come together when we are hurting.

Our country has pledged to "Never Forget". These twin words strike us as so very American, and yet they mirror another sacred pledge: *Zachor*, Remember. Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, once taught: "I don't live in the past. But what can I do? The past lives in me."³ And so, too, do we carry the events and the stories of September 11, 2001 within each of us.

If you're here in the sanctuary, if you're home on Zoom, if you're watching on Livestream, I'd ask you--if you're able--to rise for a Memorial Prayer and moment of silence, as we remember the victims of 9/11:

265 by plane

2,606 in the World Trade Center and in the surrounding area

125 at the Pentagon

343 members of the NYC Fire Department

71 law enforcement officers in New York

1 law enforcement officer near Shanksville, Pennsylvania

And 55 military personnel who died at the Pentagon

2,977 in all.

[moment of silence]

At the Hand of Terror II: A 9-11 Memorial Prayer by Alden Solovy

Creator of all, Source and shelter,

Grant a perfect rest under your tabernacle of peace

³ Rabbi David Gutterman, *Yom HaZikaron: The Day of Remembrance*, Dov Peretz Elkins, page 201

To those who died in the 9/11 attacks on the United States.
Remember the works of their hands And the message of their hearts.
Grant their families peace and comfort for Your name's sake And for the sake of those who
perished. Bring an end to violence and terror, speedily, in our days.
May their memories be sanctified with joy and love.
May their souls be bound up in the bond of life, a living blessing in our midst. Amen.

[be seated]

In their memory, and as a commitment to this day and to ourselves, may each of us strive to
heed Rabbi Eliezer's call. May we repent, even a little, each day.