

Mourning Our Temple

By Haskel Lookstein

(What follows is an edited and expanded version of the sermon I delivered on July 23, 2011, Shabbat Mattot, in the presence of a dozen firefighters of Engine Company 22 and Ladder Company 13 of the FDNY's 10th Battalion – our neighbors on East 85th Street. In part, this sermon was a salute to the more than 170 firefighters who heroically fought and extinguished the blaze that ravaged KJ on Monday night, July 11th.)

We are in the period known as Bein Ha-Metzarim – between the straits. The straits reflect our experience of loss, sorrow and feeling closed in, as we mourn the two Temples that were destroyed approximately 700 years apart. The straits also reflect the feeling of the KJ/Ramaz community as we confront the catastrophic fire that engulfed our Main Sanctuary and threatened the surrounding neighborhood, including the building that houses the Ramaz Lower School.

It is now three and-a-half weeks since the fire; in effect, very close to the end of *Sh'loshim*, the thirty day period which completes the time of mourning after the loss of a precious life. I reflect, in particular, on one call, among the hundreds which I received from all over the world. It was from Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein, one of the leaders of Yeshivat Har Etzion and the son of its illustrious founder, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein. Rav Moshe doesn't know me that well but he reached out to me less than 24 hours following the fire, just before our late afternoon *Tehillim* service on Tuesday, July 12th. He wanted to know, "How are you holding up?"

I told him that the night before I was somewhat in shock. There were no tears and I didn't have much to say. I watched with horror as it appeared that the synagogue in which I had spent my entire life was being destroyed, and I contemplated the awesome responsibility of galvanizing the community to rebuild it from the ground up. On the following morning, on the advice of Rabbi Weinstock, I served as the *Shaliach Tzibbur* for the last part of the morning service and, as I recited the words "God will answer you on the day of your pain," I burst into tears and I could not recover until after the reciting of *U'va'l'tzion* and the *Kaddish Shalem* which follows.

Rav Moshe, listening to my account, observed that I was experiencing the two different phases of mourning which the Rav, of blessed memory (his grandfather), had analyzed as *aninut*, (the period between the death of a loved one and the burial) and *aveilut* (the period following the burial). In the first period, *aninut*, there is only shock and silence. There is no response. There is no prayer. There are no performances of

mitzvot. Simply a stunning silence! After the burial, there begins a long period of *aveilut* involving reflection, analysis, grief and hope.

It is that second phase of the mourning experience which we began on the day after the fire and which we continue until today. I experience that *aveilut* reflection period in three ways:

First: an appreciation of what it appeared we had lost: our home, our history, our experiences, our joyous occasions, our moments of bereavement. These were represented by my tears that Tuesday morning, but they also were expressed in the hundreds of solidarity telephone calls, notes, essays, poems, and other forms of communication that my colleagues and I received from so many people in so many places. It was extraordinarily encouraging to receive these expressions from all over America, from Europe, of course from Israel, from former *shul* members, from Ramaz alumni and parents, from communal leaders who reached out to offer every kind of help possible. In some respects, it was as if we were sitting *shiva* and the world was coming to console us. That was the first part of the *aveilut* period.

Second: A realization of what we did not lose. We lost part of a building, but not a community. We seemed to have lost a place in which we held our services, but we did not lose the nature of our services, the things for which we uniquely pray, the way in which we uniquely pray, the solidarity we feel with our brothers and sisters all over the world, and especially in Israel, the constant remembrance of Gilad Shalit, whose picture is now on the front wall of the Ramaz Middle School Auditorium in which our Shabbat services are being held this summer. We didn't lose any of that. If you want a more complete reflection on all that we did *not* lose, please read the essay, which follows my sermon, by Steven Schacter; an alumnus, a parent of four alumnae, a past Chair of the Ramaz Board, and the first grandchild of my father, the founder of Ramaz, Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein. Profound, poignant and powerful, it is well worth reading and preserving.

Finally, my third reflection on the aftermath of the fire is the same as the instinct I had as I watched the flames. Our job is not to grieve, to mourn, or to ask why. Our job is to ask, "What can we do?" I didn't realize it at the time, as I spoke to the media that Monday night, but this reaction I learned after a personal catastrophe that occurred to the Brown family in our community. Alan Brown, then 21, was struck by a wave and in an instant he became a quadriplegic, his life changed forever. I recall that on the Shabbat following Alan's horrific accident, I had to address a stunned congregation. Here was a precious child from our community who had the innate goodness to volunteer after his Bar Mitzvah to serve on our Chevra Kadisha. How could such a thing have happened to a kid who was so good (his Hebrew name is "Tuvia," which means goodness)? I told the congregation that there was no use in asking why or how could this happen, because there would never be answers. The only question to ask was "What can we do?" And over the years we, as a community, have done a great deal to help Alan Brown but, more importantly, Alan Brown has done an incredible job of helping himself. In the hospital, some two weeks later, he said to me, "Rabbi, I am

going to beat this; I am going to get through this; I am going to come out OK.” He wasn’t asking why or how could it happen to me; he was asking how should I respond. There was nothing he could do about the hand he was dealt. There was *everything* he could do about how to deal with that hand.

And so Alan Brown did. He built a public relations business. He married; he had two sons. He has devoted much of his life, through the Alan Brown Foundation, to helping other victims of spinal cord injury deal with their personal catastrophes. He is an inspiration to anyone who has experienced loss, and today that includes all of us.

In truth, that is the way in which a community should respond. We don’t need a Biblical text for this. Sometimes the text is in life itself, or in a person and how that person responds to crisis.

Three and-a-half weeks after the fire, it is clear that the KJ/Ramaz community has responded precisely that way, not asking why or how, but rather what. The professional and lay leadership of the two institutions have worked tirelessly to provide temporary relief in this situation in which we find ourselves finding – with the help of others – suitable places in which to temporarily house the services of both the shul and the school. And work has already begun, vigorously and effectively, to rebuild. Most of the debris has been removed; the Main Sanctuary’s roof is being closed in. Miraculously, we have found that most of the Sanctuary is intact. Work has begun to repair the water damage in the school. The construction project which was well under way this summer in the Ramaz Lower School, has now been resumed with all deliberate speed. This has all been accomplished in a brief period marked by the supreme effort of the lay people and professionals; the same lay people and the professionals who had, thank God, ensured, by proper insurance policies, that Ramaz and KJ would be protected against just such a catastrophic event. This was a great blessing! Imagine where we would be today without the brilliant forethought of our leadership.

As we approach Tisha b’Av, the culmination of the mourning period of the Jewish people, we as a community approach the completion of our collective sh’loshim. In so doing, we thank God for the miracles which we beheld with our own eyes: for the heroism and effectiveness of the New York City Fire Department; for the extinguishing of the flames before our Main Synagogue could be devastatingly destroyed; for everyone who has helped in every conceivable way; and for the determination of KJ and Ramaz to rebuild, to restore, to reconstruct and to continue to serve the Jewish people in the tradition of our founders and with our philosophy of the love of God, Torah, the Jewish people, and the State of Israel.

On Tisha b’Av night we always begin our service with a statement of faith from the Jerusalem Talmud: “One who mourns the destruction of Jerusalem will merit to rejoice in its reconstruction.”

May this promise be fulfilled for our community and for all Israel.

And the Temple Burned
By Steven Schacter

This is a time of year when Jews are expected to think back and lament the flames that ravaged its two holy temples in Jerusalem. The three weeks that began on July 19th, the 17th of Tamuz, and will culminate on the 9th of Av, three weeks from now, mark the period between the breaching of the city walls of Jerusalem and the ultimate destruction of the Temple. Two millennia ago, and seven hundred years before that, not one, but two holy temples—THE holy temples—were destroyed and burned nearly to the ground, leaving nothing more than the ruins one can see in Jerusalem today.

One might expect that this period would have particular resonance for me this year as I think about the four alarm fire that last Monday evening appeared to have destroyed Kehilath Jeshurun in Manhattan--the synagogue that my family has been a part of for over a hundred years, the synagogue in which my daughters sat on countless holidays alongside their mother, their grandmother and their great grandmother, the synagogue in which two of my grandsons had their brises (circumcision), where my daughters and five granddaughters were named, where my bar mitzvah was celebrated, where my parents and grandparents were married, and where my uncle, my grandfather and my great-great grandfather served as rabbis.

And yet, as I think about the fire that shook our community to its core, my overwhelming emotion, beyond the grief of seeing a 110 year old landmark with so many memories rendered unusable as a practical matter for at least 1 to 2 years, is pride. Ours is a unique community. As I thought about historical and biblical precedents this past week, it wasn't the holy temples that came to mind. It was, rather, the burning bush in the book of Exodus, the bush through which God revealed himself (or herself—I have four daughters) to Moses, the bush about which we are told “it was burning with fire, but was not consumed.”

Our community took a blow, but we were not knocked down. Not even a mandatory 8-count. The morning after the fire, while it was still smoldering, we gathered—the leaders of the synagogue and of the school it spawned 75 years ago—the Ramaz School—to figure out the next steps and the steps after those. Within hours the community knew that the steady leadership, both religious and lay, that has been its trademark for as long as anyone can remember, was up to the task.

The community understood quickly that our synagogue and school might be in temporary, even makeshift, quarters for some period of time, but that everything that our congregation and school stand for hadn't even been tarnished. From our rabbi's first public statements thanking the FDNY and the NYPD for their heroism and professionalism—it would appear that they literally saved our 110 year old structure—it was clear that we as Americans, are ever conscious and appreciative of the society in which we're free to be modern orthodox Jews.

Ours is a synagogue in which our Sabbath services include a reading of the names of American soldiers who may have been killed during the preceding week. That will not change regardless of where we might have to hold our services. Ours is a synagogue in which its rabbis are not afraid of taking bold religious positions that might not be what everyone in the wider orthodox community necessarily wants to hear. That will not change regardless of what building their pulpits might be in. Ours is a school that cares about the indigent in our society and is always searching for ways to teach our children to offer a helping hand. That will not change regardless of where our classrooms might be this fall. Ours is a school that believes in religious and general coeducation of uncompromising excellence. That will not change regardless of what building our children will be taught in.

Ours is a community that has been a religious and educational epicenter for generations. Our children come back to KJ and Ramaz, not because of a building, though it was and, hopefully, will once again be quite beautiful. They come back as we did because of all that it stands for. They come back because our rabbi has taught us repeatedly in response to whatever local or international crisis may confront us, we ARE our brother's keepers. No fire can destroy that.

And so, like the burning bush, our building burned but our congregation and community were not consumed. Our community is resolute not so much because we hope to rebuild what was destroyed but because we hope to maintain and strengthen for generations to come what no fire could consume.