

REMEMBERANCE:

*9/11 Twenty Years Later*

*How are we to remember and what are we to remember?*

[story of Nellie and son David]

It seems hard to believe that it is now 20 years since 19 Islamic terrorists hijacked four airplanes, killed nearly 3000 people from 77 countries and destroyed the World Trade Center. Since that moment in time, the world that we once knew changed in ways we never could have imagined. One can only imagine how intensely we may have reacted had live pictures been taken by victims before they were burned to death or jumped from windows been streaming into our homes and posted on social media had it existed at that time. Nonetheless, the images are still vivid before our very eyes ... each of us will always remember where we were when it all happened. For some the scars will never heal. On that day children lost a parent, partners and spouses were lost, people lost siblings, parents lost children, and to this day the remains of 1300 people have never been found. And so this weekend, we pause to remember, with the question being:

*How are we to remember and what are we to remember?*

There was no easy answer then and 20 years on, there is still no easy answer. You might remember that shortly after 9/11 there was a great debate over what should be done at Ground Zero. Some argued that it should be left as it is, as a vivid reminder of the dastardly act that took place there. Others said, no ... that's not the American way! Americans are an optimistic people; we must rebuild and show our strength and determination and pick up the pieces and build greater and greater and higher and higher.

Rabbi Norman Lamm z"l, the former Chancellor of Yeshiva University and one of the most respected and clear-minded thinkers in the Jewish world at that time, looked into this question when he addressed students at Yeshiva University on the first anniversary of 9/11. And what he had to say then is just as relevant today.

Rabbi Lamm made reference to the way we Jews commemorate the *Churban* – the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem; a moment in time that we bring to memory every day. There are two ways we remember ... two things we remember

... one is called “*zecher l’churban* in memory of the destruction.” The other is “*zecher l’mikdash* in memory of the Temple itself.” *Zecher l’churban* is very sad and pessimistic. It is breaking a glass at the end of a wedding ceremony ... even amidst joy, we pause for a moment of sorrow. *Zecher l’mikdash* as a remembrance of the Temple, reminds us of the beauty of the Temple, its sanctity and its holiness. At every Pesach Seder we make that sandwich of matzah and maror and say: “*Zecher l’mikdash k’Hillel*” – this is a remembrance of the Temple as Hillel did it. We take his opinion into consideration just as the Temple brought all people together. And so, points out Rabbi Lamm, remembrance requires both – the positive and the negative, the destruction and the rebuilding, the glory and the devastation.

How has America done in regard to these two areas? I would say that when it comes to *zecher l’churban* – remembering the destruction that took place on Sept. 11, 2001, America has fulfilled its responsibility ... in a very simple but very costly way. Americans made their enemies pay for what they did; and we must never take that for granted. On March 11, 2004, three days before Spain’s general elections, a series of coordinated terrorist bombings took place in Madrid’s train system killing 191 people and wounding 1800. Three days later, in the general election, Jose Maria Aznar, the Prime Minister who had been leading in the opinion polls, lost the election. It is generally believed that he lost because of the train bombings, because the bombings were a terrorist response to Aznar’s government participating in the war against Iraq. So the Spanish people gave in to the terrorists! America however, stood strong and it stood united, it did what it had to do in regard to *zecher l’churban* – to remember the destruction.

It is the second part – the *zecher l’mikdash* – remembering the glory of the Temple ... that leaves much room for improvement. When we Jews remember the Temple we remember not simply the service there, we also remember the best it brought out in us. According to our sages, some of the miracles that took place in the Temple included the fact that people stood crowded but had ample space in which to prostrate themselves; that no matter how many people came on pilgrimage to the Temple, no one ever said, “My lodging is too crowded for you.” The Temple brought people together as one. You might recall that the collapsing Twin Towers in New York did the same for the American people. At that time you heard no talk about Republicans and Democrats and liberals and conservatives ... we only talked about Americans. At that time, Wall Street and Main Street, bankers and firefighters, housewives and corporate executive, rich and poor, black and white ... all stood

together as one. Little more than a month after 9/11 Congress passed the Patriot Act to combat terrorism. You know what the vote in the Senate on that Act was? 98 to 1!

For all too many of us, 9/11 colored our perspective and polarized and radicalized us. From the right, you have those who turned on their fellow Muslims ... there was a movement to outlaw *sharia* – Muslim laws – in America. That would be no different than outlawing Jewish religious courts – a *Beit Din*. And yet, the move to ban *sharia* law was led by an Orthodox Jew. On the other hand, you had those on the left who claim that there really wasn't much of a threat on America on any other country; and if there is, it is certainly not coming from Muslims. People like Janet Napolitano, who upon becoming Secretary of Homeland Security, refused to use the word "terrorism" referring instead to it as "man-caused disasters."

These are just two examples of the extreme perspectives that have taken hold in the last 20 years. It wasn't like this after 9/11 – no one said at the time of George Bush what Rush Limbaugh said regarding successive Presidents from Barack Obama to Biden: "I hope he fails." What a terrible thing to say! We're talking about the President of the United States! Just like our prime minister, whether you like him or not, He is OUR Prime Minister! If he fails, it means millions of Canadians will remain jobless, our economy will continue to suffer, our standing in the world will continue to fall.

This 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary should remind us of what we were like then and what we can be now. What can we be? United, as we were in the immediate aftermath of Sept 11. Canadians like Americans and others were grieving for those lost in the Twin Towers, we as a country were grief stricken by the losses and were united in our pain.

We should not need an enemy to bring us together, and we most certainly should not allow an enemy to tear us apart. So, yes, on this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary we must fulfill the *zecher l'churban* ... we must remember that there are evil people in this world and, sorry to say, we must get them before they get us! But we can't allow this to dominate our psyche for the future. We must also do what is necessary to fulfill the *zecher l'mikdash*. The World Trade Center was the target of the terrorists because it symbolized the best of America. It symbolized capitalism and democracy and America standing strong and tall and proud. That's what the enemies sought to destroy. We must dedicate ourselves to strengthen all that is good in our country and the world ... and there is so much that is good!

The greatest collective loss that took place 20 years ago on that day that will go down in infamy was felt by the brokerage firm of Cantor Fitzgerald which lost 658 employees at One World Trade Center. One fourth of the 2753 people killed that morning worked for the financial giant Cantor Fitzgerald. The head of the company, Howard Lutnick, happened to have been late for work because he took his son to school. He promised to rebuild ... and he did; now having more than 5000 employees working for him. He says that for years after 9/11 he had recurring nightmares that spiders were spinning webs on his face, suffocating him. Sleepwalking, he would drag his wife into the closet. He no longer has those nightmares, but he still remembers the people he lost; taking care of their families, having a service in Central Park for them every year. And one thing more: when the memorial for those who died was built and all of their names were going to be placed randomly, Lutnick argued that his employees should be listed together, and that the others who had died should also not be listed randomly but listed next to someone they worked with or were friends with. I read that and I thought of the Biblical verse: *“Ha-nehavim b’chayehem uv’misosom lo nifradu* – they were beloved in life and in death are not separated.” For us, the proper *zecher l’churban* and *zecher l’mikdash* is to remember those united in death by all of us as Canadians being united in life. May their memories be for a blessing and may God bless America, the other 76 countries whose citizens lost their lives.

