

[Sound a Tekiah] This is the sound of alarm that we all heard one week ago this morning. [Sound a Shevarim] This is the sounds of explosions, screaming, the sirens of emergency vehicles, the cries of the wounded and frightened. [Sound a Teru'ah] This is the sound that filled our radios, television screens, and computers. [Sound a Tekiah] This is the sound that cried out -- Wake up America! Life as you know it has changed forever!

With the Psalmist (55:2-9), we cried out:

Give ear, O God, to my prayer; do not ignore my plea; pay heed to me and answer me. I am tossed about, complaining and moaning at the clamor of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked; for they bring evil upon me, and furiously harass me. My heart is convulsed within me; terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling invade me; I am clothed with horror. I said, Oh that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and find rest; surely, I would flee far off; I would lodge in the wilderness; I would soon find me a refuge from the sweeping wind, from the tempest.

The enormity of the tragedy is beyond words. For the past week, we have been walking around with a huge feeling of emptiness inside ourselves. We try to fill the void with words -- we are glued to the television, wanting the information to fill us up, praying that we will hear something that will give us a reason to hope. We gather in public prayer, hoping to find comfort in God's words. We are empty vessels, looking for nourishment.

The Psalmist continues:

As for me, I call to God; Adonai will deliver me. Evening, morning, and noon, I complain and moan, and God hears my voice. God redeems me unharmed from the battle against me, though there were many who fought against me. God, who has reigned from the first, who will have no successor, hears and humbles those who have no fear of God. (Psalm 55:17-20)

Theological questions are meaningless right now. We who have faith in God look to God not for answers or justification, but for reassurance that there is meaning in our lives.

We offer words of comfort and lamentation to those who have friends and loved ones injured or killed. We grieve with those who have suffered loss; we suffer with those who endure the emotional trauma of witnessing unspeakable horror. We respond with words, even though there are no words that can satisfy our grief, our fear, and our desire for vengeance. Our feelings are not unique. The Psalmists have written of their fear, their desire for vengeance, their desire for protection, their desire for peace. Our feelings today echo the words of the Psalmist:

“While at ease, I once thought, nothing can shake my security. Favor me and I am a mountain of strength; hide your face, Adonai, and I am terrified” (Psalm 30:7); and
 “Adonai is my light and my help. Whom shall I fear? Adonai is the strength of my life. Whom shall I dread? When evildoers draw near to slander me, when foes threaten - they stumble and fall. Though armies be arrayed against me, I have no fear; though wars threaten, I remain steadfast in my faith.” (Psalm 27:1-3); and
 “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.” (Psalm 23:4)

The Psalmist's answer, to help us steady our fears and gain protection and security is simple: “Hope in Adonai. Be strong, take courage, and hope in Adonai.” (Psalm 27:14)

What other path is there that would lead us to hope and comfort? Our belief in the goodness of humanity is shaken; our belief in the justice of God's world is rocked.

We can use a theological justification to get God “off the hook,” by saying that the evil people who perpetrated this horror were exercising the free will that God gave each of us, and it is them, not God, who are responsible for their exercise of it.

This answer is insufficient when faced with evil of this magnitude. Even more than a meaningful response to evil, we need a meaningful demonstration of goodness to prove to us that the world is not irredeemably evil. Like Abraham negotiating for the survival of Sodom and Gemmorah, we seek proof that there is some goodness in the world, making it worth saving. It is the conscious acts of good people, what we Jews would call the mitzvot of gemilut hasadim, acts of lovingkindness, which redeem the world from the evil that threatens to overwhelm us.

We see this in the firefighters and police officers that gave their lives in an attempt to save the lives of others. We see this in the story of a man who carried a woman in a wheelchair down 68 flights of stairs, and escaped moments before the second tower collapsed. We see this in the lines of people waiting to give blood. We see this in the hundreds of doctors and nurses who have volunteered to help out of a sense of duty, truly mitzvah. We see this in the hundreds or even thousands of New Yorkers and other relief workers from around the East Coast and around the country making their way to lower Manhattan to do whatever they can to help out. We see this in the hundreds of thousands of people who spontaneously gathered in churches and synagogues to mourn the loss and pray for the future, and in the generous gifts of tzedakah pouring into relief agencies. This is our glimpse of the divine in this tragedy -- this proves the possibility of the redemption of humanity. In the face of hate, we act with love. In the face of evil, we seek goodness. In the face of despair, we seek hope. In the face of death, we seek signs of life.

A massive blow has been struck against our country, and we are all staggering. But our world, having been shaken, has not ended. Our lives do go on -- it doesn't end here. This may be the worst act of terrorism on the face of the earth, but in its aftermath, it is up to us, the survivors, to strengthen our faith in God, to reaffirm our faith in the potential of humanity to choose goodness and reject evil, to support our government, our system of democracy, and the rule of law.

For us as Jews, here in shul on Rosh Hashanah, we have to take one further step. We, who are so especially sensitive to antisemitism, but at the same time loaded with thoughts and fears regarding the State of Israel, need to guard ourselves against falling into the trap of the sin of racism.

It has become clear in the past several days that those responsible are Arabs, and most likely will claim to have been guided by principles of Islam. This does not, however, give us the right to look at all Arabs or all Muslims with suspicion and hatred. This does not give us the moral authority to call for sanctions against all persons of Arab descent, Arab countries, or Islamic governments.

“If someone kills a person ... it is as if he had killed all humankind, and if someone saves a person's life, it is as if he had saved all humankind.” The Federation just sent out a notice about the community blood drive with this quotation from Talmud Sanhedrin, a wonderful teaching emphasizing the infinite value of every human life. This version, however, comes from the Koran (Surah 5:32), the sacred text of Islam.

Rosh Hashanah teaches us that each person is responsible for his or her own actions. The persons who perpetrated this act -- guilty! The persons who supported them -- guilty! The clergy and government leaders who made and encouraged threats against our country, who

created a climate of hate which nurtured and fomented the attacks on our country -- guilty! But the Arab and Muslim citizens of this country or Israel, or residents of the West Bank who are law-abiding citizens, and who condemn terror with all their hearts and souls are not guilty.

Racism is looking at a black teenager and wondering if he is carrying a gun, when the same thought would not have occurred when looking at a white teenager. Racism is looking at a person wearing a kaffiah, and wondering if he supports suicide bombers, when the same thing would not have occurred when looking at a person wearing a beret.

Racism is insidious. It is inside each of our heads. I am as guilty as anyone of the above racist thoughts. As Jews concerned with the State of Israel, we have been conditioned to look at Arabs with suspicion and mistrust, and there is, in fact, a strong basis for that conditioning. A recent opinion poll of Palestinians revealed that 81% favor suicide bombings as a legitimate way to fight against Israel as long as Israeli measures against Palestinians continue. Worse, 54% favor suicide bombings, even if Israeli measures cease. However, we need to keep in mind that the Arab peoples are diverse, as is the range of Islamic belief. We should not judge all Arabs or all Muslims based on these statistics. There are those who selectively teach the Koran for evil purposes, just as there are those "religious" Jews, recently featured in a USA Today cover story, who quote the Torah and use it as an excuse to hate and kill.

Each one of us has to be conscious of our innate, culturally developed, racism, and guard ourselves against letting our actions or statements be affected by it. We could easily be transformed into a community of hate. I have seen it begun to happen, both within the Jewish community and outside. The biggest danger of seeking vengeance is that it opens up the possibility of transforming ourselves into those we seek to destroy, purveyors of blind hatred. We do not seek vengeance -- we see justice, and the Torah and Jewish tradition teach that there are just and appropriate punishments for those who murder and destroy, punishments that are only appropriate when combined with the highest standards of proof. For us as individuals to make judgments or assumptions about individual Arabs or Muslims, or the Arab people or Muslim religion as a whole, is just plain wrong.

Let us make the vow, so appropriate for this season of the Days of Awe, to become like the disciples of Aaron the kohen, loving peace and pursuing peace, Loving our fellow creatures and drawing them near to the Torah.

And let us pray responsively on page 199:

May we see the day when war and bloodshed cease,
when a great peace will embrace the whole world.

*Then nation will not threaten nation,
and humankind will not again know war.*

For all who live on earth shall realize
we have not come into being to hate or to destroy.

*We have come into being
to praise, to labor, and to love.*

Compassionate God, bless the leaders of all nations

with the power of compassion.

Fulfill the Promise conveyed in Scripture:

I will bring peace to the land,
and you shall lie down and no one shall terrify you.

*I will rid the land of vicious beasts
and it shall not be ravaged by war.*

Let love and justice flow like a mighty stream.

Let peace fill the earth as the waters fill the sea.

And let us say, Amen.