

A Tenth Anniversary - Survival and Rebirth

Sermon by Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom

Congregation Adath Jeshurun

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“So many names. There is barely room on the walls of the heart.”

It was these words that echoed in my mind three weeks ago, when Cindy and I visited the 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero. Our visit was a fringe benefit of having a son who has worked on the project for the last seven months, tasked with making sure visitors could safely wend their way through what is still a construction site to the Memorial, opened for the tenth anniversary. Around the perimeter, new skyscrapers are rising, including Tower 1, formerly known as the Freedom Tower, which will be even taller than the Twin Towers themselves.

Set in the middle of this active construction site is the Memorial itself, the two square footprints, the outlines, of the World Trade Center Towers themselves. Once massive structures strained for the heavens from these foundations. Now they are open pits. Water cascades along the four sides of each one. Pooling at the bottom. Until the water falls even further at the center, seemingly into an unfathomable abyss.

And around each endless pit, a bronze table, with the names. Almost three thousand of them. Men and women murdered ten years ago. On planes, and on the ground. At the World Trade Center, and the Pentagon, and in a field in western PA.

We walked around the tablets, reading the names. And it was these words of the poem by Billy Collins, then poet laureate of the United States, read on the first anniversary of 9/11, at a joint session of Congress held in Manhattan.

“So many names. So many lives. There is barely room on the walls of the heart.”

Edward Raymond Vanacore, Ryan D. Fitzgerald, David E. Retik, Arcangel Vasquez, Nobuhiro Hayatsu, George Smith, Susan M. Getzendammer, Krishna V. Murthy, Mohammad Salahuddin Chowdhury, Vanessa Lang Langer and her unborn child.

“And her unborn child.”

At least twelve times on the tablets.

“So many names, so many lives.”

Ten years.

Most of us can remember where we were; what we were doing, and stopped doing; what we felt as we heard the silent screams.

Ten years. What have we learned? Are we different?

The question is not “What is **the** story?”, but which among many will we remember, and which will reveal lasting insight. And guidance.

There are the stories of the victims. Who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. On the wrong plane. On the wrong floor. Who missed an elevator.

Their lives were cut short through no action of their own. We wonder what might have been had their lives not been truncated.

There are the stories of their families. Husbands and wives. Sons and daughters. Mothers and fathers. Lovers and friends. They too had no choice about their situation. But they did have a choice about how they would go on. What would they extract from this tragedy as witnesses and rememberers?

And then there were those who chose to be there. Policemen and fire fighters. Men and women who rushed in to save others. Without regard for their own safety. Who were totally dedicated to rescuing others.

### *Four Stories of 9/11*

Deputy Chief Jay Jonas was in the North Tower with a group of fire fighters, when the South Tower collapsed and they received an order to evacuate. On the twenty seventh floor they found a wounded Josephine Harris. Even though they knew she would slow their descent, they could not leave her behind. They took her with them, supported her all the way; carried her when she could not go on.

They were at the fourth floor, in the stairwell, when the Tower started to collapse around them. Leave me, she begged them. But they would not. Miraculously, Chief Jonas, his men, and Josephine all survived.

Many were not so lucky.

Then there are those who worked for weeks on end, double shifts, breathing foul air, rescuing the living from the rubble. Retrieving the remains of the dead, from whole souls, to the most minute fragments, treating each with reverence.

Lee Ielpi is a retired NYC fireman. On the morning of September 11 his oldest son, Jonathan, also an NYC firefighter called. "It's for us. We're going to the World Trade Center." "OK Buddy, be careful." It was the last time they spoke.

Lee went down to Ground Zero. He became part of the recovery effort. Three months later to the day, at home, at 11:00 PM, he got a call from the night supervisor. They found Jonathan's body. One of only 174 that were recovered whole. With another son, also a firefighter, he was among those who carried his son from the pit, his body covered with an American flag.

A few days later they found Jonathan's firefighter's coat. And then, his battered and blackened helmet.

From those painful mementos, he became one of the founders of Tribute WTC Visitors Center Museum, housed near Ground Zero in a former fast food joint. The Museum is filled with the stories of the dead. The stories of their lives. And the lives of their families. There is no mention of the hijackers, the politics, the wars, the systemic breakdowns. Just memories of lives. That go on. In their survivors.

Susan Retik is the daughter of Saul and Shelley Zalesne. She grew up at AJ. On October 22, 1995, I officiated at her marriage to David Retik on a beautiful, sunny day, at the Zalesne home.

On September 11, 2001, David was aboard American Airlines Flight 11 as it was crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Susan was seven months pregnant with the their third child.

During these ten years, Susan has devoted herself to noble causes that will honor the memory of her husband. “Beyond the 11<sup>th</sup>,” for which she was praised by New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof in a featured column, is an effort to bring support to the many Afghan women, widowed by the continuing war and violence. She got the idea when she saw the devastating losses suffered by widows of the violence in Afghanistan.

Susan remembered that through her pain, she found support and strength in her community, and in the resources of a grateful nation. She was pained by the lack of a similar support system for Afghan widows, who, like her, were bereaved because of violence. Her concern inspired her to found “Beyond the 11<sup>th</sup>.” Her work is an inspiration!

In August 2010 Susan was presented with the Presidential Citizen’s Award, the second highest civilian award after the Medal of Honor, by President Obama.

Susan remarried in 2006 to Donald Ger, and in 2008 they welcomed a daughter, Rebecca, to their busy family, joining siblings Ben, Molly and Dina.

Susan will be here on October 16 to tell her story. I know you will want to be here to welcome her home, and to hear her inspiring story.

Rais Bhuyian was born in Bangladesh. Inspired by the American Dream, he moved to the US. He was nowhere near any of the 9/11 sites, but his life was profoundly effected by it.

In September of 2001, Rais was working in a convenience store in Dallas. A few days after 9/11, Mark Stroman came into the store. He saw Rais, pointed a shotgun at his head, and said “Where are you from?”

Before Rais could respond he felt the blast of the gun. Thirty five pellets ended up embedded in the right side of his face. He has faced years of surgeries and rehab. The pellets are still there. They will always be there.

His attacker, Mark Stroman, was on a mission that day. He wanted to avenge the deaths of 9/11 by randomly attacking any Muslims he could find. Though Rais survived, Stroman’s shooting spree took the lives of two other Muslims in the Dallas area.

Stroman was apprehended and sentenced to death. One would think that would be the end of the story. That Rais would be satisfied. Justice was going to be done.

Instead, unbelievably, Rais worked for years to get Stroman’s death sentence commuted! While Rais lay on the floor at Stroman’s feet, he recited verses from the Koran he had memorized as a youth, and begged God to give him a second chance. He vowed that if he lived, if he survived, he would dedicate his life to the service of others.

He needed to be able to forgive Mark Stroman. Hatred and killing, even in just retribution, accomplish nothing, he believes. They only perpetuate more hatred and more killing. This is what he has learned from his Islamic faith.

“Saving one human life is equivalent to saving all mankind,” is one of the teachings of the Koran, he believes. Even the life of Mark Stroman.

When Stroman's attorney told him that Rais was trying to save his life, he broke down crying and said "This is the first act of kindness that I have ever known." He asked her to tell Rais that he is truly and sincerely sorry.

The irony is that it is Bhuiyan's faith that led to his being targeted. And his faith that inspired him to attempt to save the life of his attacker.

Stroman was executed on July 21, but Bhuiyan has founded an organization "World Without Hate" dedicated to making the world a safer, more humane place.

### *What We Remember*

When the story of 9/11 is told, some will focus on the terrorists. Some will learn from the rubble of these monumental structures that the world is a dangerous place, that it is either us or them.

Some blame all Muslims and burn the Koran in public.

Some mourn lost innocence. Others are bothered by inconvenience at airports.

Some will focus on the swift American retaliation and the tactics used to interrogate and imprison the accused, the killing of many Al Qaeda leaders, and finally, Osama Bin Laden himself.

We will debate the wars of the first decade of the twenty-first century for years to come. Were they necessary and effective? Were they worth the additional loss of life and the maiming of our countrymen, losses that dwarf the numbers of those killed on

9/11. The almost incalculable cost and the effect on the economy and the political system.

We will reflect on the economic impact of the last ten years, and the vulnerability we find ourselves in now, still feeling in the throes of the Great Recession. Some fret about the future for our children and our grandchildren. And some are concerned only to protect what we have, building a bulwark against an uncertain future.

We will surely have to remember that there is evil in the world, and the we must combat it.

But what I chose to remember most, what I believe we all should remember, what I believe is the ultimate lesson of 9/11 that is essential for our future as a nation, as human beings, is that at a moment of crisis, we were all just Americans, just human beings. And we wanted to help each other. And the best impulse that emerged from 9/11 was the desire to rescue others who need us. To create more safety and less hatred. More comity and fewer divisions.

Our moment of national crisis brought out the best in us. Reminded us that we need each other. That we can only survive with each other.

I believe that it is not our rugged individualism that defines what it is to be an American. It is our impulse to be there for another human being, for no other reason other than that they need us.

It is not enough to do it in time of crisis.

We need to do it every day.

## *The Haimish Line*

Many of you know I am an inveterate reader of the New York Times. I usually turn to the Op Ed page first. You won't be surprised if I confess that I am more of a Paul Krugman liberal than a David Brooks Conservative.

Nevertheless, I read both, and I was struck by the title of a recent David Brooks Column. "The Haimish Line." I blinked at the title. Haimish -- does he mean by haimish what I mean by haimish?

Indeed he did. And he discovered it in Africa, on safari with his family!

Brooks observes that some of the camps they stayed in were simple; others, elegant and luxurious. At some point he realized that the simple camps were "friendly, warm and familial." There, they got to know other guests and the staff. The kids played easily and noisily together.

The luxurious camps, on the other hand, were cold by comparison. There was not as much interaction among the guests, and none with the staff, except as servants. The tents were farther apart, and people did not venture out from their own family grouping.

It occurred to him that the only way to really describe the quality that divided the simple camps from the luxury ones was the Yiddish word, *haimish*. Now Haimish is not a word you would probably associate with Kenya or Tanzania. *Haimish*, Brooks writes, "suggests warmth, domesticity and unpretentious conviviality." When he moved from one type of encampment to the other, he concluded, "We crossed an invisible *Haimish* Line."

I thought about the image of the *Haimish Line* for a long time. In the 50's and 60's, synagogues wanted to be on one side of the Haimish Line. They wanted to be formal and awe-inspiring. The key value in those days was “decorum.” Congregants were expected to be quiet or hushed; children were to be seen and not heard, and often both not seen and not heard.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in his book *Man's Quest for God*, that “The modern temple suffers from a *severe cold*.”

In the 70's and 80's the tide turned. As people were feeling more alienated and isolated in society, they wanted the synagogue to be different, a place of warmth and spontaneity, not stone-cold decorum. Nothing symbolizes that trend more than the way we welcome children and their youthful-sounds and playful romps to our services.

Clearly, the American synagogue is struggling to cross back to the *Haimish* side of our culture.

*Haimish* is not only, or even primarily, a quality of our religious services, though. It is a quality that defines how we interact with one another. It encompasses the virtues of welcoming and friendship, caring and helping. It means not sticking to the people you know, but greeting the people you have not yet met. It means caring about the other person enough to want to know who he or she is. And how you can help make their lives better.

There is a story about the Hasidic Rebbe Moshe Leib of Sassov. One day he was watching two friends deeply engaged in conversation. The first asked, “Do you love me?” Said the other, “Of course I love you. You are my best friend.” After a few moments, the first asked a follow-up question. “Do you know what causes me pain?”

Said the second, “How would I possibly know that?”

“Then,” replied the first person, “If you don’t know what causes me pain, how can you say you love me?”

We may not always know what causes someone pain, but we can often sense pain if we take the time to look.

Cindy told me of a incident in the hospital recently where she saw another nurse who looked sad to her. She went up to her and said “You look like you need a hug.” The other nurse burst into tears and replied, “I did not realize it is so obvious. I was just diagnosed with breast cancer.”

We live in such an anonymous world. We often suffer in silence. That’s the way of decorum. The way of the luxurious encampment.

We need to strive to bring down the decorum barrier that separates us from each other, cross the *Haimish Line*, and make our synagogue one of love and caring, where we are open to each other, and give each other a break. Where we look into our neighbor’s eyes long enough to see when they are in pain. And need a hug. And a kind word. And some encouragement. And a shoulder to lean on.

We can’t really do much about the world situation. But we can learn from the experience of 9/11 that we must make our community more *haimish*. We can care more about each other as individuals. And maybe there will be a rippling outward that will help change the balance.

In the Talmud, we are taught that we should always see the world as a set of scales, good on the one side and evil on the other. We should always act as if our next act can tip the scales toward virtue. And choose to do good.

Our lives will be better if, as David Brooks concludes, we try to live “south of the *Haimish* Line.”

### *The Survivor Tree*

As we were about to leave Ground Zero, Josh said, I want to show you one more thing. I think it is the most amazing thing here.

He took us over to a tree we had not even noticed on our walk. This is the “Survivor Tree.”

When the site was being cleared after 9/11, a Callery Pear Tree, that had been planted on the World Trade Center Plaza, was unearthed amid the rubble. It had been uprooted when the towers fell. It was covered with black soot and debris.

But it was still alive.

It was sent to a nursery where it was watched, fed, pruned, and bloomed again. This year, it was replanted on the Memorial plaza.

When it was discovered, the tree was only 8 feet high. Now it is 35 feet tall.

It is a miracle of survival and rebirth.

But that is not the whole story.

When you look at the tree, you will notice rigid harnesses embracing it from all sides. They compensate for roots that are still too shallow to hold it steady against buffeting winds.

If you look at the tree from one side, it looks like a typical pear tree in bloom.

But go around to the other side, and it is barren, gnarled, and irreparably damaged.

It is a remarkable metaphor for life. A lesson to be learned from 9/11.

We are all damaged in some way by the tremors of life. We bear the scars of our traumas and our failures, our foolishnesses and our misjudgments.

But we can withstand them all. Not alone. Like the tree, we need the help of others. We need family and friends we can lean on. We need people willing to hold us up so we can stand.

And when others lean on us to regain their strength, we grow in strength too. It is not a zero sum game. The more we help others, the more our capacity to help grows.

### *The Message of 9/11*

That is the message I want to take from 9/11.

We have been severely traumatized. Injured.

But we can still stand . . . together. We can survive when we lean on each other.

I hope on this tenth anniversary we will take this lesson to heart.

That like the Survivor tree, we will be able to expose our weaknesses and our injuries and lean on each other.

That we who may be momentarily stronger will be willing to have others lean on us. And invite them to do it.

That when there are others in need, we will do our part to rescue them from isolation and despair, like Deputy Chief Jonas and his men rescued Josephine Harris.

That we will respect and honor those who have fallen as human beings, by telling their stories, and reminding us what we have lost with their deaths, like Lee Ielpi.

That we will overcome our pain by recognizing that remembering is not enough. We can make a difference in the lives of others, even those we do not know, even those who are part of the group we call our enemies, like Susan Retik.

And that we can ultimately learn to forgive, like Rais Bhuyian, because without forgiveness, there can be no future, no life.

Individually, the new year brings anxiety and uncertainty.

Together, we can, as a community, help each other, ease the burdens we bear, and rejoice together in the human spirit, which can always triumph when we live as a community, south of the *Haimish* Line.