

Twin Reactions to the Twin Towers Tragedy

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The enormity of the depraved atrocity that was perpetrated has not yet been fully assimilated, especially by those of us who lived here, so close to the scene of the crime. Yet a number of students felt that before the effects wear off, we ought to think about remembering — how shall we recall what happened and why.

We should not underestimate the importance of remembering. The philosopher, George Santayana, once famously said that, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Apparently, everyone agrees that it is important to remember. The question is: *what* do we remember, *whom* do we remember, and *how* do we remember? Let me therefore begin by putting this event into some kind of perspective.

There have been many catastrophes in history, both man-made and natural. We shall concentrate on the man-made disasters in my lifetime, and those which undoubtedly will continue in your lifetime. This list of horrors includes the gulag of Stalin, where millions of people perished; the experiment of the Communist regime in China — when millions of people perished; the Khmer Rouge, World War II, Cambodia.... One can give a whole list of catastrophes invented by human minds — depraved human minds, but human minds nonetheless.

And then, of course, there was the *Shoah*, the Holocaust. If you want to understand the impact of the Holocaust on the Jewish people and thereafter for the world, remember that we lost one third of our population. We started World War II with a world Jewish population of eighteen million; after the *Shoah*, we were reduced to twelve million. Now make the following very simple math-

This essay is an adaptation of remarks delivered in 2002 at Yeshiva University, at a memorial service commemorating the first anniversary of the attacks on September 11th, 2001.

emational calculation: what would have happened if the World Trade Center catastrophe had been expanded to one third of the American people? *We would have lost over eighty-two million people!* And nevertheless, despite all that, the impact of what happened exactly one year ago today — even without our calculation — was enormous. Someone put it correctly: *it exposed our vulnerability.* We Americans had been living in a fool's paradise for a long time, protected by two oceans which, at least psychologically, seemed to us to be impassable and therefore for us the permanent boundaries of our security and safety. We learned, to our dismay, that we are vulnerable, that America is no different qualitatively from every other group of human beings. And that is a very difficult lesson to learn.

Let me now turn to the question of what shall we remember, and how do we remember?

There's a great debate that is still raging as recently as this morning's newspapers and it has been raging for the past year here in New York City: How and what shall we do to remember the tragic events of September 11th, 2001?

There are two opinions about the story: one of them is that the place should be left as it is — destitute, except for a museum or a monument, an ever-lasting reminder of the cruelty that struck us and an ever-lasting tribute to the close to three thousand people who were killed, the three hundred who are still alive but who were wounded for life, and the thousands upon thousands of relatives and friends who will never forget this day of infamy and who were wounded psychologically and emotionally.

There is an opposing attitude, and that is just the reverse. They are saying, 'Yes, it is important to remember the tragedy, but we Americans are optimistic and we have to go ahead and forge our own future and not allow ourselves to be dragged down by this one terrorist strike. And if we have to rebuild, then let us rebuild. If this was the financial capital of the world, it must again become the financial capital of the world. We must show that we are not only going to survive, but we are going to *thrive*, and that we will not allow the terrorists to determine our future.'

So, which one ought we to emphasize? The recollection of the tragedy or the overcoming of the tragedy? Historically, we Jews have experienced both, each in its own context.

The most traumatic event in Jewish history until the *Shoah* was the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the Temple in Jerusalem, in the year 70. The destruction left our people devastated; our whole way of life had changed because so much of our religious, spiritual and communal life was built upon the service in Jerusalem. After that we were at a loss. Of course, we eventually filled in the vacuum, but it was a wrenching experience historically. And the question was, "How do we remember the destruction of the Temple?" There arose a group called the *Aveilei Zion* – the Mourners of Zion. The *Aveilei Zion* were people who determined that they would never forget what happened, that they would always mourn it and, therefore, never again would their mouths taste meat or wine. Never again would they indulge in full-throated laughter; nothing more than a smile did they permit themselves. They wanted to live an endless *shivah*, or a perpetual "Nine Days," without any relief. Indeed, many of them did just that. But the Talmud rejected that for the simple reason as R. Yehoshua and R. Chananya said, "*Ein gozerin gezeirah ella im ken rov ha-tzibbur yakhol la'amod bo*" – you may not decree a law, a form of practice, or any norm for the community unless most of the community can abide by it. And most people cannot live in perpetual *aveilut*, in endless mourning. The Sages therefore discouraged extreme mourning practices, or at least they did not encourage them. So it declined for a while, only to come up again in the Middle Ages and various other periods of Jewish history. Even to this day we occasionally mention them in our prayers, especially on Tisha B'Av – "*Nahem Hashem Elokeinu et Avelei Tziyyon va-Avelei Yerushalayim.*" We mention them because there was something of value to what they said. Even if it was not put into a formal, normative framework, it was something precious, and so we remember them.

Hence, the question for us is: what shall we do? R. Chananya and R. Yehoshua advocated moderation. But are there other authorities in Halakhah? Is there any way of determining nowadays what we ought to do in Jewish law and in Jewish tradition? And the answer is "Yes," and the Talmud had two minds in its reaction to catastrophe. Those two themes are called "*zekher le'churban*"

— in memory of the *churban*, of the destruction. And the other one is “*zekher le’mikdash*” — in memory of the Temple itself. *Zekher le’churban* emphasized the pessimistic, the negative thinking: we remember the pain, the shame, and the national anguish. We must never forget; we owe it to the people who were destroyed, we owe it to the Temple that was ravished, we owe it to the People of Israel who had to suffer through this national cataclysm. The other memory was *zekher le’mikdash* — we will never forget the beauty of the Temple, we will never banish from our collective memory the glory, the sanctity, the holiness of the Temple, the service that took place, and how it united our people — and therefore, our hope that it will be re-established, rebuilt, and resurrected.

How do these two opposing themes play out in the Halakhah? Simple: *zekher le’churban*. This means that we observe (or should observe) memory of our defeat to this day. It means, for instance, that every home has to leave a slab of 3x3 feet unpainted in the main room, so that as beautiful as the home is, there is always a solemn note of remembering the *churban*. (Admittedly, this law is often neglected.) Or, at a wedding, the groom breaks a glass. The real reason is: *zekher le’churban*, in memory of the destruction of the Temple. At some weddings it is customary to put ashes on the head of the groom to remember the destruction of the Temple. So *zekher le’churban* is prominent and insinuates itself in many aspects of Jewish life—even at the happiest of moments.

At the same time we have practices that are *zekher le’mikdash* — in memory of the *Beit HaMikdash* itself. For instance, one of the *mitzvot* of Sukkot is not only the *sukkah* itself, but also the *arba minim*, the four agricultural species. The most prominent of the four especially in size, is the *lulav*, the palm branch. According to the Halakhah, the *lulav* was waved all seven days in the *Beit HaMikdash*; but in the *gevulin* — areas outside the *Beit HaMikdash* — it was waved only one day. That was the Halakhah before the Temple was destroyed. After the destruction of the Temple, our Rabbis legislated that in every place — even in the *gevulin* — we should wave the *arba minim* for all seven days — even though it is required only once by the Torah itself. Why all seven days? *Zekher le’mikdash*, in memory of the *Beit HaMikdash*, to give us that injection of hope and optimism.

At the Pesach *seder*, the *korech* (the famous “sandwich” of *pesach matza umaror ve’okhlam be’yachad*) is always eaten *zekher le’mikdash ke’Hillel* — because we accommodate the opinion of Hillel who ruled that one must consume all three — the meat of the Passover sacrifice, the *matzah* and the bitter herbs — together. The reason? Because we remember the *Beit HaMikdash* on this day.

Between Pesach and concluding with Shavuot, we count the *omer*. The *omer* was measure of grain, offered when the Temple was in its glory. Now, *min hatorah* (according to most *Rishonim*), we need not observe the *mitzvah* of *omer*. Nevertheless we do count the *sefirat ha-omer* — *zekher le’mikdash*. Interestingly, there is one minority opinion (that of the *Baal HaMaor*) that although the counting of the *omer* is *zekher le’mikdash*, nevertheless we do not recite the *she’hechyanu* blessing — which we normally do when a *mitzvah* appears at certain regular intervals — because it is *zekher le’churban* — a reminder of the destruction of the Temple as well. Hence, we have these two divergent themes struggling with each other: on the one hand, we remember the negative, the destruction; on the other hand, we recall the beauty, the glory and our unrepressed and eternal hope to overcome the destruction and relive our ancient glory.

So the arguments, both Talmudic and contemporary, are reflections of the deeper ambivalence of the universal human psyche, the universal human mind and heart concerning catastrophes, whether natural or man-made. As a result we have paradoxical reactions: on the one hand, deep grief, mourning, bordering on despair, a sense of defeat. On the other hand: defiance, struggle, healing, hope and a striving to overcome and re-attain the glory that once was.

We experience the same theme when a relative or a loved one passes away. One “sits *shiva*,” we observe seven days of *aveilut*, of mourning. The law requires us to mourn — that is a form of *zekher le’churban*. Nevertheless, others who are required to visit the mourner for *nichum aveilim*, offering consolation to the mourner(s). We try to bring him or her back into normal life. We do this as a form of *zekher le’mikdash*. We appeal to the mourner to remember the good that once was, the beauty, the love, the happiness that they attained and thereby bring the mourners back into a state of “normalcy” where they can continue living later on. Again, the two themes are like Siamese twins — or

better, related to each other like twin stars, revolving around each other. But both themes are there and active, each in its own way and time.

Another example is the *kaddish*, the classical prayer to be recited in the case of one who lost one of seven relatives. One of the problems that occurs is: what has *kaddish* to do with death?! This classic expression of mourning does not have a single word to do with death! We ask that God's great Name be magnified — *yitgadal* — and be sanctified — *yitkadash shemei rabah* — in the world which He created and that He accept our prayers. But not a word of reference to death. Not a word! So what does the *kaddish* really mean?

Shai Agnon — the great Israeli writer and Nobel prize winner — wrote what is called a *Reshut Le'Kaddish*, a prayer before the *kaddish*. The essence of this prayer: a human king, a human president, any human leader, involved in a calamity such as war, would throw his troops into battle and he doesn't consider each individual person. He can't; it would be criminal for him to do so because he has a responsibility for a whole army and a whole country. What does he do? He treats them like cannon fodder: ten thousand troops here, twenty troops there, a hundred thousand troops going in afterwards. He relates to them from a global point of view. Not so is the King of Kings of Kings. For Him, every human being is a precious soldier in the army. Every human being, regardless of race, religion, nationality, or anything else, is a child of God, a soldier of God, a beloved of God. If that person dies then God's name is diminished and God's *kedushah* (His sanctity) is diminished. So when someone dies, we turn to the Almighty *Hakadosh Barukh Hu* and we say, 'God, we are here to console You.' We are *menachem avel Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. 'You lost something of Your Name, of the greatness of Your Name, You've lost something of Your holiness,' so we pray *yitgadal ve'yitkadash shemei rabah* — 'may Your great Name be magnified, instead of diminished, and may it be sanctified, and never be desecrated.'

Thus, the *kaddish*, presents to us the double theme: on the one hand, of death requiring consolation; and consolation itself with its hope for a future of reconciliation with the Almighty.

Most remarkably, there are several forms of *kaddish*. They are *kaddish le'eilah*, *kaddish titkabel*, *kaddish de'rabanan*, and there is also *kaddish de'itchadita* — which is the most beautiful. (It is worth reading the translation if you do not understand the Aramaic.) Unfortunately, most people stumble over the unfamiliar Aramaic words. In this *kaddish* we ask of God that His name be magnified and re-consecrated in a world which He will be rebuilding, in which Yerushalayim will flourish, in which the *Beit HaMikdash* will rise again, in which the *geulah* will come to Israel and for the world. And when is this *kaddish de'itchadita* recited? On two occasions: one of them at an open grave, just before the interment. And the other — at the height of one's joy in the collation offered at a *siyyum masechet*, when you finish a volume of the Talmud and you joyously recite the same *kaddish*. How remarkable! A solemn prayer recited at an open grave as a fellow Jew is being lowered to his eternal rest, and *this Kaddish is identical in every word to the kaddish of the joyous praise of the Almighty upon concluding the study of a tractate of the Talmud*. One is *zekher le'churban* and the other — *zekher le'mikdash*. And again, both themes go hand in hand.

Perhaps the best symbol of this duality of *zekher le'churban* and *zekher le'mikdash* is to be found in the *shofar*. The Halakhah identifies three kinds of sounds: *tekiah* — a single long blast; *shevarim* — three intermediate sounds; and *teruah* — staccato, nine short sobs. *Shevarim* and *teruah* symbolize weeping and crying, lamentations. The three intermediate sounds are the crying and then the sobbing sounds of staccato. *Tekiah* is a sound of *simcha*, of joy. We are to take the weeping and the sobbing and surround them by expressions of joy. Hence, in one blast of the *shofar* we have the combination of *zekher le'churban* (the *shevarim-teruah*), and the *zekher le'mikdash* (the *tekiah*), as if to say that if you want to lead a good, proper and worthy life, a life of experiencing what is precious and invaluable, then you have got to identify what's wrong but surround it with the symbol of what is right. Thus we can overcome the defeat and despair, and achieve hope and the glory and happiness, that once was normal for us.

This morning's *New York Times* quoted something that New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg said and which is similar to what we have been saying: 'We'll mourn in the morning, and in the evening we'll rededicate ourselves to rebuild.' I agree with him almost completely about both themes, but they are

not separate, with one period for mourning, and then forgetting the mourning and going on to the rebuilding. Rather, both tendencies must co-exist simultaneously — *zekher le'churban* and *zekher le'mikdash*. We cannot afford to dispense with either of them. As we mourn those who did not survive the World Trade Center attacks, as our hearts go out to those who were injured and who lost precious relatives, we keep both tendencies in mind. We realize that we Americans are a very proud people.

The reason the vicious terrorists struck the World Trade Center is because that is a symbol of capitalism, of democracy, of American entrepreneurship and initiative — and that is what our enemies wanted to devastate. Well, we are a proud people and we are an optimistic people. But if we forget the *zekher le'churban*, then we are unrealistic. America has learned something: we've learned that we are vulnerable, that after all is settled and done, we share the common lot of humanity. We discovered that life is sometimes risky. Life is fragile, life is fragmented and not always do we successfully achieve our ends. We have always to consider the fact that lurking behind us, maybe below us and certainly above us are the threats of death and destruction. Without that knowledge we march into life unarmed and unprepared. At the same we never must allow ourselves to become a depressed people. Rather, recognizing the *zekher le'churban*, we rededicate ourselves with equal emphasis to *zekher le'mikdash*.

We must determine that this awful and dreadful anti-human event be preserved in the collective consciousness of America. But the memory of the destruction must not dominate us for all the future. Indeed, the *zekher le'churban* as we go on must be transformed dialectically into its opposite, into *zekher le'mikdash*. And the *zekher le'mikdash* can never afford to express itself without always having at its side the *zekher le'churban*. That is the way of maturity, that is the way the Sages, the guardians of our heritage, understood the reaction to the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*; and how we must understand the reactions to any and all such catastrophes.

Let us hope that the victims will be remembered not only by their immediate families but by all of us and that together, they and we, will rededicate ourselves as Americans and as Jews to a greater, safer, more secure and more realistic future.