

## "TWO TEARS"

Address by Dr. Norman Lamm  
on the Terrorist Attack on America, September 11, 2001,  
at a Student YU Rally the Same Day.

We gather today both as Americans and as Jews to express our concern, our heart break, our fury, and our worry about the future on a day that has been described by one of the highest officials of this country as "worse than Pearl Harbor." It will forever remain a black day in American history. Additionally, for Jews this is already a day of sad and bitter recollection: today, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of *Elul*, is the anniversary of the Nazi liquidation of the Vilna ghetto. So for us, both as Jews and as Americans, this is a day of *iruv* – confusion, chaos, and commiseration for all those whose lives were lost, and for those whose loved ones were murdered or are missing. These men and women – no matter what their race or religion or politics – were all by virtue of their humanity created *be'tzelem Elohim*, in the divine Image, and we mourn for them and grieve with the people they left behind. I suspect that in the coming days we will learn that there are people who are close to us, relatives and alumni whom we have known and cherished, who are or will yet be victims of this cruel and vicious attack. I received a call this morning about a graduate of Yeshiva College and of Cardozo whose offices were on the 85<sup>th</sup> or 86<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center; fortunately he went to another office in Jersey this morning, but he learned that his entire law firm was virtually disintegrated, and many of the leaders of the firm are dead. We will be hearing more stories of this kind as time goes on.

But even as we feel overwhelmed by the shock and by feelings of depression and dejection, we must strive to concentrate on the future, and express our hope and our *tefillah* that all who are still alive be saved, and that the families of the victims be consoled. In the days and years to come we will take account of what happened and, as a community and as a nation, do what has to be done.

How are we to make sense of this incredible cataclysm? As believing Jews, מאמינים בני, מאמינים, we are puzzled: why, oh why? Let me share with you a gem taught by R. Samson Raphael Hirsch. He makes the following comment about the verse (Psalms 22), א-ל-י א-ל-י למה, "My God, my God why have You forsaken me?" He asks: Is it proper for David to take God to task, as it were, and demand of Him to give an accounting of what and why He did? Is it not absurd for us who are mere mortals to come before the *Melekh Malkhei Ha-melakhim*, the Master of the Universe, and challenge Him, "why have You forsaken me?"

Rabbi Hirsch answers by means of a very fine grammatical point that speaks volumes: if King David wanted the Almighty to explain Himself, he would have said: "*madua*" (מדוע) *azavtani*? The word *lamah* (למה) is not quite the same as *madua*. *Madua* means "why" – give me a reason, explain yourself. *Lamah* means *le'mah* – for what purpose, to what end? I know that I have suffered. I know that I am forsaken. But what must I learn from all this? What should I feel is the purpose – the purpose, not the reason – of my dejection, my pain, my suffering, my tragedy?

Today we too have to ask that same question, for there are lessons we and the world can and must learn. For one, the entire world must learn from this catastrophe that terrorism has universal consequences. You cannot confine it to one sector, one country. If Israel and other such small and vulnerable countries are in jeopardy because of terrorists, so is every country – including this, the most powerful superpower in the world. Those who thought that Middle East terrorism affected only the Israelis have now learned—I hope!—a bitter lesson, namely,

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that terrorism is as much a matter of the soul as it is of arms: it respects no borders and, like the plague, spreads its venom all over.

Another lesson for us to learn and learn well is to desist from moral posturing. Overlooking reality, we have glibly uttered moral pieties, enshrined in congressional legislation, outlawing the preemptive killing leaders of enemies who are confirmed mass murderers. This is a moral affectation that spawns horrible consequences. We should have learned to respect the wisdom of the Talmud in declaring as *halakha* that you must destroy your enemy who seeks your death – before he destroys you: *הבא להרגך השכם והרגו*. Such a policy of preemptive action is not the dreaded sin of “assassination,” but simply and rationally a matter of self-defense. America, the same America that joined, although in a weaker voice, with the European countries in castigating Israel for “assassination” of the ones who sought (successfully, to our misfortune) to kill women and children as well as soldiers, targeted Noriega some years ago – and Bin Laden as well! Of course there must be protection for human rights, but we have overemphasized civil liberties in their tension with the basic needs of security and life itself. Besides, it is absurd to declare ordinary soldiers to be expendable, but their leaders who directed their murderous activities to be immune to punishment.

A third lesson we must learn is the fatuousness of “moral equivalency.” For instance, here we have the Israelis, on one side, who react militarily against Palestinian terrorists on the other side. These Arabs violate every principle of decency by blowing up cafes and movie theaters frequented by young civilians. The doctrine of moral equivalency holds that they are equally culpable, and that both must be chastised for the “cycle of violence.” But this inane approach does violence to common sense and reflects poorly on those who hide behind such a policy for fear of speaking the truth and offending the guilty. The statements issued by the State Department with disgusting regularity that “*both* sides are at fault and *both* should practice restraint,” imply that those who are being attacked are on the same level of culpability as the perpetrators.

The disaster that befell America this morning was man-made, the result of men drunk with religious arrogance and sanctimonious evil. Yet it is worth treating it, in some ways, as a natural catastrophe. A fascinating passage in the Talmud (*Berakhot* 59a), in considering what blessings ought be recited upon witnessing violent outbreaks of nature, asks about the origin of such phenomena as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, etc. The *gemara* answers in beautifully picturesque aggadic language:

בשעה שהקדוש ברוך הוא זוכר את בניו ששרויים בצער בין אומות העולם מוריד  
שתי דמעות לים הגדול, וקולו נשמע מסוף העולם ועד סופו

When the Holy One considers how His children are oppressed amongst the nations, He sheds two tears that drop into the Great Sea, and the sound of the splash of these two gigantic divine tears is heard from one end of the world to the other.

For us today this picture has special, poignant relevance: the Holy One sheds two tears, one for America and one for Eretz Yisrael – the two major victims of Middle Eastern terrorism. And the sound of those tears resounds from one end of the world to the other. The entire world must hear that splash and learn that no one – not the European Union, not Russia, no country – is safe from international terrorism. What happens to Israel, and has now happened to America, can happen to any country. It is a pity that this ghastly outrage had to occur and claim so many thousands of innocent lives in order for the world to sympathize with the struggle that Israel is undergoing and to appreciate the agony of Israel for these past 12 months. Had we done so, then maybe – just maybe – we here would have been spared this horrible trauma. But now we have become the unwilling victims of international myopia, apathy, and cynicism. And, irony of ironies, it has struck so soon after the disgrace and the



outrage of Durban. In Durban, it was Israel which was pilloried as racist by such paragons of civic virtue as Syria, Sudan, and Libya. While America valiantly fought against this canard, other countries, even those who were dragged into the American orbit rather reluctantly, played the game of moral equivalency. No wonder that the same pathological phenomenon that bedeviled Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians reasserted itself in Durban—a theater of the absurd staged primarily by the same Palestinians.

So what shall we do? How shall we respond? The first thing is for us as religious Jews is תשובה ותפילה וצדקה—repentance, prayer, and charity. This three-fold formula, invoked on Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur, is a first strategy for believing Jews. We must look into ourselves and judge ourselves with the searing honesty that alone leads to *teshuva*; we must give *zedakah* more generously than is our want. And we must pray fervently and recite *Tehillim*—as we here just did this afternoon. We must continue to *daven* with *kavanah*—great concentration and sincerity—and to learn Torah with a great deal of zest and enthusiasm, knowing that the *mitzvah* of *Talmud Torah* bestows certain *zekhuyot* which can help redeem us, redeem Israel, and redeem the world. We must proceed with faith and with confidence in the Almighty.

But that is only the first step. We must also remember what the Talmud (*Sotah* 37a) tells us. The Torah (Ex. 14:15) records the situation of Moses and Israel immediately upon their exodus from Egypt

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה מָה תִצְעַק אֵלַי דָּבַר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וִיטַעוּ: וְאַתָּה הָרַם אֶת מִטְנְךָ  
וְנָטַתָּ אֶת יָדְךָ עַל הַיָּם וּבִקַּעְהוּ וַיָּבֵאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בִּיבָשָׁה:

Moses prays fervently to God, who says: “Why do you cry (i.e., pray) to Me? Speak to the Children of Israel and let them go forward, and you—lift up your rod and stretch forth your hand over the sea and divide it.” On this, the Talmud comments: באותה שעה היה משה מאריך בתפלה, אמר לו הקב"ה: יידיי טובעים בים ואתה מאריך בתפלה לפני?

A parallel version in the Midrash (Ex. R. 21) fills in some interesting detail:

ר' אליעזר אומר אמר לו הקב"ה למשה עת לקצר ועת להאריך בני שרויים בצער  
והים סוגר והאויב רודף ואתה עומד ומרבה בתפלה דבר אל בני ישראל ויטעו

These two texts, conflated, tell us the following story: Moshe, finding himself surrounded by the sea on one side and the onrushing Egyptians on the other, and the Jews frightened and confused, cries out in prayer to the Almighty who replies: Why do you cry out to Me in prayer? My people are in pain, caught between the Egyptian army and the raging sea, and you engage in leisurely prayer? There's a time to do things deliberately and a time to do things quickly. Now is the time for fast action: Speak to the Children of Israel and let them march, and you, as their leader, prepare to move ahead and split the sea.

To *daven* slowly and carefully and with a great deal of *kavvanah*, is appropriate when there is nothing else you can do to ameliorate the troubling situation. But there are times when *tefillah* has to be very short – and indeed Moshe was a master of the short *tefilla*; there are no shorter prayer in the entire Torah than his prayer for Miriam—and action must be taken forthrightly.

A similar charge is laid upon us. We have prayed – and we should continue to pray – but, having prayed, now is the time for action – for marching, for getting to work, even to splitting seas.

We have many things to do. One of them is give blood, not just for now but for some time in the future, as needed, because of the nature of the catastrophe that struck us. Do it in a way that is organized and systematic and therefore most effective. Volunteer – for hospitals and

respite centers, for visits and for work. Make yourselves available for any and every type of effort in this critical hour of *pikuach nefesh*.

We should write to our government officials two different kinds of letters. One, to congratulate them for upholding the honor and dignity of our country against the onslaught on reason and decency that occurred in Durban. We should never take government for granted; let them know how much we appreciate it. And second, we must write to support a very vigorous and aggressive stand on terrorism and to let them know that we will stand behind them for the general weal and welfare of all New Yorkers and all Americans. We at Yeshiva should be ready at all times to do our part—and more. If and when such call comes, we will discuss it with faculty and administration and, of course, students. I know that, as always, the students of Yeshiva University will be at the forefront of activity on behalf of all that is right and peaceful and just.

I conclude with a *tefillah* that has a moving story behind it. About three or four years ago, my wife and I visited Prague, and from there we went a bit North to the city of Terezin, which was the site of the infamous concentration camp, Terezienstaadt. We went through the barracks where hundreds of thousands of Jews were squeezed in. We saw the shower rooms. We saw the gallows. We saw the walls against which Jews were lined up and shot. We also saw, of course, the burial grounds of those who were fortunate enough to come to *kever Yisrael*. But we learned that several weeks earlier, a fascinating discovery was made. A room was found that the Nazis had not destroyed; they simply forgot about it. It was a tiny room, and the reason they ignored it was that it was cold and it was used to store potatoes. Now, some 50 years after the *Shoah*, someone chanced upon the room, emptied the room of the potatoes, and found something marvelous: Jewish prisoners of the concentration camp had come in, moved the potatoes aside, and *davened* there. They had built a little Shul under the very noses of the Nazis! And on the four walls were inscribed, by artistic inmates, different verses from the *tachanun*. The one that stunned me most, the one that both devastated me and inspired me with its pathos, was on one wall – a wall of this tiny, clandestine shul, not far from the gallows and the shooting wall. On it was inscribed the passage, *וּבְכַל זֹאת שָׁמַךְ לֹא שָׁכַחְנוּ*, נָא אֱלֹהֵי תַשְׁכַּחְנוּ, O God, here in the midst of this dread *Gehennom*, this Hell, *despite everything* – the random killings, the torture and torment, the back-breaking work, the unending indignities--*we did not forget Your Name. Please God do not forget us.*"

That is my prayer too. We must be able to say—honestly--to the Almighty, *שָׁמַךְ לֹא שָׁכַחְנוּ*, we have not forgotten Your Name. We are Your people, the *am Ha-shelem*. We are determined to continue in the ways of our sacred tradition, the ways of *Torah*, *tefillah*, *teshuvah* and *tzedakah*. So we pray that, in turn, our Father in Heaven not forget us; that Israel find safe haven in its current worrisome crisis; that America be spared any future pain; that the survivors and families of the victims of this vicious attack be blessed with His love. And we stand prepared as well for the charge of *דָּבַר אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ*, of marching forward.

We will stand firmly behind all decent people in opposing terrorism and helping the victims. And we shall endeavor never to forget You, O God.

And do not, we pray, forget us.