

Rabbi Sidney M. Helbraun  
Temple Beth-El  
Northbrook, Illinois

**A Time For Redemption**  
**Erev Rosh Hashanah 5762**  
**September 17, 2001**

Last Tuesday, America sat by the television and watched the incomprehensible. By the time I had turned it on, both towers were on fire. And, as I stood there watching, the first building came crashing down.

I knew what was coming next. We all knew. If one of the towers that held 50,000 workers and 80,000 visitors a day had fallen, with how many souls still inside of it, how long would it take until the other one would fall as well?

I could not stop watching. I could not take my eyes off of the screen. None of us could.

In a perverse way, it almost felt as if I had a responsibility to watch; almost as if it was my national, patriotic duty as an American to watch what was coming. But I was wrong. I shouldn't have watched. I had no business watching.

To watch those scenes from the safety and security of my home; to see it happening right before my eyes, and to be helpless to respond to it in any way; I had no right to see that. To witness it without being swept up. To witness it, but be unable to respond. To witness it, and still be clean and safe in my home afterwards. I wasn't meant to witness that. None of us was.

But there it was. The clouds filled our eyes and our minds. But when we turned our heads away from the screen, we saw only the clear, calm, blue skies of Chicago. We had no business watching those scenes. They were not meant for our eyes. They were not meant for anyone's eyes.

For several days afterward, I walked around in a deep fog. Despite the fact that I was sitting in Northbrook, and I still don't think I knew anyone in those three buildings or four planes, I was still in shock, as was our nation, as were we all. And so I must say that I am truly grateful that our nation has taken time to process what we have seen: to weep, to mourn and to grieve for the tragedy that has occurred.

I am particularly grateful for this response because it is not our usual practice. Our usual practice is to run away from tragedy, to hide, from it, and rush back to our "normal" lives. And there were calls for us to do just that here. Suggestions that, if there was no football last weekend, then "we would be giving the terrorists another victory."

I am so grateful that we didn't rush things; that we fought against our impulse to distract our minds, avert our eyes and turn our heads. Because when your nation has endured a tragedy of the magnitude that we have suffered; when we need to comfort some 5,000 families who have lost their loved ones; when we need to recognize just how fortunate we are that only 5,000 human beings have lost their lives; and when our nation is beginning to discuss arrangements for fighting a war, for sending our young men and women off to battle, the last thing we need is a football game to "distract" us. Give us a week to confront our loss, to mourn our dead, to contemplate the future, before we start to worry about our "normal" lives.

The truth is that what we witnessed in New York, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania were not scenes from a movie that can quickly be filed away. This was real life, as real as it gets. And to rush past it, to close our eyes, to distract ourselves from what happened in our country, to our friends and neighbors, that would have been giving the terrorists their ultimate victory.

This desire, to push away from sights that are uncomfortable for us, to find diversions, and to get back to “normal” life, it has been a source of frustration to me. And I see it all the time. I see it in people who rush back to work after a death in their family, who never took the time to really talk to a loved one about a sickness, or who simply avoid talking about problems with their spouse. As a nation and as individuals, we have become experts at avoiding discomfort, and seeking solace in the “normal.”

And I understand why we've done it. It's hard to talk about problems, sickness, and tragedy. It's so much easier to enjoy a movie or a ballgame instead. But what do we really accomplish by turning our heads away from unpleasant sights? What have we really gained? Do we really care more about the Cubs than our children? Do we really care more about Madonna than our wife?

Our country has tried to make living a “normal” life our standard. But a normal life is not a richer life. It is not a truer life. It is not even a better life. It is merely a shallow life. So if this tragedy is to serve any higher purpose, if it is to ever be something more than a day of bloody terror, perhaps it could serve as a wake up call for our generation. Perhaps it could be a reminder to us, to pay less attention to “normal” life, and more attention to what is real.

Over the course of this past week, we've all been living in the real world. We've had no choice. The magnitude of what we saw overwhelmed us. It stunned us and left us in a fog. So we've been forced to slow down, to stop, and to feel. We've been forced to shake our heads and cry at the unbelievable tragedy.

We've all been feeling pain and anxiety. I know, because I've seen many of you coming into the temple to pray. And it's a good thing too, because in the real world, prayer helps.

Prayer brings solace to our soul. It helps us breathe a little easier. I'm not exactly sure why, but I know that it does. And you know it too. That's why you've been coming. That's even why some of you are here today, not because it's Rosh Hashanah, but because you needed to be at temple. You needed to be with your community. You needed to talk to God. You needed to pray.

So we are hurting, our country is hurting. And we're doing what we can to get through this difficult time. But there are some Americans who don't seem to know what to do with their feelings. And we've heard about them in the news; men who've decided to beat up Arabs and Moslems. They're good and mad, and they want to do something about it, so they've begun turning against other Americans.

We know that blaming others, that scapegoating is the wrong way to deal with pain or anxiety. Yelling at your spouse, beating your kids, mistreating a co-worker, or roughing up a foreigner won't solve your problems; it'll only create new ones. Instead of exploding with rage, we all need to be reaching out with compassion. We are not suffering alone here. We are all feeling pain and anxiety, all Americans: black and white; Arab and Hispanic; Christian, Moslem, and Jew. We need to give each other strength and support, not more sorrow and pain.

And if some of you think that I'm being just a little too altruistic here, if you think that maybe some of those Arabs really deserve what they're getting, then remember that those people who are scapegoating Americans because they are Arab or Muslim today, will find a way to scapegoat us because we are Jews tomorrow. They'll say: “The Muslims bombed us because they were angry with you.” They'll say: “You

caused this problem for us, Jews. It's your fault.”

So if we don't want to stand up against bigotry and hatred simply because it's wrong, then let us at least recognize that we need to take a stand now for our own self-interest, because Americans who target other Americans, will get around to targeting us one day too.

We cannot afford to sit on the sidelines if our countrymen start turning against one another. We need to be prepared to stand together with Arab and Muslim Americans, or else the hatred that begins to well up against them, will consume us as well.

You know, as I've seen how some Americans have responded to this attack against our country, I can't help thinking what would have become of the Palestinians if these people had been their neighbors instead of the Israelis. I wonder how long would Americans have waited to remove the Palestinians if they were on **our** border. How many suicide bombs would it have taken before all Palestinians would have been forcibly removed from the land?

The restraint that Israelis have shown over the last year has been incredible. A year ago, they offered peace to the Palestinians, they offered to divide Jerusalem for the Palestinians, and they got suicide bombers in return. Then, having the gall to defend their people, Israel has received rebukes and condemnations from most of the countries of the world and from most of the press, National Public Radio and the Chicago Tribune included.

And yet, despite it all, during the course of these last months and years Israel has continued to respond to the war that is being waged upon her in a careful, measured, tactical way. She has sought to minimize casualties to civilians and only target those who were responsible for murdering her citizens. Now we'll see if our government will be as careful, measured, and tactical in its response as Israel has been. But I know that many of our citizens would not be. They would not have sat around and waited for an army to respond. They would have grabbed their own weapons and removed the Palestinians all on their own. The Palestinians will never admit this, but they have been truly fortunate that their battle has been with the Jewish people. For I do not know of any other nation that would have accepted their terror for as long as Israel has.

I have respect for the way that Israel has responded to the assault on her people this last year. I am proud of the sacrifices that Israel was prepared to make for peace. I acknowledge Israel's need to protect her people and her land. And I appreciate the care that she has shown in avoiding civilian casualties.

In light of the events of the last week, these statements seem almost self-evident. One cannot imagine a Tribune editorial this week questioning Israel's moral integrity. Not now. Today I believe that all Americans, indeed all nations, must look with clear eyes at what Israel has endured and how she has responded, and praise her for her restraint from engaging in war, and for her desire to pursue peace.

But while I want to offer my total support for Israel's actions, I also need to confess some of my sins. For as I have watched how America has responded to our tragedy, I know that I have not done enough for my Jewish homeland. My response to Israel during her time of anguish and need has been severely lacking.

For a year now, not a week, but a year, Israel has been facing suicide bombings. For a year now, they have seen restaurants, discotheques, buses, train stations, and shopping malls bombed. Can you imagine the stress and strain that they have been living with? Can you begin to understand the trauma that this has caused to that country?

Israel has endured bombing after bombing, and my response has been lacking. They have endured months of terror, and our response has been to be afraid, and to stop traveling there. New Yorkers are hurting and we're responding. We need to. We must support our countrymen. But what about our Jewish people. They have been suffering as well, for a long time, and it must look like we've abandoned them. The pain, the loss, the fright, the terror of it all, and our response has been to stay home.

We can and must do better, friends. We can and must do better. Now I don't expect you to get on a plane and visit today, but I do believe that each of us can do something to reach out. Each of us can let our Jewish homeland know that they are in our thoughts and our prayers.

Send something to Israel. Send a card, buy a tree, buy a bond . . . send something. I don't care if it's five dollars or five thousand dollars. The amount is not as important as the thought. In this time of crisis, when we have truly become aware of what Israel has been going through, how can we not send them our love and concern.

Last week Israel held a day of prayer for us. We need to reach back. Each of us. In some way, needs to send something to let them know that they're in our hearts and our prayers. Because just as we still face uncertainty, so do they. They are on the front lines over there. They always have been. Let's let them know we care.

For years, Israel has had to endure suicide bombings. And now, America has also faced this horror. Last Tuesday, September 11, 2001 is a day that none of us will ever forget. It will be remembered as the day the towers fell; the day that 5,000 Americans died; a day of dread and terror.

But somehow I wish that that day could be something more. That we might find something of value in that day, something beautiful that we can teach, some way that we can pay tribute to the thousands of people whose lives were cut short. I wish that we could find some kind of redemption for the day, so that it can be remembered as more than the day that terrorists made our hearts bleed.

If we try, if we commit ourselves to a purpose, then perhaps that day can be remembered as the moment when our generation began to open our eyes, lift up our heads, feel our souls, and live. That on that day we were reminded of how precious life really is, and how grateful we must be for every single minute.

Life is a treasure, a gift. And none of us knows how long it will last. None of us has any control over that. We only have control over how we choose to spend the days that we do have; over what we choose to do with our time.

Friends, we can try to protect ourselves from the pain and sorrow of life. We can close our eyes to the grief and anguish. We can keep ourselves distracted and go back to living "normal" lives. Or we can learn a lesson from this tragedy. We can open our hearts and our hands to one another; we can turn our attention to our family. We can build something worthwhile together: a stronger community, and a better world.

The real world is filled with heartache and loss. In the real world there is pain and sorrow. But in the real world we appreciate the time that we have, instead of looking for distractions. In the real world, we worry more about our family and our friends, our spouses and our children than we care about fashion and celebrities, entertainment and sports. In the real world we treasure relationships more than objects. In the real world we grow strong by supporting one another, not by tearing others down. In the real world, there is no such thing as "normal" life. Every day is extra-ordinary. Every day is full of potential. Every day is precious. Every day is a gift.

May September 11, 2001 be remembered as the day when we, as a nation, began to live again. May America be strong. May Israel be safe. May we be secure. And may we make our lives real. Amen.