

Lo Nafsik Lirkod:
“We Will Not Stop Dancing!”
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5762
September 17, 2001

My friends, as we begin our first High Holy Day season together, this is a difficult time indeed. We opened our service this night with ancient words of humility and awe: “*Hin’ni He’ani Mimash, Nirash v’Nifchad*; Behold, me of little merit, trembling and afraid, as I stand before You to plead for your people. O gracious God, Lord of compassion and love, accept my petition, and that of my people.”

This year our plea, our petition, comes from our innermost being. It is an almost wordless yearning, an agony and a pain.

There is so much I wanted to speak with you about this year: God and spirituality, my own sense of what Judaism is about and what is important for us as a community. I wanted to be less topical, perhaps, then in other years, to not touch on politics.

Then came the planes.

I came across these words the other day. “Remember when we felt young? Remember when we were carefree and innocent? Remember when we had no fear? Remember when it was Monday?”

For congregations around the country this night, there is no choice but to speak of what is in all of our hearts.

It is often the case that what we get *out* of coming to a house of worship depends, in part on what we bring with us. This night, this year, what do we bring with us to this place? What do we seek, what do we need now? Do we come for clarity? But we are a mess of mixed emotions, anger struggling with compassion, blood lust with our inner humanity, shock and disbelief with with our inner need to make some sense of a world turned upside down. The better angels of our nature wrestle with the worst that is in us. Do we come here to make connections? Here we will, indeed, find comfort in one another. Yet even our own sense of identity is different tonight. At this season of the soul, when we often feel so distinct, as Jews, from all our neighbors, we are this year bound up together, united as Americans in ways we have not been for a very long time.

The wound is fresh. The pain is real. The words we share are still a first response, to a tragedy that will change our world, and shape our lives, in ways we cannot begin to know.

It has been a week of asking questions, and exchanging information. Did you hear from your cousin? Your co-worker? Your college roommate? Do you know what happened? Did you lose anyone? Where were you, what were you doing when you heard?

We Jews are a tale-telling people, a sharer of stories. We have claimed, from the very beginning of our existence, that there is deep meaning to be found, in the story we share of ourselves.

This is the story we will read tomorrow. It is of a man who is wracked in anguish, torn between hope and despair, agony and obedience. He has been promised a future. But he is about to lose his son.

“Bayom Ha’shlishi, vayisa Avraham et aynov, vayar et hamakom meirachok; On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes, and he beheld the place from afar.”

My friends, I want to share with you a hint of meaning I have seen in these words, in connection with the events of the past week.

I want to speak with you about perspective.

And connection.

And response.

About a look inside.

A look at each other.

And a look across the sea.

Bayom Ha’shlishi. On the third day.

Erev Shabbat last week. Last Friday night. Several of you, three, if I recall correctly, said something strikingly similar to me. You described the emotional process you had been going through. You all said something like this:

Tuesday felt like a dream. Wednesday you were numb. And Thursday. Thursday is when it all hit home.

The experience follows a familiar pattern. Physicians and nurses who pay attention to post-operative pain management say that almost always in the course of recovery, the third day is the hardest. It is the time when reality sets in, adjustments begin. When the mind starts listening to what the body is saying.

The third day is when we look inside. When we begin to set the events we have seen, the trauma we have been through, into a new perspective.

What do we feel, when looking back? I don't know about you, but I feel a sense of fragility. A reminder of mortality. And -- even in the face of deliberate evil -- a breathtaking appreciation for the role of chance in our lives.

A missed plane. A wrong turn on a street. A woman who was fired from a firm towards the top of Tower One, a week ago today. The millions of daily decisions we make without a second thought can save our life. Or cost our life. And we can never, never know which it will be.

Indeed, we owe our entire existence to chance. Think of how your parents met. Do you know the story? Did it have to happen? We learn from Quantum Physics the role of randomness, of chaos in the universe. We were reminded last week that it is a serious lesson indeed.

And what a wakeup call those images from last week convey! Not long ago we were wrangling over things that seem so... petty in retrospect. A friend of mine told me that nothing she was so worried about two weeks ago seems important anymore.

This is a season during which we are supposed to reflect on our lives, to take stock, and to shape up. To put us in the right frame of mind, to shock, to frighten us into awareness, we sing tomorrow morning the words of the *Netaneh Tokef*:

“B’rosh Hashanah y’kateivun, u’v’yom tzom kippur yeichateimun; On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed; How many shall pass on, how many shall come to be; who shall live, and who shall die; who shall see ripe age, and who shall not; who shall perish by fire, who by water; who by sword, and who by beast...”

My friends, I ask you simply this. Has there ever been a year when you have needed so *little* help getting in the right frame of mind for the *Yamim Nora'im*, these terrible, awesome days of Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur?

“Vayisa Avraham et aynov; and Abraham lifted up his eyes...”

We look inside. Now we look around. We gain perspective on our own lives... and we connect with each other.

We are at war, with a phantom and faceless enemy. It is a new kind of war, because in this fight, we are all on the front line.

We are all on the front line. No place is safe. It could be me. It could be you. It could be anyone, anywhere, anytime.

But this is a feeling Jews have lived with for centuries, intensified since the Shoah and the birth and struggles of the state of Israel, muted by an obviously false sense of security in this country until now, shared at last, today and for all our tomorrows, by every American.

We are all in this together. And from that knowledge comes a kind of comradery that I find profoundly comforting. For in the commonality of experience differences fade, and our core humanity comes to the fore. If a hand reaches into the rubble to help, do you care what it looks like? When we come forward to help each other we unite as in no other way. For one shining moment of glory we are one indeed. No class divides us, no race or gender tears us apart.

Americans, human beings, we are, indeed, all made in the image of God, all of us, male and female, Jew and gentile, gay and straight, white and black and yellow and brown, all of us made in the image of the Most High. We roll up our sleeves, to help, to dig, to give blood. In the midst of a crisis, what matters most is not the color of our skin, but the content of our character. One dream comes true... in the wake of a nightmare.

Vayisa et aiynov.. And we lifted up our eyes...

“Vayar et hamakom meirachok; and he beheld the place from afar.”

We look around. And we look across the sea. We look for, we look towards, we look at our enemy, and we respond.

My friends, let's be clear about what comes next. We will teach the world who we are not only in how we come together, but also in how we strike back.

The book of life and death are open now. The pages are burnt and filled with the ashes of debris, the ruined rubble of so many lives. And the pages are wet with tears of grief. But if you are here with us tonight, if you are alive still, then your page, and mine, are also blank. They await the next chapter of the story. The pen is in our hands. We will defend ourselves. But as we do, we will *also* define ourselves.

Will we stoop to their level? This is not just a national challenge, a question of whether we will dismiss the death of innocents as an unavoidable byproduct of an apocalyptic crusade. It is a personal question, a spiritual struggle as well.

This week there was heat in our words. And hate in our hearts. At a time of such strong feelings, the challenge is to give voice to our emotions, but to keep alive the humanity in ourselves, and in the way we look at others. And I think that's a hard thing to do.

We have seen Palestinians dancing in the streets. We know that the only reason Yassir Arafat expressed shock and remorse is to keep himself alive. We know that there are people in this world who are not our friends.

But they are still human beings. And the bringers of bombs, the celebrants of suffering, it *is not all of them!* There are citizens in our American family who are suffering a second layer of pain this week. The Arab-American family next door, the Imam who works as a chaplain, the Muslim scholars who teach in our universities, the Palestinian physicians, the Iranian engineers, who work with us, who live near us, they *did not do this*. They are, many of them, as were so many Japanese-Americans during World War Two, loyal, patriotic *American citizens*. Our pain is their pain. They are not to blame. They did not do this.

Nor did the mothers in the streets of Kabul, or the girls the Taliban are not even letting learn to read. They may suffer the brunt of our response. But they are human beings. They are mostly innocent. They are not Acollateral damage.@ How we think of them, what we do to them, will say as much about our moral future as it does about their physical one.

What kind of people will we be?

“September 1, 1939.” Words of W.H.Auden:

I sit in one of the dives
 On Fifty-second Street
 Uncertain and afraid
 As the clever hopes expire
 Of a low dishonest decade:
 Waves of anger and fear
 Circulate over the bright
 And darkened lands of the earth,
 Obsessing our private lives;
 The unmentionable odour of death
 Offends the September night...

I and the public know
 What all schoolchildren learn,
 Those to whom evil is done
 Do evil in return.

Into this neutral air
 Where blind skyscrapers use
 Their full height to proclaim
 The strength of Collective Man...
 But who can live for long
 In an euphoric dream;
 Out of the mirror they stare,
 Imperialism's face
 And the international wrong.

Defenceless under the night
 Our world in stupor lies;
 Yet, dotted everywhere,
 Ironic points of light
 Flash out wherever the Just
 Exchange their messages:
 May I, composed like them
 Of Eros and of dust,
 Beleaguered by the same
 Negation and despair,
 Show an affirming flame.

May we, composed of inner turmoil... may we find our own inner
 light. And find our own affirming flame.

“Vayar et hamakom meirachok. And we behold the place from afar.

Finally, finally... will we let them win?

Our lives are ever changed this week. It will never be the same. Security measures will become a part of our routine, although I'm not sure how many potential terrorists are just shaking because we got rid of Curbside Check-In.

But there are ways beyond convenience our lives could change, and we *must not let that happen!* We can learn to live *with* fear. But that is different than living *in* fear. We can cringe. We can pull back. We can stop celebrating who we are, what we are, what we stand for. And if we do, we will let them win.

Of all the things I have spoken with you about tonight, this is perhaps the most important. We must look twice before we cross the street. Maybe, today, even three times. But to stay home, to sit out, would be the saddest choice of all.

*At the end of the briefing session on *Hill Street Blues*, there were words Sarge shared with the officers and detectives about to hit the street. Do you remember his message? It was simple. "Be careful out there."

Many years ago, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav said the same thing, in a Jewish kind of way. You will hear me cite these words often. They are one of the most important messages I know how to convey:

Kol HaOlam Kulo, the whole entire world...

Gesher Tzar Meod, is a very narrow bridge.

V'ha'ikkar, the most important thing...

Lo L'facheid Klal, is not to be afraid.

Perhaps... perhaps we should modify the image...slightly.

For we *are* afraid. But perhaps there is a slightly better way to get across what we are trying to say.

The bomb blew the place to smithereens. Twisted metal and shattered lives was all it left behind. The screams and the sirens were quiet now. The hustle and bustle of two nights before was replaced... by a ghastly, ghostly silence.

But some intrepid soul had been back to visit. That was clear. There was a sign hanging on what was once the entrance to the collapsed building.

There were words on the sign. And the words were a promise.

The sign at the entrance to the Dolphinarium Discotheque in Tel Aviv has three Hebrew words on it.

They are the words you are receiving now.

They are a pledge. And a promise. And a way of life, all in one. They are words which hit at the core of our being. Or at least of who we often claim to be. At a time of terror, they are among the most inspiring words I have ever heard.

What are the words? The sign says, I am told, just this: ***"Lo Nafsik Lirkod. We will not stop dancing."*** My friends. Bring these words with you when you leave this place tonight. Keep them with you for a while. Bring them in to your own soul. Chew on them, and ponder them, and figure out for yourself what it means to you. ***Lo Nafsik Lirkod. We Will Not Stop Dancing.***

L'shanah Tovah.