

**Faith and Freedom:
Lessons Learned in a Year of Terror**

***Eleh Ezkerah: These I Remember –
Service of Reflection and Comfort
September 11, 2002***

Forty years ago, a young and untested American leader stood before the citizens of a foreign city, looked them in the heart and said, in words of profound empathy: *Ich bin ein Berliner!* It was a moment of unity in the midst of crisis, of identification and solidarity in the face of danger and darkness, oppression and evil.

Now we face another test, another time of danger and struggle. For a moment in time the world stood with us. In Africa and Asia, in Europe and in South America, some stood up and said last September 11 that, no matter what our differences, “today, we are all Americans.”

But the days passed, and the shock subsided; disagreements about the meaning of the event set in, arguments about how to respond. Those few brief moments of unity, of moral clarity, they faded with the first outbreak of fighting in Afghanistan. And they never, ever translated into a world-wide awareness of a war against terror. In the ashes of a discothèque or pizzeria, in the ruined remnants of a Pesach seder, in the shattered shards of a Bat Mitzvah party, no European has ever thought to say the same thing, or use the same standard. Not once, from Europe, do we hear the cry: “we are all Israelis.”

If we would look for lessons in 9/11, look not to unity; it is fleeting and superficial. It fades fast in the face of hard questions: are not the people of India also victims of terror? Why is their Parliament worth less than our Pentagon? If Americans can drop bombs on villages half a world away, why is Israel a pariah, for defending itself, on its own streets, and its own border? Why do Arab papers still claim that Jews organized the attack in order to lay blame on them?

Why do Irish Catholic schoolgirls need a military escort to go to school – in the middle of Europe? And how many deaths will it take ‘til we know... that too many people have died?

Morality is a casualty in the world of war: your facts are not my facts, her story is not history, and in an obvious commonality of core cultural values, the United States considers *Saudi Arabia* an ally and a friend! Everywhere we look, the world has turned upside down.

But perhaps... perhaps in the very cacophony and confusion, in the multitude of voices, the different versions of the same event, is a lesson, and an opportunity. Perhaps the very fact that we are all so different from one another... can teach us something about the uniqueness, the greatness, the glory of America. **If not unity, then perhaps what we can take from 9/11 is a stance less lofty, but more profound. Maybe what we can learn is the power, and the potential, at the deepest level of democracy. It is the American aptitude for openness. Of sharing ourselves. Of being open to others. And appreciating differences.**

This past May, Julie and I returned to Philadelphia for our 20th year college reunion. We attended the brother-sister schools of Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges. Until reunion, I had not realized, I suppose, that Cantor Fitzgerald was owned and organized by Haverford alumni, that the CEO was a class below me. On the Saturday afternoon of reunion, the two schools, a mile apart, came together for a joint activity: a Memorial Service for Tom Glasser, Haverford Class of 1982, a classmate, and a Cantor Fitzgerald casualty.

There I stood, on the track – Tom was a runner, and had endowed Haverford’s new track, so we held our service there -- handing a symbolic baton to another classmate whom I had not seen in years, Marwan Journey.

Marwan was a friend of mine from the earliest days of freshman year. It was a friendship that almost never happened. Marwan is Palestinian. Freshman year I had a map of Israel on my

wall. I remember the first time we talked politics. He walked up to my map, pointed to Tel Aviv, and declared that he wanted to see the Mediterranean from that spot. I indicated that he could take the next El Al flight. The discussion deteriorated from there.

Marwan and I discovered over time that we could not share a common view of the past. Our narratives were too much a part of who we were. We would never agree on yesterday.

But we were friends. Not the closest of friends, and we did not keep in touch beyond college, but I considered him a friend. And what I learned at college long ago is that, even in our disagreement about the past, when we shared our stories, we *could* also share a common prayer for the future.

Another scene, in another city. I have just delivered a benediction at the close of a Citizenship Naturalization ceremony, welcoming new immigrants to full status as American citizens. [I had my own doubts about what I was doing there – why *are* there invocations and benedictions at a purely civil ceremony? I briefly considered not accepting the invitation, just out of my belief in the separation of church and state. But I was glad I was there to give the benediction, as soon as I heard the Minister’s invocation. Sure enough – in a room filled with Kurds and Cambodians, Pakistanis Muslims and Indian Hindus, Chinese Buddhists and Soviet Jews, in a room in which Christians were, to the naked eye, a clear minority, nevertheless the Minister invoked on our behalf, in the name of “our Lord Jesus Christ.” So I was glad I was there, with my carefully crafted non-denominational, indeed, almost non-theistic benediction.]

But after the ceremony, something extraordinary happened. A man approached me, grabbed my arm, and shook my hand. “You,” he said in a thick Middle Eastern accent, “are a rabbi, and Jewish.” (And I’m thinking, yes, so, what other kind of rabbi is there?) “I,” he went on, “am Muslim, from Cairo. There, we fight. Here, we can be friends.”

Sometimes to touch tomorrow, all we can do is tell our story. Share ourselves, and be open to others.

Here is the story that I know. Here is a taste of my America.

Young faces looked up from the circle of chairs. They were from different groups, and were different ages: at that single service we had as guests a Lutheran seventh grade Sunday School class, a Methodist high school youth group, and one of the local Catholic colleges. The discussion was going well: their questions were good, thoughtful, honest... and respectfully stated. We were learning from each other.

Then one of the college students raised her hand. She asked us all to look around the room, and commented on how rare it was in history, how fortunate we are in all the span of the centuries, that such an evening could occur.

Years before that evening, at another service: Sister Joan Chittister, OSB, had stood on our pulpit and related how she had walked by the congregation I served at the time every day as a child, had stopped to look at the windows, and tried to peer inside. Knowing... that she was not allowed to do so. Knowing that according to her church, she was not allowed to enter. The building of another faith was "off limits."

Whether such prohibitions were official or implied, they worked both ways. Few Jews in centuries past or continents away would have entered a church for any reason, much less a mosque... even to admire its art or music, even in common cause to help the poor, or to share in purely cultural programs open to an interested public. There was too much in the way of history. The wounds of a tortured past were too recent, and too real. **What I think we need to remember after 9/11 is this: that we live, indeed, at a time of great openness and tolerance... and in a land of liberty that has fostered such feelings.**

Much is written today about how the "religious" world can "help" and heal the public at large, the lessons of the spirit for a dispirited and secular society. This is true. We dwell in cynicism, rootless and rudderless, fractured by an individualism taken to extreme ends at the expense of the group, the collective, the whole. Communities of faith have much to teach and re-teach... above all about the core values of living in community.

But the opposite is true as well. As much as ancient insights have to offer our modern American society, so, too, the model of American democracy has much to teach communities of faith.

For centuries, religions operated on the model of what Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, refers to as the "truth game." Most faiths were convinced that they were "right," that they were "true," that their's was the only way... and that all other religions were "wrong." **But the experiment that is America has given us another way of being religious as well.** For the West, for the non-fundamentalist, for one who is willing to see that his truth is not absolute, that her path is not the only path, in implicit function even if not in explicit doctrine, many religious traditions are dealing with the what might be called the "meaning game," asking about not what is exclusively "true," but what touches deep meaning and evokes ultimate issues in the spiritual lives of their followers.

This shift is an outgrowth of living in a democracy, of our personal experience with pluralism. There is value in diversity. What democracy has let us see, I believe, is that almost all faiths can be different paths to God.

Picture, if you will, your favorite destination in our area. It might be the White Flint. It might be Fed Ex Field. It might be the other Mall (the one downtown). Now, by means of example (and not meaning to be sacrilegious) let us for a moment compare one of these places,

say, White Flint Mall, to God. You can get to White Flint, from here, by taking Jones Mill to Jones Bridge to 355. Or you can turn up Connecticut, and cut over on Knowles. Or you can get to 495, and take that to Rockville Pike. All of these roads lead to White Flint.

Usually, we travel our own roads, the path of our own religious lives. Sometimes, however, we want to explore the area. We look at a different road, just to learn about it. This is what we do when we study a religious tradition other than our own. Sometimes, too, we look at the whole picture -- we take out a map and look at all the roads at once. That is called Comparative Religion.

Sometimes we notice that there is something about our own road that needs some work, a bump, rough pavement, a pothole -- or an issue that makes us uncomfortable. A single pothole -- even a bad one -- is not enough to make us change roads; it is something that we learn to deal with, to come to terms with, to drive around. Sometimes, as well, we notice nice things about other roads... a beautiful view, a logical concept, a glimpse of an alternative truth.

Now, there are those who fear that this kind of openness, this plethora of paths -- or, even, the possibility of a multiplicity of meanings inherent in the same event -- that all this is merely a mask for a dangerous kind of relativism. There are those who think that we focus too much on freedom in the modern world, that we are open to each other only when we believe that any belief is as good as any other belief, which is as good as no belief; that any value is as good as any other value, which is as good as no value, that anything can mean anything to anyone.

But the risk of tolerance tumbling into valuelessness is only there if openness is *all* one believes in, if universal equality is the sum and total of our identity... not if it is a companion to our total selves. The lesson we have learned from life in this land is that we can *appreciate* more than one spiritual path... even while our own *identity* is defined by the single path on which we

ourselves travel. Pride in who we are need not come at someone else's expense. **What we try to teach here is pride, without prejudice.**

This democracy of the spirit goes deeper than being nice to our neighbors. Even within a single tradition, we gain far more than we risk by being open to more than one level of meaning.

We will read, in a few weeks time, in synagogues around the world, the story of Creation. We will hear once again the tale of Eve being formed from Adam's rib. We don't even need to deal with the issue of literalism; whether this happened in exactly this way is a point for another time, and another place, if it even needs to be dealt with at all. We can ask a different question. Why the rib?

In a class studying the text, one student raises his hand. "Because it is close to the heart?" We know immediately that we have a romantic on our hands. Another, a young woman: "Not from the head, to rule over him; nor from the feet, to always serve him, but from the side, so they can walk forward together, hand in hand and side by side, equal in every way."

In two sentences of response, we have just learned as much -- no, more -- about these students and their personalities and experiences than we have about the original verse. The answers are very different. Yet both work. And we are enriched for hearing both.

It is no wonder that faith has flourished in freedom, that Americans are consistently more interested in religion and more active in religious organizations than our European counterparts. State sponsored religion homogenizes... and dampens the spiritual quest. The formal separation of church and state, rather than inhibiting the life of the spirit, has instead been a protective fence, letting new seeds flourish and grow and find their place among all the older plants and ideas of the garden.

If bio-diversity is the key to ecological survival, then theological diversity is the key to spiritual survival. Variety has been called the spice of life, but it is more than that. It is also its guarantor.

Many centuries ago, two distinct approaches to Judaism vied with one another, two sages, Hillel and Shammai, with very different ideas argued back and forth. The arguments -- and the divergent practices of the two groups -- continued, surviving side by side through debates that lasted decades and beyond. The followers of each of sage made up a "school" of thought, and much is made of the different positions of the "school of Hillel" and the "school of Shammai." The disparity was disconcerting. Until the Talmud issued a judgement that put the debate in perspective: "These (the positions of the school of Hillel) and these (those of the school of Shammai) are the words of the living God."

Both? How? Even when they contradict? Yes, both. And we are promised that a time will come when boundaries will fall, and connections will be clear that perhaps we did not see before. Maybe, in this later light, what seems a contradiction now will prove to be just different aspects of the same thing. Maybe.

And in the meanwhile we have learned that truth is often found in the search itself, that the process is sometimes more important... indeed, more holy... than the product. For it is in the struggle for meaning, and the grappling for answers, not in its aftermath, that we will inevitably discover what it is that moves us, and who it is that we are.

For me, this is the lesson of September 11: to be wary of certainty, to be careful of absolutes, to be open to each other. That divine conviction erodes moral constraints. That spirituality and religious life is at its *best* when it co-exists with democracy and diversity and pluralism. That what is at stake in this struggle is not any particular foreign policy,

but the concept of openness itself. And that, as I once heard somewhere, in the spirit of this season, the holiest words in the English language might well be: “I might be wrong.”