

## **Finding God and Hope: Understanding Our Sacred Purpose**

RH Sermon 5772 *by Rabbi Michael Schwab*

(Shanah Tovah) Sometimes the world seems impossible to understand. I look at the world and what is happening around us and so many things seem upside-down. The headlines I read portray incomprehensible events: a man killed a fellow moviegoer over popcorn, teen gangs in Chicago with members that are only 14 or 15 committing murder, not to mention all of the disturbing news on the international front in the Middle East, in Africa and beyond. When I reflect on what is happening around the globe, and on various experiences I have had in my own life, I am frequently astonished at the cruel and foolish choices people sometimes make that hurt others and damage our society; I am dismayed by the tragedies that strike the world, both natural and manufactured by human beings, and I am saddened by the suffering that exists amongst so many on the planet because of oppression, poverty or disaster. Why, we ask ourselves. How can there be so much suffering and cruelty in the world? And

ironically, from one perspective, this bewilderment and confusion likely *increases* for those of us who believe, or want to believe, in God. For a world with *no* higher meaning, by definition, lacks ultimate purpose and is guided by no essential moral values. Yet, we would imagine a world *with God* should look differently than our own.

This year in particular it has been hard to reconcile our general concept of God as both good and powerful with the number of disasters and tragedies that have occurred both at home and abroad. In particular, the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, the devastating earthquakes in Japan, New Zealand and Myanmar, the storms and tornadoes in the south that killed almost 200 Americans, the mass murder of civilians by outgoing dictators such as Ghadafi and Assad, or the current famine in Somalia which tragically has the potential to claim lives in the hundreds of thousands. For some this national and international chaos simply mirrors the disruption we feel in our own *personal* lives, which through loss, illness, financial crisis, or

family strife has turned our lives upside-down, made life significantly harder in some important way, perhaps leaving us paralyzed or feeling like we are living in the dark.

On those days when we look at the world through the murky lens of the glass pane empty, we must ask ourselves: what are we to do with all of this heaviness? Is there another way to understand our existence, to reconcile God with this imperfect world, to see the power of hope and goodness where despair and pain seem to reign?

Just a few weeks ago we commemorated the tenth anniversary of the tragedy of 9.11. It is hard to believe it has been 10 years already. To me, it seems like that terrible event just occurred. Like most of you, I know *exactly* where I was when I first discovered what was unfolding. I was in South Jersey at my parents' home preparing to go to Israel for my third year of Rabbinical School. I remember that I called my dentist's office to confirm the time for my appointment that I was squeezing in before I went abroad and the receptionist on the other end was

being quite **in**attentive. I guess my frustration showed in my tone and she said, “Don’t you know what is going on? Turn on your TV.” And she hung up. So I obediently turned on my television to see the image of the first tower belching dark smoke with an announcer repeating over and over that an airplane had flown into one of the twin towers in New York. Within minutes, to my horror, and to the horror of the thousands of others watching, we witnessed live, helpless to do anything, the second plane hitting the South tower at a speed and with a force that was jarring. An explosion of fire and smoke emitted from this tower too and a gaping hole was all that was left of the plane and its passengers. As you all know, people were jumping from windows, smoke was everywhere and individuals were streaming out of the towers like a confused colony of ants streaming away from the inferno.

My immediate thought was about my brother Ian, who at the time was living in Manhattan and working a summer job as a bike messenger. I remember that he had told me that the Towers were a common delivery destination for him. I remember calling his cell

over and over to no avail. I recall the anxiety and the fear creeping in, fighting against my rational side that was telling me that the odds were very small that he was there at that particular moment; he didn't go there everyday and when he did, he was only there for a few minutes at a time. And while my family and I were unconditionally relieved when we finally heard from him – he had been thirty blocks away – that overwhelming feeling of despair still clung to me as I contemplated the purposeful destruction of life that other human beings chose to inflict on their fellows.

A few weeks ago, in anticipation of the upcoming 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that black day, I was browsing through some commemorative material on-line searching for some meaning from the safer distance of ten years. During my search I became intrigued by one website's presentation of their material, for they placed initial reflections of survivors or loved ones of people who died, written only days or weeks after, **next to** pieces these same survivors and loved ones had just written, now 10 years after the fact. I wanted to know – what had they learned in those ten years?

How did **these traumatized victims** of such terrible violence process what had happened? Did they see that day and its significance differently now? Had they been able to heal or grow? Perhaps, I was hoping, that these 9/11 survivors could teach me, with enough hindsight, how to understand a way through tragedy, despair, calamity and loss – everything they had experienced since that fateful day.

What I found was a treasure. In these reflections I discovered a message of great hope – a true ray of light shining forth out of a menacing cloud that I believe has the potential to help us wash away the darkness and hopelessness we may sometimes feel about life – that nagging at our faith, both in humanity and God, which springs from our assessment of the world. For upon comparing each individual's **initial** response to their experience of 9/11, to their reflection ten years later, I found that while the initial reflections focused on a description of the fear, pain and tragedy of the event, including the bewilderment, anger and sadness that surely followed after, the reflections at **ten**

**years** out were awash with themes of gratitude, of love and of hope. Upon looking back years later, these brave victims and their families chose to focus on those who helped them that day, the support they received from the rest of the nation, and the way in which their traumatic experience actually helped them re-shape their lives, and the lives of others, in better ways. The love, compassion, gratitude and faith contained in their words were inspiring. These victims of hate and calamity had more than begun to heal, they had grown in unfathomable ways and they had renewed their faith in life. As one survivor, Genelle, wrote in her tenth anniversary reflection:

Today I still work for The Port Authority as I did when I clocked in at the World Trade Center at 8:05 that Tuesday morning 10 years ago. But now on September 11th, I try to take the day off. I want to be in a quiet, peaceful place praying. It is a day I both mourn and *celebrate*.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I had left the 64th floor of the North Tower earlier and escaped unharmed. What if I hadn't been buried in debris, the ground falling out beneath me at the 13th floor as I was racing to get out of the building? What if I hadn't been stuck under rubble for 27 hours before rescuers finally found me? I would have been grateful, but I wouldn't have looked any deeper at my

life. I would have chalked my survival up to quick thinking or quick moving or plain good luck. I would have gone on with my life avoiding God the way I had ever since I lost my mom to cancer in 1999.

You can see why I celebrate and mourn every September 11th. I mourn the loss of so many lives, my friends from work, people who walked down the stairs with me and didn't make it. Yet there is much to be grateful for. My survival—which still fills me with wonder. My health—I walk with a slight limp that most people don't even notice. My family—Roger and I and our four children have a good life. Most of all, I celebrate my relationship with God.

Or how about this account of a Jewish man, Jeff Parness, who lost his best friend and business partner, an Israeli named Hagay Shefi, son of retired IDF general Dov Shefi. He wrote:

I miss my friend Hagay Shefi. Always a smile on his face, always a new idea he couldn't wait to share. We were partners in a software company. On September 11th, 2001, Hagay was at the World Trade Center to give a talk. He never made it out.

For two years I struggled to find a way to commemorate his life. Like many New Yorkers, I felt a terrible sense of loss yet also an abiding gratitude to the thousands from around the country who came to help at Ground Zero. Then on November 1, 2003, my five-year-old son, Evan, came running to me. He'd seen wildfires ravaging San Diego on CNN. "I want to send toys to kids who lost their homes," he said. "What if we collect toys from all the kids in the

building?” I asked. . . Evan’s eyes lit up. In three days we had donations from 100 people. . .

So Evan and I decided we’d deliver relief supplies as well. I rented a 17-foot truck and parked it outside our building. On a whim, I hung a sign on the truck that read, “New York Says Thank You.” Strangers stopped me as we loaded the truck, New Yorkers with tears in their eyes, asking if they could help.

Back home Evan and I saw there was much more to do. The Gulf Coast was rocked by Katrina. In 2007 a massive tornado practically wiped Greensburg, Kansas, off the map. This spring another twister destroyed much of Joplin, Missouri. Each September [New York Says Thank You](#) sends a group of volunteers to help rebuild a community recovering from disaster. Perhaps the most remarkable thing is this. At each place we’re joined by people from the previous town we helped. That reminds me we’re all in this together. When Americans lend a hand to one another, nothing is impossible. We’re not about what happened on 9/11. We’re about what happened on 9/12.

There is absolutely no doubt that the pain of the losses and the trauma of all of the victims of 9/11 are still very present. Yet, the reflections of these survivors and their loved ones gave me hope that even after having personally experienced such a hate-driven calamity or after losing someone so dear to them in that tragedy, that one could heal and grow from that moment, and could, even

while changed and damaged in some fashion, become stronger people, more convinced about the sanctity of life and the need to help others, as well as more full of faith in ways that I could never have imagined. I thought to myself, if *these* folks had the ability to endure what happened to *them*, and they could heal enough and learn enough, to grow from that tragedy and look at life and God with new eyes, I can too; we all can.

One of the amazing things about the Jewish New Year is that this time period in our calendar holds out for us, as Jews, the priceless gift of renewal – the ability for us to change, to refresh, to rejuvenate and to grow. Like an annual planted in the ground, its flower may be forced into hiding for periods of the year, but as sure as the sun will rise, it blossoms again. Every year our tradition gives *us* this blessed and powerful opportunity to blossom -- to mend and strengthen: our relationships, ourselves and our world. We call the process by which this occurs, *teshuvah*.

Often we talk about *teshuva* in terms of correcting deficiencies in our character, or in committing to engage in more

productive and helpful behaviors. These are both important and worthy endeavors. Yet, we must not forget that the High Holiday's promise of renewal is even more expansive, even more powerful – for not only do they inspire and adjure us to work *on* ourselves, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur also grant us the chance to experience renewal *for* ourselves. During this time period we are given the opportunity to *recover* from the trials of living, to *unburden* ourselves of the heaviness of life's many tribulations, and to *refresh* our general sense of hope in the world, of our faith in our fellow human beings and of our belief in sacredness of the life and the world that God has given us. The High Holidays are not only about reflecting on what *we* did *wrong* but they are also about renewing and revitalizing how we understand the world. During these High Holidays we can re-discover the truth about the sacred potential the *world* constantly offers *us* for a blessed and meaningful life. Today we pledge to see the world through different eyes.

As many of you know, Rosh Hashanah is the holiday in our calendar that is dedicated to the celebration of the creation of the universe. Therefore, at its very core the Jewish New Year is a touchstone for the power of regeneration and our ability to shape our lives and the world anew. With the knowledge that we are made in God's image – that every human being has a Divinely created soul – Rosh Hashanah teaches us that we can partner with God to create a world, and a life, that are better than they were last year. By the nature of who we are, as creations of God, we human beings *always* possess the power to move forward, to heal, to grow and to bring goodness where there was once evil, to create hope where there was once despair – it is built-in to who we are. Therefore, when we truly understand our own miraculous nature, we discover that we can tap into the eternal and elemental power of what it means to be a Divine creation *at any time*. Doors start to appear where there were once walls; paths through the mountains materialize where they were once only sheer cliffs.

For sure, pain and suffering are not made to disappear; recovery is still a struggle. However, the message of Rosh Hashanah reminds us that our lives can become suffused again with the importance and potential they were always meant to have. It may take time, there will still be sorrow but, there will also be hope – a conviction that we *can* move forward, that we *can* renew and that we must.

In fact, Judaism's understanding of creation teaches us that each one of us has a divine and sacred purpose. Actually, we have many of them. Calamities that might befall us, setbacks we suffer need not prevent us from achieving our sacred tasks. In actuality it may be that these experiences will make us more effective in contributing to the world and they may make our being successful even more necessary. We would *never* choose such experiences for ourselves or anyone, but after having undergone them, after having survived, and after having experienced what we went through, we will have so much more to teach. Some of the most effective people in helping professions are what we call wounded

healers. They have chosen to no longer remain only a victim but instead they have made the conscious choice to use their painful experiences to help others who may be struggling as well. And through this process they have helped to turn back the evil that was inflicted upon these souls and replace it with healing and goodness both for themselves and those whom they were trying to help.

For our efforts to heal, help and share our wisdom in the face of tragedy are precisely what humanity needs to counterbalance the deficiencies in the world. This is one of the most important ways that we live up to our title as the “crown of creation” and as *the* partners of God. While it is clear that we cannot always fix every wrong that is done, our goodness acts as an anchoring counterweight to combat the negative forces in the world and it helps us to make progress as a society in creating better lives for all.

How do we do this? Where do we start? The answer is: anywhere we can. As Arnold Eisen, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, wrote: “Martin Buber, one of the greatest

religious thinkers of the 20th century, taught the important lesson that the world can be repaired at “**infinitely many points other than the ones at which it was most recently injured**”. Buber wanted to reassure those who bear guilt for wrongs that they have committed, and cannot make right, that **there is a lot of good that needs doing everywhere we turn**. If we cannot help those whom we ourselves have hurt, we can and should help others. If you can't repair the particular wrong you've caused or witnessed, repair a different one. There's a part of us, in the face of these limitations, that wants to lash out in anger at someone, anyone -- and another part of us, or maybe the same part, that is tempted to throw up our hands in despair of ever making a real difference. So much evil! So much pain! How can we put a stop to it? Neither response gets us very far. Blind vengeance is rarely of much use and despair often leads to inaction. Suffering multiplies as a result. The forces of evil advance. Good retreats. The cause of life is diminished. Better, Buber advises, **to seek out whatever good we can accomplish.**” and do it.

Eisen is pointing out that Buber is teaching us that while life doesn't add up perfectly and symmetrically, while we can't directly fix every wrong we encounter, there *is* still a way to balance the equation. There are countless opportunities for us to repair the world, no matter what we have suffered or perhaps even *especially* if we have suffered. We can give *tzedakah*, volunteer for a cause, make an effort to be kind, reach out to someone we know is hurting, support the synagogue and other institutions that exist to care for each other, engage more deeply in our tradition, give of our time to those in need. No matter what we have done or what has been done to us – the only productive, helpful, holy, healthy, spiritual way to respond is to seek out whatever good in the world we *can* accomplish and then act. We might not be ready right away but like Jeff Parness, who started New York Says Thank You in his friend Hagay's memory, we must do our best to turn our grief into compassion and our hurt into deeds of righteousness. The Jewish way is to always seek to somehow build something meaningful out of every incidence of destruction.

That is why Jewish tradition teaches us to give *tzedakah* in memory of people we lose – to imbue the loss and the memory of those we love with a legacy of meaning that leaves a positive imprint on the world. Think about Israelis, every time a bomb explodes on an Israeli street or a rocket hits an Israeli home, the community bands together, begins to heal each other's wounds and re-builds. It is the story of our people throughout history. We cannot erase the tragedies of the past, we cannot undo 9/11 or the earthquake in Japan. However, what we can do is resolve to remind ourselves of who we are – God's partners – and that in the face of tragedy, we *will* do what we *can*. We may be battered from a difficult year but on Rosh Hashanah we must commit to the notion that evil will simply inspire us to do good, that we will respond to calamity with an outpouring of love, we will combat hurtfulness with helpfulness, and we will respond to neglect with a strong and warm embrace. Because our lives have meaning, we have the power to bring structure to a world of chaos, just as God

did on the first day of creation. We have the ability to ensure that goodness will outshine tragedy.

This year at Beth El we must commit ourselves to this goal. Each of us, I believe should pledge to do one more thing to proactively do our part to make the world a better place. Join and strengthen our social action committee and participate in its wonderful volunteer activities. Reach out to those who are ill through our Bikkur Holim society. Participate in our Network aimed at supporting those in search of employment. Consider Fair Share dues to ensure that all those who wish can be members of our community. Study with us to learn our values and be inspired. And embrace our community's various events by participating and connecting with your fellow Beth El members in new ways.

We have all made the journey from last Rosh Hashanah until today. We have all endured some form of loss, we have all been injured – some deeper than others. The world too has clearly suffered this year as well. Yet, Rosh Hashanah reminds us that we can heal, we can rejuvenate and in fact we must. There are grave

injustices going on in the Middle East, we must stand up for Israel through whatever means we can. There is calamity around the globe, most critically in East Africa at this time. There are people in this country reeling from natural disaster, Chicagoans in our area who are in need of our help, and friends and family whom we know are hurting. We must do our best to partner with God and be for others a source of healing and goodness. We are supported in these efforts by each other, by our tradition and ultimately by God whose assistance comes even in unanticipated ways.

How can we reconcile God with this world? I asked. How do we move forward? I leave you with the powerful thoughts of Rabbi Naomi Levy, who suffered great losses herself, from her book *Talking to God*. She wrote: "I grew up believing that God was some kind of superhero who intervenes in our lives to protect the innocent and punish the evil. But there is a problem with this conception of God. Every day the news headlines remind us . . . of the millions of suffering souls. I believe that God is just as outraged as we are by life's unfairness, and just as pained. God is

not distant and unfeeling, but compassionate. God suffers when we suffer.

Many people bargain with God when they desperately want something to happen: "God, if You do this for me, I'll do that for You." Then if things don't go their way, they abandon prayer altogether because they assume that God wasn't listening. But I believe God *is* listening. And I believe God answers us. God's answer to our prayers may be *very* different from the answer we were searching for. God's reply might come as the *strength* to fight on. It may come as the *courage* to face what we have been fearing. God's answer may be the *ability* to accept what we have been denying. Or it may appear as *hope* in the face of despair. God is neither distant nor deaf. We are not alone. God is present in our lives. . . . I no longer look to God to prevent life's ugliness; I look to God to show me the way to prevent the cruelty **I** have the power to prevent. I no longer see God as a being who can shield me from all harm, but as a presence who has the power to point me toward the holiness that resides in simple acts. Once we stop blaming God

for our suffering, we can stop hating God and start listening to God. I believe it is God who enables us to return to life after tragedy-not by eradicating all suffering but by giving us the strength and the courage to heal what we can heal. God gives us the capacity to appreciate the miracles that surround us each day, the conscience to choose good over evil, [and] the compassion to extend our hands to those who are suffering.”

May we all be blessed to be God’s partners and bring healing and goodness to the world in the year to come. May we all find healing for ourselves and recognize the sacredness of our life’s tasks. And may we all be blessed for a year of sweetness, wonder and goodness. *Shanah Tovah Umetukah.*