

Compassionate Living Inspired by the Memory of 9/11

(Draft for Speaking by Rabbi Michael Schwab - RH Eve 5787)

Where were you twenty-five years ago on September 11th, 2001? 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. It was the era before smartphones and I hadn't watched the news that morning. I remember that I called my dentist's office to confirm the time for my appointment and the receptionist on the other end was being quite *inattentive*. I guess my impatience came through and she said, "Don't you know what is going on? Turn on your TV!" And then 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, I witnessed live, helpless to do anything, the second plane hitting the *South* tower 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, fleeing from the inferno. My immediate thought was about my brother Ian, who was living in Manhattan and working as a bike messenger. The Towers were a common delivery destination. I *remember* calling his cell over and the anxiety and the fear creeping in, fighting against my rational side which knew that the odds were very small that he was there at that particular time. And while my family and I were unconditionally relieved when we finally heard from him, I *remember* the overwhelming feeling of despair that still clung to me as I contemplated the purposeful destruction of life inflicted by one group of human beings on another.

And I *remember* the stories of those who died. Those on the planes, those in the towers, those at the Pentagon and those who died attempting to save others. I remember the grief of our country: the tears, the makeshift memorials and the emotional testimonies of those who survived, describing the horrors they experienced that day.

But I also *remember* the images and descriptions of the great *heroism* and extraordinary acts of *caring*. I remember the firemen and first responders that ran *into* the smoke, *into* the crumbling buildings and *towards* the fire, to save and treat anyone they could. The everyday New Yorkers who responded with bravery and carried others out of buildings, sheltered them in their homes or guided people to safety. Those who came from nearby offices and neighborhoods *towards* the disaster with water, food, supplies and an open heart ready to help. September 11th *certainly* revealed the *terrible* things human beings are capable of doing *to* one another. But it *also* revealed the *extraordinary* things human beings are capable of doing *for* one another. That, too, is my memory of that day.

The prophet Amos asks: “If a shofar is sounded in a city, will the people not tremble?” The sirens of that day were certainly not the shofar. Yet, as with a shofar, the sirens sounded, the people indeed trembled and their response was *inspirational*: they answered with love and with bravery. What about today? How will we answer the call? As Maimonides famously wrote, the Shofar’s sound calls out: “Awake, sleepers, from your sleep...examine your deeds, return in teshuvah, and remember your Creator.” Twenty-five years later, to what must *we* awaken? During a holiday that prizes memory, *Zichronot*, what is the memory of 9/11 calling us to hear?

Researchers for the National Institute of Standards and Technology examined 245 in-depth interviews with survivors. They found that, amid confusion and danger, these people amazingly developed *new* patterns of action, largely

shaped by their *sense of responsibility for others*. In other words, as the catastrophe unfolded it not only produced panic but it also called forth cooperation, courage, and care.

As it teaches in *Pirkei Avot*: **בְּמָקוֹם שֶׁאֵין אָנוּשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לִהְיוֹת אִישׁ** “In a place where no one is acting humanely, strive to be human.” A national study by sociologists Kraig Beyerlein and David Sikkink reached a related conclusion: sorrow, more than anger, encouraged people to identify with the victims of 9/11 and inspired many of them to come to their aid. Their research suggests, therefore, that grief need not end in helplessness. When grief opens our hearts to the suffering of others, it can actually be a catalyst for active compassion. Thus, we should indeed remember the tears and the grief, but we should let our memory of those days *inspire* us, and *teach* us to care for others in the *present*. Let our reflection and our memory remind us *now* that the essence of life is intricately tied to how we care for our fellow human beings.

I also remember the *unity* following 9/11: the widespread sense that, despite our racial, religious, political, and geographic differences, we shared a common fate. That unity was neither perfect nor universal. But it did remind us that we *are capable* of seeing one another as *neighbors*, even across our differences. The years since have taught us that such unity must become a *discipline*, as layers of *division* have been heaped upon that foundational feeling of connectedness. Writer, Robert Putnam, described civic solidarity as a “moral resource” that “increases with use and diminishes with disuse.” Research by Putnam and Thomas Sander found that 9/11 created greater *openness* to *shared* sacrifice and a wider sense of “**we**.” But they also warned that those feelings would not *automatically* become *lasting* civic behavior. Memory must therefore become *more* than admiration for what people did twenty-five years ago. It must become a commitment to rebuilding those compassionate connections **today**.

In Judaism, it is a well known tenet that memory should inspire us to action. Beginning in 2002, families of those killed on 9/11 worked to transform September 11th into a lasting day of *service*. Their efforts led Congress in 2009 to establish September 11th as the National Day of Service and Remembrance. Service and Remembrance. This should remind *us* that Jewish memory is *not* nostalgia. We remember the Exodus and *therefore* care for the stranger. We remember Amalek and *therefore* resist hatred and needless violence. We remember the dead and therefore recommit ourselves to life. Rosh Hashanah therefore asks us not merely to remember 9/11/2001, but to recover its moral insight: we belong to one another even *before* disaster strikes. We should not require a catastrophe to awaken our compassion, our courage, or our sense of common purpose.

Perhaps that *is* what the shofar asks of us this year afterall: Do not *wait* for the alarm of another tragedy to awaken. Do not *wait* until buildings fall, to recognize how much we depend upon one another. Awaken *now*—to the stranger who needs help, the neighbor who needs companionship, the community that needs healing, and the fragile world that God has entrusted *to* us. Tomorrow we will pray to Gd in our Musaf service, “You, O Lord, remember the deeds of the world.” This Rosh Hashanah, may *we* remember them as well—and may our remembering awaken us to lives of greater compassion, courage, and responsibility for one another. Shanah Tovah!