"We Lament"

Friends it is not an easy thing to stand before the congregation in times like these, when cities and lives have been laid waste, when thousands have been killed, thousands more wounded, I pray to be blessed with the wisdom of Solomon, the sage perspective of the great rabbinic masters to bring some understanding, some insight to the horrible tragedy that has befallen our nation.

There is that sense of Moses standing before God as he is told to lead the people from slavery to the Promised Land, our Torah records his profound and all together human response, *lamah ani*, 'Why Me? God, Why am I the one to do this? It is not the traditional response from our text when an individual is chosen by God for a sacred task. The traditional reply, the one that is heard like a shofar call throughout the Torah at such moments, is *Hinei*, here I am Lord, ready to serve you and do your will. But I have always liked Moses' reply better, for it shows an awareness of the awesomeness of the challenge before him, humility, and humanity that can sometimes be lacking from our biblical ancestors.

And so it is in the spirit of Moses' *Lamah Ani* that I speak tonight as we search together for a way to comfort and consul the bereaved among us, to encourage our community and our nation to go forward from this tragedy with renewed resolve toward peace and justice.

But it is also with a sense of *Hiniei,* 'Here I am'. Here we are God ready to rebuild and rededicate ourselves to collecting the shards of your shattered vessels and repairing the brokenness in the world.

In another time and another age, the book of Lamentations records the cries of the Jewish people as the splendid city of Jerusalem lay wasted and burning on a distant hill. Smoke visible for tens of miles, the result of a siege and destruction brought by a foreign power. Listen to the words of the prophet, he speaks of a Jerusalem 3000 years ago, but as Torah often does, the words resonate with the headlines and editorials of today:

> 1. How lonely sits the city, that was full of people! She has become like a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, has become a vassal!
> 2. She weeps bitterly in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies.
> 3. Judah has gone into exile because of affliction, and because of great servitude; she dwells among the nations, she finds no rest; all her pursuers overtook her in the midst of her distress.
> 4. The roads to Zion mourn, because none come to the appointed feasts; all her gates are desolate; her leaders sigh, her young are afflicted, and she is in bitterness. (Lamentations 1:1-4)

In this text, Jerusalem, the city it self is weeping. Its roads cry because no one travels them, its gates are empty and full of despair. She has been laid waste by those that she was most welcome to, those she considered her friends, the huddled masses for which she was a beacon of hope.

New York and Washington cry along with our nation. If cities have souls, and I believe on some level that they do, then the soul of these great cities are in anguish. New York, a city that has served as a gateway to a new and more prosperous life for so many

in our nation, was attacked because it was such a symbol of the American dream. For centuries it has been the port of entry to millions of immigrants, fleeing oppression and persecution for the hope and protection offered by our nation, symbolized by that statue that stands in the harbor. Its is painfully apparent, that because New York is a city of such promise and hope to so many, because it is the great American melting pot, that it above all other cities was targeted for terror and destruction. The pathetic irony of this is another blow to the soul of that city and our nation.

I was just in New York this summer, the first time Kim and I had vacationed their together. We stayed with a friend who lives and works just 7 blocks from the World Trade Center towers and who survived the terror of last week unharmed, but not unscathed. Walking around that city we both commented on how incredible New York was, how many people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds called that city home, and how they all seemed to get along and build a vibrant and culturally rich community. New York is, the great American experiment at work, it is so vibrant, so electric with the energy of a 100 different cultures no only coexisting, but co-operating, working together. There is a brotherhood among New Yorkers that I am reminded only a true New Yorker can ever really understand. A sense that life in that city for all of its opportunity is also a grind and a daily challenge. From the traffic and housing costs, to the weather and realities of living in an urban jungle. But it is the ability of New Yorkers to meet this challenge to endure the grind of daily life in that city that is I think the thing they are most proud of, and that unites them across racial and ethnic lines. An in-it-togetherness that is not that different from the American Jewish experience itself.

As American Jews we know how much the challenges we have faced as a people have shaped our Jewish identity. Our struggles with persecution and pogroms, libels and anti-Semitism, our own immigrant experience in this country and the establishment of the State of Israel have all tested and defined the American Jewish identity in profound ways.

And so there is another layer to the destruction and pain afflicting our nation at this time, as Jews we resonate particularly with the targeting of those people and cities whose purpose was only to bring people together, to build bridges between races, religions and nations. For such high ideals are part of our creed, the teachings of our Torah as well.

New York and the World Trade Center particularly were more than symbols of America's support to the huddled masses yearning to be free, they were and will be again one of our nation's greatest efforts to embody that American and inherently Jewish ideal, to be a nation of justice, compassion and hope for those who have been denied it everywhere they turn. So New York and America were for our people and so they must continue to be for generations still to arrive on our shores from distant lands.

There is a terrible fear that arises after an attack such as this, though there has never been an attack such as this before. Linked to the fear that it could happen again, is the fear and anger directed at those who might be culturally and ethnically linked to limited group of perpetrators. It is the fear of the other, the foreigner, the stranger in our midst. That fear, that anger, that boiling hatred has a name, it is called xenophobia, and of all peoples it should be familiar to us, the Jewish people. The word itself is even mentioned in the Vidui the confessional we read during the High Holy Days. It has been in our Machzor for decades. As a rabbinical student, I will admit I had to look it up, just

so I knew what it meant. But once the definition was known, I realized that I knew the word all to well, its definition is written in the history of our people.

In Eastern Europe xenophobia brought forth a cry of 'Get the Jews' often heard long before the fires of whatever had happened had been extinguished in the village or shtetl. In Germany xenophobia was at the root of humanity's greatest inhumanity. In America too the word has been the impetus for many of our nation's greatest injustices. It was not long after the ships settled at the bottom of Pearl Harbor, that Asian Americans were interned in camps, fourteen of which were in the California, one just down the freeway at Santa Anita. Xenophobia was at the root of segregationism, it has been at the core of our nation's laws concerning homosexuals and in a nation of laws written predominately by men, can we not see its influence on the battle for women's rights and equality.

We know this word for we are human beings and we are quite susceptible to its allure. It makes us feel better than, it allows us to stand tall, while we push others down. We know this word in our own lives all to well. Let us honestly search our souls on these High Holy Days, did our thoughts not run their Tuesday morning?! Mine did, seeing those images of Palestinians dancing in the streets while thousands laid buried in the streets of our nation's greatest cities, my anger went right to that point. Watching those images my mind was screaming, 'get the Arabs' as loudly as they were screaming 'death to the Jews'. Thoughts of the Abbot of Citeaux's, reply to the Catholic Crusaders in 1209 filled my head. When asked by the Crusaders how to root out the heretics from amongst the Catholics in the southern French town of Beziers, the Abbot, a representative of the Pope, proclaimed the infamous line, "Kill them all and let God sort them out."

And that is just what they did, burning or clubbing to death 20,000 citizens in order to kill the 200 suspected heretics. Eventually the Crusaders found a better way, it was called the Inquisition.

Commentators and pundits boldly proclaim that more wars have been fought in the name of religion than any other cause in history, and while that may be true, it is not exacting enough to be accurate. In truth the root of so many of our conflicts, global and personal are fought because of our fear of those who are different. Because we lump together the perpetrators of the crime with those who merely look like them, talk like them. There is a world of difference between an Arab-American, living and working in this country, and a Fundamentalist Islamic Terrorist. There is even a significant difference between an Islamic Terrorist and those Palestinians dancing in the streets, though I admit the distinction is not always so easy or so clear.

Our leaders have proclaimed that it is time for America to go to war, in a manner and a way that we have never experienced before. But if, as the President says this is to be the first war of the 21st century, let us at least endeavor to use 21st century thinking and reason, and not allow the prejudices of past crusades, of blind hatred, of xenophobia color our heroic and just cause. It is only a battle of good verse evil, if we ourselves do not become evil in the process. If we don't use the same genocidal justifications that so many have use against us for thousands of years.

In the Torah God commands the Israelites to march upon and destroy the Hitties, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites because they practice human sacrifices, a crime against humanity. At that same time God issues a stern warning, the war they wage must not be wanton destruction, when they lay siege to the

city, the soldiers are forbidden from destroying the fruit trees, for as the text proclaims: "is the tree of the field an enemy that it should be besieged by you?" In war we must battle the enemy without equivocation, we must not let up until the battle is won, but we must be clear who the enemy is, or we may look up at the end of the day, when the smoke has cleared and discover that we have become the very thing that we sought to destroy, those who show no respect for human life, those who show no regard for the rule of law, those who do not discern between the just and the unjust, and allow their decision to be guided by fear and anger, rather than reason and justice. We must not become the evil we endeavor to vanquish.

The caution is worth repeating in another context as well. As our nation finally grapples with the reality of modern terrorism, a reality that Israelies have lived with and confronted for decades, we must carefully balance, our need for more security, with the careful protection of the very rights and liberties we intend to safe guard by these new laws and procedures.

While a rabbinical student I spent a year as a hospital chaplain at City of Hope in Duarte, at City of Hope they deal with life and death on a daily bases. They have the ability to try all manner of experimental and some times untested treatments in their attempt to cure cancer in a patient. But with this freedom comes a responsibility and it is manifest in their creed which can be seen on the gateway to the hospital facility as you enter, it reminds all enter, "There is no profit in saving the body, if in the process you destroy the soul." Likewise for our nation, our security measures must be heightened, our vigilance must be greatly enhanced, but we must remember in the process the slogan of City of Hope, me must not destroy the soul of our nation, infringe to greatly upon the

very liberty and freedom we wish to protect and are so proud of. And this must be our responsibility, as Americans and particularly as Jewish American's we must heed the lessons of our tradition and guide our law makers along the right course in this regard.

Jewish history records what it is like to live in a nation where rights and freedoms are denied to some, or ultimately taken away from all for the proposed greater good. We must be that prophetic voice. The Jewish community above all others must be the voice of reason in this nation as it attempts to confront the battle abroad and the crisis at home. Our voice is particularly important for no matter the plurality of the moment, I think it entirely possible that Judaism and Israel will be forever linked to the battle that is about to be waged. Actions will be taken in our name, and on behalf of our people as well as the nation as a whole and we must assure that what is done is done in the interest of justice and righteousness, we must hold ourselves and our nation to the same high standards God hold each of us to on these High Holy Days. In the words of the great Rabbi Hillel, "In a place we people are acting inhuman; we must strive to be human." Even in War we and our nation must act as an *Am Kadosh,* a holy and righteous people.

The Mishah (Rosh Hashanah 1:2) teaches that on Rosh Hashanah a great accounting occurs. God assembles all of his creations before Him, and as a Shepard seeks out his Flock and makes the sheep pass under his staff, so to according to our tradition does God assemble all of humanity before Him, and he numbers and counts, records and seals as he considers every soul, and its deeds over the past year. Our tradition teaches that everything we do is written down in Sefer HaHayim, in the book of Life. Let us be ever mindful of that fact as we enter this new year, with all of the challenges and uncertainties that will face us as individuals and as a nation, let us never

forget, as our tradition teaches, that this day, and indeed everyday we must account for our soul, for our actions, for how we acted towards one another in this world.

Three weeks before his death Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was interviewed for what would be the final time. When asked by the interviewer what message he might have for future generations, Rabbi Heschel replied: "Let them remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every deed counts that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all [its] absurdities, and all [its] frustrations and all [its] disappointments… And above all, let them remember to build a life as if it were a work of art."

Let us go forward from this day, from this tragedy, with a greater appreciation for life and its many blessings. Let us walk together as a congregation, as a community, as a nation under God's staff as He counts the sheep of his flock, proud of our deeds and our actions, aware of our failings and our weaknesses, ready to make the changes necessary to bring about the ideal, that is the potential in all of us, that is the great potential of our nation. Let us build and rebuild our lives and our country as thought they were a work of art.