

***Tenth Anniversary of September 11, 2001***  
***September 10, 2011 / 11 Elul 5771***  
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In 1990, eight Jewish delegates were invited to Dharamsala, India, to meet with the political and spiritual leader of Tibet, XIV Dalai Lama. The Tibetans had lost their land and temples to China and their religious leader was in exile. Now they feared they would also lose their identity as a people. As he was conscious of the parallels to Jewish history, the Dalai Lama asked the Jews for help: "Tell me the secret of Jewish spiritual survival in exile." The request seemed fantastic to writer Rodger Kamenetz. As Kamenetz's grandfather might have said, "Who would have thought to ask?"

When he set out on the trip to India, Kamenetz wasn't even sure he could rise to the occasion. His life had slipped its moorings. The death of his infant son and the derailment of his writing career had left him adrift in a sea of self-doubt. You see, as is often the case, there was a story within the story. (Above taken from *The Jew and the Lotus* website) Embedded in a national story is the individual narrative.

Rodger was surrounded by the suffering in Dharamsala, the overwhelming poverty of India and the Diaspora of the Tibetans. However, within the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Buddhists, he encountered a people who faced suffering with resolve and compassion. For the first time in his life, Rodger felt the power of a spiritual tradition. His finely-wrought defense system began to crack. No longer an observer, he began to look for a way out of his own pain and exile.

The same is true of our nation since September 11, 2001. We can teach great things to a world still in recovery from our story. There is a national lesson and there is an individual message. Since that dreadful day, there has been broad stroke analysis about the world and the cosmic shift. We are living in a world changing so quickly that we can't even get our footing before another nation falls. Truthfully, all of these stories are in the background but in the forefront is a very personal story.

This week I have been overwhelmed by analysis of both the events of September 11 and the reactions and responses since then. I have read countless articles and listen to numerous reports on radio and television. Some have been unique while others have simply been repetitive. I have heard blame given to the feet of institutions and leaders. I have heard about what we still need to do, and the questions of realigning our priorities. National security and national interests are our focus. However, as David Remnick of *New Yorker* magazine writes, "In the weeks after September 11, we could barely erase visions of the wreckage, the two towers, the twisted steel and the sheets of glass along with the knowledge that thousands lay beneath the ruined buildings. To live in or near a war zone was frighteningly fresh to all but the immigrants who had come here to escape such places. The sense of grief and shock, a terrible roaring in the mind of every American, made it impossible to assess the larger damage that Osama Bin Laden and his fanatics had inflicted and the extent to which they had succeeded in shattering our self-possession."

Some have asked, “What were you doing when the planes hit?” Others have asked, “What have we done since?” Some have even asked, “What would the world be like today if the attacks on September 11 had never happened?” Some now speculate that our anger towards Bin Laden is turning inward on ourselves or even outward on all Muslims.

A professor of religion at Yale University, Eliyahu Stern, wrote in the *New York Times* on September 2, 2011, “More than a dozen American states are considering outlawing aspects of Shariah law because Newt Gingrich has said that, ‘Shariah is a mortal threat to the survival of freedom in the United States and in the world as we know it.’” That is just plain wrong. Stern continued, “Anti-Shariah legislation fosters a hostile environment that will stymie the growth of America’s tolerant strand of Islam.” The continuation of America’s pluralistic religious tradition depends on the ability to distinguish between punishing groups that support terror and blaming terrorist activities on a faith that represents roughly a quarter of the world’s population.

We have been at war for the past decade and it is not a war we chose. It is not a war we began nevertheless we have been engaged in daily conflict since September 11, 2001. My youngest daughter, now ten, has never known life in America without war going on somewhere. We have been at war in Afghanistan which has spread over into Pakistan, we have been at war in Iraq which has spread over into Iran. We have been fighting real enemies and we have been confronting real threats, not just to our very lives, but to our way of life. Thousands of people have been killed, countless lives have been destroyed and billions of dollars have been lost. We are a nation in mourning and anger is certainly one stage in the grieving process, however, it cannot be the final stage.

Remember what the Amalekites did to us as we left Egypt. They had no fear of God so when we were weary and worn out, they met us on our journey and attacked all who were lagging behind. “When the Lord, your God, gives you rest from all the enemies around you, in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget.” (Deut. 25: 17-19) (Page 1135-36 of Etz Hayim Humash.) It is the comment on page 1136, under the notation for verse 17, which is most instructive. “There is no indication of what prompted the Amalekites to attack.” However, Moses offers us some perspective years after the attack when he says once again, “Remember what they did and remember who you were.” Moses says we were tired, we were weak, we were hungry and we were vulnerable. We were easy targets. Moses essentially says, “We can’t figure out who they are or who they were, but we can remember who we were.”

In this week’s parasha, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out an incredible insight of the Torah. In the days of Moses, the Israelites had two enemies: the Egyptians and the Amalekites. The Egyptians enslaved the Israelites and then turned them into a forced labor colony. They oppressed them and then Pharaoh commanded them to drown every male Israelite child. It was attempted genocide. Yet about them, Moses commands: “Do not despise an Egyptian, because you were strangers in his land.” (Deut.23: 8) (Page 1123)

The Amalekites attacked the Israelites once, an attack that they successfully repelled. (Ex.17: 13) Yet Moses commands, “Remember.” “Do not forget.” “Blot out the name.” In Exodus the Torah says that, “God shall be at war with Amalek for all generations.” (Ex.17: 16)

Amalek does not die and neither do the Jewish people. Over the centuries and even after we were attacked so many times, we still live. We still live, giving testimony to the victory of the God of love, over the myths and madness of hate. You see we, the Jewish people, have the credentials for teaching.

The message is simple. We get to choose. We get to decide who we are and how we are going to respond. To be vulnerable is scary and we run from it but it is tolerable if we are vulnerable together. We can hold the anger and never move on or we can choose to remember and let go of the fury. We can hold the pain and the memory of those who died that day, of the innocence lost and the deficit of security we, as Americans, have grown to rely upon.

Please turn to one last text, Page 68 of the Siddur (Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals).

Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai was once walking with his disciple, Rabbi Yehoshua, near Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Yehoshua looked at the Temple ruins and said, "Alas for us! The place that atoned for the people of Israel – through animal sacrifice – lies in ruins!" Then Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai spoke these words of comfort to him; "Do not grieve my son. There is another equally meritorious way of gaining atonement even though the Temple is destroyed. We can gain atonement through deeds of loving-kindness. For it is written: 'Loving-kindness I desire, not sacrifice.'" (Hosea 6:6)

When our world comes crashing down, we wonder what is next? When the center of our life is destroyed, we fear for our future. When we lose we turn to those who survive and say, "What am I supposed to do now?" When we witness destruction, devastation, pain and anguish, we beg to know what we are supposed to do. So I say today, just be kind. As Paolo Coelho once said, "Don't allow your wounds to transform you into someone you are not."

Remember those who have died and whose lives have been torn apart, then find kindness and compassion.

So, in the ten years since September 11, I have learned that the sound of an airplane doesn't mean I have to ask myself, "Is that plane flying too low?" But, I do have to look up and see God and in the words of the Psalmist, (89:3) Olam Hesed Yibaneh, who said, "God built this world from love, and therefore we must then look toward each other and say, 'I will build this world from love.'"

There is much our people need to teach the world. Whether it about living in exile to Tibetan Buddhists or to our fellow Americans, we must remain steadfast in our commitment to Shalom, Hesed and Ahava, to peace, kindness and love.

Tomorrow we will gather as a community of faith, to ask the question, "Do we still have faith not just in God but in ourselves? Do we have the capacity to heal and grow, to learn and to change, to hold our prejudices in check while we open our hearts to each other?"