

Kavannah

This Year, the 25th Anniversary of 9/11 Falls on Rosh Hashanah

A meditation on the Rosh Hashana prayer “Who Will Live and Who Will Die,” The Unetaneh Tokef

וּבְשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל יִתְקַע, וְקוֹל דְּמָמָה דְּקָה יִשְׁמַע

A great shofar is sounded, and a still, small voice is heard.

| The scream – then the silence before the sirens.¹

כְּבִקְרַת רוּעָה עֹדְרוֹ, מַעֲבִיר צֹאנוּ תַּחַת שֶׁבֶטוֹ

As a shepherd inspects his flock, making his sheep pass beneath his staff.

| Each of the slain; a face not a number.²

בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתָּבוֹן, וּבְיוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחְתָּמוּן

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

| Twenty-five years written, sealed, never forgotten...always present.³

כַּמָּה יַעֲבִירוּן וְכַמָּה יִבְרָאוּן

How many will pass from the world, how many will be born into it.

| Widows carrying children who would never know their fathers.

מִי יִחְיֶה וּמִי יָמוּת

Who will live and who will die.

| Seconds. A missed train, a caught train. The whole difference.

מִי בִקְצוֹ וּמִי לֹא בִקְצוֹ

Who at their appointed end, who before their time.

| Young and old, all before their time.⁴

¹ Survivors of terrorist attacks have described that after the deafening explosion, an eerie silence follows – a silence that seems forever. Then come the sirens of the helpers.

² Nachmanides writes that when the Torah commands the census of the Jewish people, it says to count every head, every face. No one is a number; everyone is a world.

³ The largest attack against the Jewish community in the Diaspora took place on July 18, 1994, when the AMIA Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires was bombed. At each of the memorials, thousands gather as the name of each of the slain is read aloud, and the assembled respond, “presente” – the deceased is still present.

⁴ Both young people and older people were murdered on 9/11. We often associate the young victims with dying before their time, but older people, too, died before their time – precious years were taken from them as well.

מי במים ומי באש

Who by water and who by fire.

| Flames bursting from the towers – water falling now, where they once stood.⁵

מי בחרב ומי בחיה

Who by the sword and who by beast.

| Heroic passengers and crew rose against the sword of terrorist beasts.

מי ברעב ומי בצמא

Who by hunger and who by thirst.

| Buried in rubble for hours – thirsting, hungering, for life.

מי ברעש ומי במגפה

Who by earthquake and who by plague.

| The Towers – an earthquake of steel and ash, the world seemingly ended.

מי בחניקה ומי בסקילה

Who by strangling and who by stoning.

| Down the stairwells, gasping for breath, as towers fell like stones from the sky.

מי ינוח ומי ינוע

Who will rest and who will wander.

| The dead – some found and at rest; others wandering, never found.

מי ישקט ומי יטרף

Who will have serenity and who will be confused.

| PTSD – seeking to move on, never fully.

מי ישלו ומי יתיסר

Who will be tranquil and who will be tormented.

| One found peace on the other side of it; another never left that day.⁶

⁵ Today, water plays a central role at the 9/11 memorial at Ground Zero.

⁶ Long-term, there are those whose lives were forever defined by 9/11, and others, while always impacted, have found ways to move on.

מִי יֵעָנִי וּמִי יִעָשִׁיר

Who will be impoverished and who will grow wealthy.

| Loss measured in more than money.

מִי יִשְׁפָּל וּמִי יָרוּם

Who will be brought low and who will be raised up.

| Can victimhood become vision?⁷

וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וְצִדְקָה מַעְבִּירִין אֶת רֵעַ הַגְזֵרָה

But repentance, prayer, and charity annul the severity of the decree.

| Turning fate into destiny.⁸

אָדָם יִסּוּדוֹ מֵעָפָר וְסוּפוֹ לְעָפָר

Man's origin is from dust, and his end is to dust.

| The earth of Ground Zero is not void, not soulless – it is hallowed ground, holding holy souls forever.

וּכְעָנָן כָּלָה וְכַחֲלוּם יַעוֹף

Like a cloud that fades away, and like a dream that flies off.

| Firefighters and police: they did not fall, they climbed to the clouds, ascending higher and higher.⁹

וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִתְקַע בְּשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל

And it shall come to pass on that day, that a great shofar shall be sounded

| May the shofar of Unetaneh Tokef transform into Isaiah's great shofar, sounding: redemption is here. With hearts, souls, and might – and God's help – for America, for Israel, and the world: so may it be. Lu yehi.¹⁰

⁷ Can evil be turned into opportunity?

⁸ Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik wrote that our mission in life is to “turn fate into destiny” – to move “from an existence that is passive and influenced to one that is active and influential.”

⁹ One who makes the ultimate sacrifice does not fall, but rises, giving everything for their country.

¹⁰ The final meditation moves from Unetaneh Tokef's still, small voice to Isaiah's shofar of redemption: “on that day the great shofar will be sounded.” With heart, soul, might – echoing the Shema's *bechol levavcha u'vechol nafshecha u'vechol me'odecha* – may we, with God's help, follow God's ways and do all we can to make America, Israel, and the world better. Lu Yehi – so may it be.