

Rosh Hashanah Sermon – 5772

Rabbi Steve Segar

Kol HaLev – Cleveland's Reconstructionist Jewish Community

Victor Frankel, the well known 20th century Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor taught in his famous book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, that ultimately, the one freedom that can never be taken away from human beings is the freedom to choose the way in which we respond to the difficult and painful events with which life sometimes presents us. There have been many times and places in the years since that book's publication where events have conspired to re-demonstrate the truth of Dr. Frankel's words. One of the most powerful examples of this in our country were the attacks of September 11th 2001 whose tenth anniversary we have recently commemorated.

In the days and weeks leading up to this tenth commemoration, nearly everywhere we turned, all of our media were focused on providing opportunities to experience a rich tapestry of viewpoints on the meaning and repercussions of this singularly destructive day in our nation's history. There were multi-hour long specials that retold the tragic story from a range of perspectives. There were many panels of experts who gave their opinions as to the nature of the central lessons learned by our nation and by the world at large from the attacks themselves, and from actions taken over the ensuing decade.

Many of these conversations focused on lessons that were political or military in nature. Debates revolved around the balance of wisdom versus folly that was drawn upon in our government's decision to initiate wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Other conversations explored the impact that the 9/11 attacks had on the religious and spiritual lives of the American people. Some of us chose to mark this anniversary by tuning in and collectively re-living the tragedy and the heroism of that day, and some of us chose not to, but regardless of which group we found ourselves in, the question of whether we as a nation, are truly any safer now than were then was constantly playing in the background.

As I sifted through the range of programming related to the commemoration on television and the internet, what jumped out most powerfully for me were the words of those who held a more multi-layered view of the impact that the attacks had had on our country. These voices were clearly expressive of the horrific nature of the attacks, and the profound fear and grief they engendered, but they were expressive of something else as well; that there was somehow, in addition to the catastrophic destruction, something that we as a society had gained.

That something was identified by a number of commentators as a profound sense of connectedness to one another that was unique in the historical experience of our country. It was palpable on so many levels. It could be felt even by way of the names of the victims who perished in the towers. On that list, we could discern the entire pallet of ethnic identities that make up the fabric of our society. The Al Qaida attackers did not discriminate between Americans of various political, religious and ethnic stripes, including those Americans who were

from a Muslim background, and that fact reinforced the commonality and shared destiny of all people within our nation.

This sense of commonality was revealed in the many stories that emerged from that tragic day, and from its aftermath, of people who did not know one another, but who chose to reach out in order to give and receive help, many of whom, as we know, did so at the cost of their very lives.

For me the most powerful stories were those that told of individuals from distinctive sub-groups within our society, often thought to be at odds with one another, who found themselves thrown together into harm's way, and who made the choice to risk connection and trust rather than turning their backs on one another in search of others more familiar to them.

One example of such a story can be found in a video on YouTube that chronicles the events of that morning. In this video there is a particular segment in which an American Muslim named Usman Farman is telling the story of trying to escape the debris cloud from the recently collapsed South Tower of the World Trade Center. He explains that as he ran down the street, he tripped and fell to the ground, and found himself lying on his back unable to get back up. At that moment an unnamed hasidic man bent down to him and offered Usman his arm, saying, "hey brother, take my hand, let's get out of here." In Usman's understandable and poignant response, he admits that, this Hasidic man was probably the last person he would have ever expected to receive that kind of help from.

There are many, many similar stories of unexpected human compassion and courage in the face of overwhelming fear and pain. But what I find most intriguing is that this compassion and connectedness did not end at the boundaries of the localities where the attacks took place. It extended out and impacted upon people all across our country and to some extent around the world as well. There was a shared, gut level, instinctual response that we all felt on that day, and in the days and weeks that followed, of seeking out the company of other people, whether we were close to or distant from any of the points of attack.

While this experience was for many of us something with which we can identify subjectively, it has also been the subject of research and documentation in books such as September 11th in Popular Culture. According to authors of this book, in the aftermath of the attacks, "Americans felt more connected to other people and to their communities. Spontaneous gatherings sprang up across the country, from the crash sites where vigils were held in honor of the victims, to small towns and large cities where people felt drawn to interact with others during the time of crisis.

People reported that they felt closer to their neighbors, were more likely to greet strangers on the street, and experienced a generally increased sense of humanity in the period directly after the attacks." While the authors acknowledge that "these feelings dissipated as life returned to normal," many still associate the terrible events of 9/11 with memories of kindness among

strangers and support within communities. As one witness recalled, ‘immediately, people started to connect, to comfort each other, to help each other out.’”

I remember so clearly the strength of this dynamic as it operated here within the context of Kol HaLev, which was then known as the Reconstructionist Havurah of Cleveland. Those of you who are present today, and who were connected to the Havurah at that time, I’m sure will recall that many of us were already gathered together on that morning of September 11th, prior to any news about the attacks, for the purpose of commemorating the life of a wonderful older member named Edna Raphael, who has passed away three days earlier.

Most of us made our way to the Berkowitz-Kumin funeral home that morning completely unaware of what was taking place less than a day’s drive away from here. But by the time we reached the cemetery, word had spread about the attacks on the towers and the pentagon, and as we laid Edna’s body to rest, someone made the poignant suggestion that we say an extra mourner’s kaddish for those who had been killed in New York and Washington.

We were fortunate on many levels that day, not the least of which was to be in one another’s presence as we found out what was happening to our country. Beyond that, we found ourselves within the context of grieving a full and well-lived life which provided a safe pathway into grieving the senseless losses that we were just beginning to assimilate. Following the burial, many of us returned to the home of Edna’s niece, on one level to enter the next stage of commemorating Edna’s life, but just as importantly, to draw upon the sense of human connection that could offer some comfort at a time of great fear and uncertainty.

But even as we recognize that there was a powerful shift in social relations that took place within our local and national environments in response to the trauma of September 11th, we are faced with the question of whether that shift represented merely a kind of temporary compensation in response to the very extreme circumstances in which we found ourselves or was it, perhaps, a glimpse of a deeper truth about our potential as human beings?

The authors of the September 11th book appear to support the first hypothesis when they note that, over time, the feelings of connection to other people, as well as the desire to act on those feelings, began to dissipate as “life returned to normal.” For myself, I lean towards hypothesis number two, that there was something, if I may use the term, almost revelatory, in the way that so many people were open to and capable of experience a new level of caring and connection, especially in relation to others with whom there was no prior association. In fact, the very phrase of “life returning to normal,” rings rather hollow to my ears. Rather, what has been running through my mind over the last few months is the thought that even at this point, ten years down the road, life really hasn’t returned to “normal” at all. Yes, many of our personal behavior patterns have certainly long since reclaimed their places in our lives, and new structures have emerged, that we are slowly getting used to, like the heightened security at airports, so that the flow of our collective activity could be resumed. But, at a deeper level, it

feels to me as if there remains a profound psychic wound in the American soul that is far from being healed.

In part, that wound is revealed in our obsession surrounding the possibility of further terrorist attacks, and in the need to prepare ourselves for that eventuality. But it also feels to me like there is another dimension to this wound, and it has to do with a challenge to our fundamental assumptions about what kind of life is truly worth aspiring to as a society.

This is an idea that contemporary thinker Deepak Chopra writes about in his book entitled, *The Deeper Wound*, composed in response to the 9/11 attacks. Chopra suggests that while the immediate wound was the grief and shock of 9/11 itself, the deeper wound was our fear of death and our doubts about whether good can really prevail over evil. His book focuses a good deal on fear, because, in his words, “the voice of fear is so powerful and convincing; it blocks our ability to reason; more crucially, it rips the fabric of faith, trust, and our connection to the soul.”

I, for one, think that Chopra is really onto something here, that the power of fear in our lives has become in many ways, the dominant factor in our cultural evolution. We have mistakenly tried to address and transcend our fear in many ways; through heavily beefed up national security, through the exercise of military power, and through the pursuit of economic rewards at any cost. Yet each of these paths in their own way have boomeranged back against us and have actually added fuel to the fire of our collective angst.

It seems to me that it is much more likely that the path leading towards the possibility of true healing and wholeness for our country is to be found through the building up of our collective will to own to our connectedness to one another, and through the commitment to live our lives in such a way that this sense of connectedness is a real driving force rather than an ideal to which we merely pay lip service. I believe that even as the military, political and economic fallout of the post 9-11 world has ground down our usual sense of hope and possibility, there has been a parallel process operating below the surface in our society.

I have an image of a seed that, as it germinates and grows, is pushing us to continue to move in the direction of mutual support, mutual care and mutual responsibility that so characterized those first few days after the attacks. And I don't think that we have too far to look in order to see this process being expressed in our very own community.

We have seen over the past 18 months the unlikely emergence within our region of a powerful new interfaith organization that we as a community have chosen to support, and that a number of us as individuals have become quite involved in. The name of this organization, Greater Cleveland Congregations, has appeared on a regular basis in our monthly newsletter, in our weekly updates and in our board meeting minutes. But no amount of verbal acknowledgement can do justice to the experience of connection and hope that attending a GCC event has inspired among the number of us who have been able to participate in one. This is an

organization that embodies on many levels the ideals of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility.

One expression of this is that its member congregations span a wide range of religious, socio-economic and ethnic identities. At any given meeting of this organization, you are likely to find Jews, Christians and Muslims, African Americans, Latin Americans and European Americans, people who live on the east side, on the west side and in the city proper. People who have very limited resources, those who have significant resources and everything in between.

Greater Cleveland Congregations, or GCC as it has come to be known, helps to galvanize the awareness, across all of these thresholds of difference, that security and wholeness are not achievable by any one group individually, on its own. To my mind it is exactly through the cultivation of and involvement in organizations like GCC that we can most effectively address both the inner and the outer wound that continues to trouble our society. In fact, I would like to encourage any member of Kol HaLev who has felt even a tingle of interest in this organization to strongly consider exploring further involvement with it over the coming year.

If we in our region and others across the country are able to allow ourselves to follow the promptings of our hearts and opt for support and connection over isolation and suspicion, then it is my hope that in the year 2021, when our country commemorates the 20th anniversary of the September 11th attacks, that there will be much more attention paid to the ways in which American individuals and communities have embraced the ethos of mutual caring, and the understanding of our deep interdependence that are as much a part of our country's 9/11 legacy as are the loss and the destruction. Ken yehi ratzon! May it be so!

And may we all be inscribed for a good and a sweet new year!
Shanah tovah umtukah