

## “A Jewish New Yorker's reflection on the terrorist acts in New York”

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The book of Lamentations begins:

How doth the city sit solitary,  
That was full of people!  
How is she become as a widow!  
She that was great among the nations,  
and princess among the provisions,  
How is she become tributary!  
She weepeth sore in the night  
And her tears are on her cheeks;  
(Lam. 1:1 – 2)

New York City is not dead, and yet I mourn her. I see a skyline that I no longer recognize. Smoke still rising, days later, from the space that seemed meant for the buildings whose gravity absorbed our gaze; buildings that crashed upon themselves, falling downwards as the engineers had planned. What a victory, we should not forget, that one hundred ten stories, doubled, disintegrated straight down and not on their sides. They crumbled but did not topple, a circle of destruction but not a chasm. No line of death extending to thirty-third street, or somewhere more uptown than the pile now lies. I see a face without a nose now, a home without intimacy. I see my childhood, gone, as if my memories are no longer valid. I long for my home, I feel very far away.

I am a New Yorker, born and raised. I am forever attached by an umbilical cord of bagels and good pastrami, of Cuban-Chinese restaurants, of immigrants, and punk rock. Of Art and garbage, of love and drugs, of central park. The land of our fathers, Jazz, the Apollo theater, the Strand Bookstore, all still there, yet somehow different, thinner, emptier, more solitary now that the outsiders have come to the city that welcomed all and turned a blue-skied day into a dust cloud of mourning, of fear, of prejudice, of disgust.

A New Yorker is a New Yorker first, much like a Jew is a Jew first, or a Texan is a Texan first, but without the hats. A New Yorker outside New York is a Diaspora, a culture looking for a home, a heart looking for a good joke, a conversation looking for a loud voice. A New Yorker knows kindness, despite what non-New Yorkers think, and New Yorkers know adversity, hostility that turns to love in an

instance, no time to talk but always time to give directions: long discourses on which train to take on which time of day and how to travel if it were Saturday, or raining, or if the A train were broke. Something is always broken in New York, and yet there is always something else to do.

The book of Job tells us:

For there is hope of a tree,  
If it be cut down, that it will sprout  
again,  
And that the tender branch thereof will  
not cease,  
Though the root thereof wax old in the  
earth,  
And the stock thereof die in the ground;  
Yet through the scent of water it will  
bud,  
And put forth boughs like a plant.  
(Job 10: 7 –9)

The history and character of contemporary New York is analogous in many ways to the history of contemporary Jews. Like the Jews, New York is alternatively demonized and lionized. It is given the credit for being all that is good in the ways of art, culture, technology, and finance, yet it is hated with a lack of understanding, blamed for problems that are not of its own doing, cursed as evil and hostile, accused of being ridiculously and shamelessly liberal. Like the Jews it is small compared to the rest of the world: only some millions in a world so much larger. But, like the Jews its influence overpowers its numbers, the knowledge and creativity that it gives birth to has changed the world.

Now New York represents America. The attack on September 11 compels all Americans to feel sorrow and anger for the violence that was foisted upon it. Suddenly, America must adopt New York as its own, an acceptance that makes many uneasy, as if people suddenly had to adopt the persona of the Jew; as if America suddenly had to admit to being Jewish. What anxiety! What lament!

So we focus on the people, not the city, and there is little that makes more sense. People are important, buildings are not, at least comparatively. And the stories that we hear of

the grief stricken searching for their parents, children, and partners are, in Mayor Giuliani's words, too much for any of us to bear, and we get sad, and we get angry.

It is our anger that concerns me here: our self-righteous indignation. How can they do that to us? How can they kill our innocents? How can they attack our buildings? In a reference to the story of Jacob in Genesis, Stephen Mitchell suggests that "Israel" means anyone who has the courage to wrestle at night with the mysterious other. There is something to be said for that, it is a powerful image of the Jewish relationship with God and with the stranger. But this is the season of our New Year and our atonement. We renew our cycle of learning, and we wash away our sins. This is the season when we say to those around us, "If I have wronged or offended you in any way, either intentionally or unintentionally, then I ask for your forgiveness."

In the spirit of Rosh Hashanah, I would like to modify Mitchell's claim, and suggest that "Israel" means those who have the courage to wrestle in the night with the mysterious other within ourselves, the stranger that we harbor inside us, our ignorance that we rely upon at moments when we can least afford to. I ask then that we take a moment to ask what this other might say about our thoughts in the wake of last week's tragedy, of our desire to kill, or of our monolithic view of Islam and the Arab.

Like the many denominations of Judaism, there are many denominations of Islam, most are moderate, but some are not. Like the many types of Americans, there are many different types of Arab. Most are loving and caring, but some relish hate. Like Americans they live in numerous different regions, far apart from each other. They don't all have the same name. They don't all have the same address. We are used to seeing the Arab world at their worst, filtering out their positive actions, ignoring them at their best. We fear the Palestinian who stands on the border of Israel, and we hate the Iraqi whom we understand to hate us. But fear and hate lead to wrongdoing and to oppression, and no people are more un-entitled to oppress than we are. We are Jews. We have been hounded, maimed, and violated for our entire history. We have no business perpetuating injustice. We, of all people, should know better.

So, where is the other within us? Where is our blind spot? What acts must we force ourselves to see? Tomorrow on Tashlich, we will drop bread in the water and watch our sins float

away, and then on Yom Kippur we will fast to cleanse ourselves. What are our sins? For what must we atone?

I have heard, in conversation and through the media, the assertion that an outgrowth of the horror of Tuesday will be a greater sympathy with Israel. America and perhaps the world, this argument continues, will suddenly understand the violence that Israel has suffered, and it will support more readily actions against its enemies. This may be true, although, honestly, I think it is not. I find, however, these observations to be a bit self-serving, and more than a little unreflective. I think they support our world-views uncritically, and in return, I ask us to consider the opposite. What might Israel learn from this act of terrorism? What knowledge might we gain? Perhaps we might learn that we too have caused pain, and that we too have bombed the innocent. Perhaps we might understand that every dead Arab is as much a tragedy as every dead American, and that every oppressed human is an ugliness as profound as every oppressed Jew. Perhaps when we have examined ourselves and our own actions, then we might look toward our neighbors in the world and say: "If I have wronged or offended you in any way, either intentionally or unintentionally, then I ask for your forgiveness."

Let me be as explicit as possible here. I am not a pacifist and I make no demand for turning the other cheek. I understand this is the beginning, and I know that there are responses that are Just. I only ask us to be aware of our own imperfections, and our own mistakes.

There is an image, within our cultural consciousness, of the prison that executes the condemned using the electric chair. As the warden pulls the switch, the lights outside the prison dim. Outside, inevitably, are the few, the self-righteous, the indignant. As the light dims they cheer. This death, this tragedy, induced and endorsed by the state, becomes, for them, a moment of celebration. Whatever may or may not be the moral status of capital punishment, those standing outside the prison are beyond their rights, and it is only they that I ask us not to become. I ask that Jews who should know better not celebrate death. Whatever acts we must engage in at this point, we must do so with a heavy heart, we must do so reluctantly, self-reflectively, begrudgingly. Jews have no business standing outside the prison, watching the dimming lights, and cheering.

In the books of Moses, we learn that the greatest prophet Israel has ever known was

prevented from entering the holy land because he too grew angry in the name of God. Despite his goodness, he too was held accountable for his mistakes; Deuteronomy tells us that God commanded Moses to die on the Mount of Abarim. God tells Moses,

“For thou shalt see the land afar off; but thou shalt not go thither into the land which I give the children of Israel.  
(Deut. 32: 48)

And yet we know that Moses still retains his greatness:

And there hath not risen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses whom the Lord knew face to face (Deut. 34:12)

Of that Moses learned so late in his life, perhaps we might learn a little sooner.