

## **Torah from Terror – How Rabbis Responded to the Events of 9/11**

The TORAH FROM TEROR website was created in 2001 by Rabbi Neil Gillman and Rabbi Jason Miller to preserve the sermons delivered by rabbis in the days following the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001. By that dark Tuesday morning, most rabbis already had drafts of their High Holy Day sermons completed. Upon witnessing the footage of that first plane crashing into the World Trade Center building, rabbis knew immediately that they would have to rewrite those sermons. The common response from clergy across the country, regardless of religious affiliation, was a feeling of speechlessness at a time when so many were looking to them for words of wisdom and consolation.

### **Rabbi Michael B. Herzbrun, Rosh Hashana 2001**

It has been almost a week since the catastrophe in NY. Even if we were not directly related to the innocent [victims] who died in the terror that struck our nation last Tuesday; even if we were not directly involved in the rescue efforts (now more ‘recovery’ than rescue), we still were overwhelmed by shock and an utter sense of disbelief. Part of our rational being was telling us that what we saw on the TV screen just wasn’t happening; that it simply wasn’t possible. It wasn’t that we believed the United States to be “invincible” to attack – although that was certainly part of it. And it wasn’t that we weren’t aware of suicide bombings: we were still reeling from the almost daily accounts of Palestinians blowing themselves up along with anyone standing by on the streets and in the shops of Israel. But what was too incomprehensible was the image that someone would actually think to take a planeload of innocent passengers, deliberately crashing into the side of a skyscraper; causing the deaths of thousands of people; and all in the belief that this would somehow glorify the name of god. That there were four planes on the same mission was – and is – beyond our mind’s sense of reality.

So it has been almost a week. And in the Jewish tradition, we know what a week is: it is the length of a ‘shiva’; the minimal time it takes for overwhelming grief to lose its total domination over our lives; the shortest time it takes for a mourner to find the shadow of a direction again, the briefest number of days to recover our bearings and to orient ourselves again toward the future ...

Where do we go from here? We are already saturated with the TV coverage, and each of our lives – and those of our kids, our spouses, our parents – have routine demands that can not be put on hold any longer. We have to go on; we have to reestablish a sense of hope, some confidence in the goodness of humanity, some measure of trust in whatever meaning and purpose we had known in this world that we all inhabit together. But still -- how do we get beyond those images of destruction and pain still residing in our heads?

As you know, I had planned to talk with you tonight about stem-cell research. I wanted to discuss the stem-cell debate that surfaced in this summer’s news when President Bush made his address to the nation. It was fascinating to listen to him react to the pressures of politics and religion. So I was going to try to decipher how the medical communities and the various religious denominations lined up on the issue; I also wanted to talk a bit about where Judaism stood; and then I had even hoped to explain some of the really astounding work by two research teams that had led to the development of the “60” or so cell lines that President Bush spoke about in the first place. But still, I think that we’ll postpone most of this, maybe until the study group on Yom Kippur afternoon... except for two things:

The first point I want to make about stem-cell research probably fits better in tomorrow's discussion of terrorism. But here it is anyway: with all of the articles in the news media that I read regarding the advances in stem-cell research this summer, not one of them (at least that I'm aware of) ever mentioned that one of the two teams of scientists that collaborated in developing the very 'first' stem cell line was headed by an Israeli. His name is Dr. Yosef Itskovitz-Eldor, the head of the reproductive lab at the Rambam medical school at the Technion University in Haifa. With all the press, there was no mention of his central role in what might be one of the more important scientific achievements of our time; no mention that most (if not all) of the single-cell embryos that they used to create these stem-cell lines came from fertility clinics in Israel; and there was almost total silence (or maybe just ignorance) about the astounding work he and his colleagues made just last month at the Haifa clinic where they were able to coax a line of stem cells into developing primitive muscle tissue. In the petri dish, these cells began to cluster in a mass that actually showed signs rhythmic beating. In other words, at a time this summer when the newspapers were carrying all the other stories of the stem-cell breakthroughs, the only thing that the papers discussed with regard to Israel was that Ariel Sharon should use restraint in responding to the suicide bombers in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. I know that it's a small point; but it indicates to me that knowledgeable, educated people continue to overlook the contributions that Israel is making everyday in the Middle East. And if people are really not interested in finding out what good Israel is doing, if Israel is simply painted as the military aggressor, the so-called occupier of other people's lands, then it is just as likely that a growing number of Americans will start blaming Israel for last week's tragedy. (As you know, some of the talk show hosts are already making that connection.) But that is the topic that I want to hold until tomorrow morning.

So back to the main point. How are we going to heal? Of course, in time our grief and disbelief will lose their edge. But for us here tonight: how can we begin these High Holy Days with a sense of comfort and peace? How can we expect to read the words in our prayer books tomorrow of "Unetane Tokef": "who shall live and who shall die?" What possible sense does it make to talk about the righteous getting inscribed in the Book of Life as a reward for their deeds? How do we explain where God's protecting shield was last Tuesday morning? Do we say that God's power saved some people but not others? And if we ask questions like these -- questions that have been asked by our people throughout the centuries -- don't we really know that there are no immediate answers? So even if the questions themselves allow us to express our anguish, they still don't give us the comfort we are looking for.

Of course, I don't have any of the answers. (All that money I paid for rabbinic school, and no answers...) But cynic that I am, I have to say that I did stumble on a small ray of meaning in my reading this summer -- both in the stem cell research, and its connection to a Biblical passage. Let me read the passage from the first chapter in Genesis: "And God said, Let the earth put forth grass, herb yielding seed, and fruit-trees bearing fruit after its kind, wherein is the seed thereof, upon the earth.... And the earth brought forth grass, herb yielding seed after its kind, and trees bearing fruit, wherein is the seed thereof, after its kind..." Whether you believe that God wrote these words or that they were written by human beings, the point is that our people were astounded by the seed. They knew that grasses give rise to more grasses, that olive trees bear olive trees, that lions give birth to baby lions and not to giraffes, and they marveled that everything seemed to follow "after its own kind." But they didn't know why! They knew that it had something to do with the seed; that seemed for sure. But they didn't know how that solitary seed, or that single fertilized egg could give rise in the animal kingdom to a full-blown member of the species. That part they didn't understand; they simply couldn't solve the mystery.

And yet what they were on to, was the stem cell. Twenty-five centuries later, we are just beginning to find out how the genetic code inside the cell gives that cell the information it needs to divide, to replicate itself, and – in the human -- ultimately to differentiate and give rise to heart tissue, nerve fibers, blood cells... in fact to create every one of the more than 220 different kinds of fibers in the body. So this is one astounding ray in God's creation. From the Jewish point of view, it's not that God has just given us the gift of life. In the key to the stem-cell, God has given us the power to heal ourselves: to grow muscle tissue for patients with congestive heart failure; to grow nerve cells for people with Parkinsons, Lou Gherig's disease and spinal cord injuries. This key is wrapped up in every cell of our bodies, and part of our task is to find out how it works. To learn how to do this, we have to learn why some cells become muscle, what makes some cells become nerve fiber, how some cells become blood, and some cells become skin. We have to find out why some cells divide according to their function, and other cells just keep on dividing even when they're not supposed to. We have to learn why the brain – the ultimate neural computer – processes information the way it does.

Then, just as we will learn how the stem cell that has the potential to cure diseases of the body, can we learn how to cure the diseases of the soul? Can we discover why people turn out the way they do? Can we then “grow” compassion where there was indifference to the human condition? Why do some of us feel sadness while others never empathize with pain? Why do some of us find meaning in helping each other after a fall, while others seem to relish another person's misfortune? Why are some of us drawn to bring healing, while others have become so twisted and bitter that they would bring down all that we have built, and destroy all that we know is good...

There is a midrash in which two rabbis involved in a dispute ask God to intervene to solve their difference of opinion. They each explain their case, and then God answers like this: “guys – what you decide is out of my hands. This life on earth is your domain. I have given you the Torah; I have given you wisdom; I have even given you the ability to remember your mistakes and the capacity to heal the wounds you have created in others. But now it is up to you. All that you need to know in order to solve your problems is in front of you. It is your life.”

So where was God on September 11th? It is apparently true that God did not intervene. No power is able to undo what was done. And yet God was still evident in our yearning for life. God was evident in our pain, in our instinctual horror in witnessing members of the human race gone horribly wrong. And God, the Creator of life, was also in the work of the heroes who sought to sustain life this last week: the firefighters, the medical teams, the rescue volunteers and the exhausted workers who will clean the rubble; the technicians and engineers who will get the water and electricity and phone connections back in place, the people who with their skills and their sheer endurance will rebuild that part of New York City. As the days unfold, there will also be 5,000 more tragic stories of courage and faith, where families in immeasurable mourning will find some way to rebuild their lives and deal with the wounds in their souls. There is something very basic, something innate in us that will not accept destruction as the final chapter of the human race. And because we have shared in this national week of mourning – even as far away as Rochester, NY – we have established ourselves as part of this ‘creation of life,’ to be registered in the Book of Life, and we have reason to hope on this first evening of Rosh Hashana.