

## **Shabbat Parshat Netzavim 5761**

### **Twin Towers of Smoke**

*The following is a sermon given by Rabbi Freundel at Keshet Israel Congregation. As many of our members asked to see that talk in writing, Rabbi Freundel has made it available to all of us.*

#### **By Rabbi Barry Freundel**

Tuesday night after Maariv, many of us gathered to recite Tehillim and other appropriate prayers. I said that evening that we were in a time of Aninut. That is the period defined in halachah as the time between the death of a close relative and burial. During that period, the shock is so new and so great that the focus is only on getting through the next minute, the next hour, the next day, trying to make the arrangements necessary to get to the burial. The consolations, and the questions of moving forward, are simply irrelevant. It is what is described in halachah as, "Meito mutal lefanav"--"his dead lies before him", and there is nothing else except that reality. For many people--for example, those we see on our television screens carrying pictures of loved ones, searching desperately to find them--that period continues and may continue for many months. For others of us, we have begun to move past the period of Aninut ever so slowly, and I would like, today, to help in that process in some small measure.

One of the ways that I deal with difficult times, times that are so overwhelming that I cannot grasp their magnitude, is to latch on to a symbol of the events and to search out that symbol in our sources and in our tradition. That is what I propose to do this morning.

As I was watching the scene in New York, from approximately half an hour after the second plane crashed into the World Trade Center an image was seared into my mind. It became even stronger after the two buildings collapsed. Interestingly, the image finds echo in our tradition, not from this time of year. It is not from Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur or Succot, it is rather from halfway around the year, from Pesach. Somehow, that seemed appropriate. The world turned upside-down this week and grasping for an image from half a year away just seems like the right thing to do given the circumstances in which we are living.

The image appears in a verse from Yoel (3:3) that we recite in the Haggadah. The verse reads: "Venatati moftim bashamayim uva'aretz"--I, G-d, will place unbelievable signs in the sky and on earth, "Dam", blood, "Va'esh", and fire, "Vetimrot Ashan", and towers of smoke. Of these three symbols, the one that stood out most for me was the last--the tower of smoke. That is the symbol which I have been dealing with in trying to get a hold of the enormity of what has occurred. In fact, if you go back and look at the original text in Yoel, the prophet also continues with the tower of smoke image. "Hashemesh yehafech

lechoshech"--The sun will be turned to darkness (and you will remember that Tuesday was a very sunny day, suddenly overshadowed by the tower of smoke) "Vehayareiach ledam"--and the moon will turn blood red. Surprisingly, I saw some pictures on network television that showed what one could see of the moon through the smoke, and there clearly was a reddish tinge to it.

As I thought about the image of the tower of smoke, I came to realize how often in our history a tower of smoke has marked life-changing tragedies. On investigating those moments in history, I discovered that there is at least some consolation in how often Rabbinic discussions surrounding those events parallel the emotions we all felt this week.

The first event that I thought of turns out, actually, not to be the earliest. We will get back to the earliest event a little later. Nonetheless, the first event that I thought of was the destruction of the first Temple. It, too, went up in fire and in a tower of smoke. There is a remarkable Midrash in Pesikta Rabati (ch. 26) that I want to share with you. It sounds remarkably like something I heard on television over and over again this past week.

Reads the Midrash: "Yirmiyahu hanavi yatzah mei'anatot lavoh liyerushalayim"--Jeremiah the prophet, who lived in a suburb of Jerusalem called Anatot, was making his morning commute. He was out on I-95 in Virginia or the West Side Highway in New York riding on his donkey, and he was traveling from Anatot to Jerusalem to go about his day's prophecy, or perhaps, since he was a cohen, his day's work at the Temple. "Natal einav vera'ah ashan beit hamikdash oleh"--He raised his eyes, and he saw the tower of smoke rising from the just destroyed Temple. "Amar belibo"--He said in his heart, "Shemah chazra yisrael bitshuva lehakriv karbanot"--"Perhaps the smoke reflects the fact that the Jews have repented and therefore, that they have offered many sacrifices." Like so many people, seeing the smoke for the first time, there was denial. It cannot be what it appears to be. It cannot be what I am hearing on the radio or seeing on television and being told by the commentators has occurred. It cannot be. It must be something else.

And the Midrash continues "Amad bachomah"--He stood up on the walls, and he saw that the Temple had collapsed, and that there were rows upon rows of fallen stones, and he turned to G-d and he cried out, "pititani hashem va'eifat" (Jeremiah 20:7). In this context, I understand that verse to mean, "G-d, You seduced me, and I allowed myself to be seduced." I understand that cry today to mean that even though he was the prophet of doom and the prophet of destruction, even though he kept telling the Jews that the Temple would be destroyed, he always believed that they would listen to him, that they would repent and that somehow, it would never happen. It could never happen. He was like so many people this week, who turned wherever they turned, and said, "We were seduced. We were fooled. Yes, there were warnings. Yes, there were

articles that said this kind of thing could happen, but we never believed, we couldn't believe, that it would happen here, and yet, it did."

That brings me to a second tower of smoke in our history--the destruction of the second Temple. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai is famous for having escaped from Jerusalem during the final siege and making his way to Vespasian, the Roman general. There he ingratiated himself to Vespasian who would soon become emperor, and who asked Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai what boon he would want. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai at that moment made the fateful decision to give up on Jerusalem, to decide that it was lost, and, in his famous request, chose "Yavneh and her sages."

The Midrash in Avot D'Rabbi Natan (4:5) tells us some more detail. Having given up on Jerusalem, knowing it would be destroyed, here is what happened.

Says the Midrash, "Be'oto sha'ah nilkida yerushalayim"--at that moment, Jerusalem was captured, "Verabban Yochanan ben Zakkai hayah yoshev"--and Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was sitting, presumably in Yavneh, "umetzapeh vechared"--he was hoping and he was trembling. That was the mood and the sense that so many of us had this past week. Once we assimilated exactly what had occurred, once we knew that the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon were lost, we sat and hoped against hope that the immensity of the tragedy would not be what everything told us it was going to be. We hoped and we also trembled in fear. Eventually, says the Midrash, the news of the fire and the smoke that had destroyed the Temple came to Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, "karah begadav vekaru talmidav bigdeihem"--he tore his clothes, and along with him, his students tore their clothes. The moment had come to mourn, as the moment is coming for us to mourn.

That brings me to a third tower of smoke. It is the one that either we or our parents or our grandparents lived through. It is the tower of smoke that rose over the crematoria, that gave the name "Holocaust" to the events of the middle of the past century. Despite the terrible images and memories evoked by that era, there is some consolation in that tower of smoke because we know that we or people close to us have shown the ability to live through a catastrophe marked by such a tower, and to go on to rebuild.

But I am not yet up to talking about consolation. There is another point to be made here. The perpetrators of the events this past week are ideological brothers to the Nazis. Both groups believe that their system, that who they are, is so far superior to others that in pursuit of their goals, they can turn human beings into fodder, into victims, to accomplish their dreams of global superiority. We thought that we had ended such fantasies of superiority after the second world war, or perhaps after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe. The column of smoke rising in New York and at the Pentagon tells us that we were kidding ourselves. The fight against that unspeakable evil continues.

That brings me back to the earliest tower, the true first tower of smoke--the one that I had forgotten initially, but that needs to be mentioned here in particular. It is the tower of smoke that once rose from a place known as "Gei Ben Hinnom". Gei Ben Hinnom is a valley. If you stand on the western or southern walls of the city of Jerusalem (not of the Temple Mount) and look down, you are looking into Gei Ben Hinnom. I assume we all will recognize that the name of this valley is related to the name Gei Hinnom, which is the Jewish term for "Hell". How did Gei Hinnom, this pleasant valley, become the place that gave its name to "Hell"? It originates from a tower of smoke that came from people offering what the Bible calls the ultimate abomination--human sacrifice. (Jeremiah 7:30-34; 32:35; 2 Chronicles 26:3) Now that raises a question for me that I share with you. If we have named "Hell" after a place where people sacrificed their children in the name of their deity, what is the place worse than "Hell" that we will name after people who sacrifice their children to their deity and in doing so, take thousands of innocents along with them? I would truly like to know, what is the place worse than "Hell" that will carry that name for all eternity?

One last point about the tower of smoke from Yoel. During the medieval period, Jewish thinkers, like many people in the world, were trying to make sense of the universe as they knew it, in light of Greek thought and Greek science. The understanding of physics in those days was that the world was composed of four elements--earth, air, water and fire. There is a discussion in that literature about how to fit smoke into this schematic of the four elements. There are a number of sources that speak of smoke as "Hafradat hayisodot"--as a sign that the elements are separating and breaking apart. But one can legitimately translate that phrase as "separation of the foundations." Just as the foundations on which the twin towers and the Pentagon stood, separated and collapsed in whole or in part, the foundations on which our world has been built, have separated and come apart. There really will be a new world order for us to live in. The paradigms by which people lived, the understandings that people have had, the policies on what to do with hijackers aboard a flight, all of those things have been radically changed, because there has been hafradat hayisodot--the falling apart of the foundations. And all of those things are represented historically in Jewish literature by the tower of smoke that we saw this week and that stands before my eyes whether they are open or closed, whether I am watching television or not.

But I do not stop here. Interestingly enough, the phrase "Timrot Ashan", towers of smoke, that appears in Yoel appears but one other time in TaNaCH. There are twin towers of smoke in the Bible. The second one appears in Shir HaShirim (3:6), and there it is a very different image. "Mi zot olah min hamidbar?" King Solomon asks the question, who is this that rises up out of the desolation of the desert "ketimrot ashan"--like a tower of smoke "Mikuteret mor ulevonah mikol avkat rochel"--spreading its aroma of myrrh and frankincense, with all of the fine spices of the apothecary. As opposed to Yoel, where the tower of smoke was associated with blood and fire, obviously, this is meant to be some type of positive image associated with the tower of smoke.

Here I want to explain a bit about the history of a Midrash. I will start by quoting that Midrash in the way one can find it in Rabbenu Bachaya (Shmot 25:10). For Rabbenu Bachaya, it evokes images best known to us from Raiders of the Lost Ark. Says Rabbenu Bachaya, "Kol hanisim shena'asu leYisroel"--All of the miracles that were done for Israel "Hayu na'asim ba'aron"--they were all done through the Ark, the Ark of the Torah, the Ark where the Divine Presence resides. And Bachaya continues (and here I present only the translation), as it says, the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord was traveling before them, and it was killing the snakes and the scorpions, and it was killing all of the enemies of Israel. Said Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat in the name of Rabbi Yose ben Zimra, two sparks emerged from between the two staves of the Ark. Those sparks killed the snakes and the scorpions and they burned the thorns. The smoke rose and spread all over the world, and the world was sweetened by the smell of this smoke. The nations of the world responded and said, "Who is this rising up out of the desert? It is a tower of smoke spreading its sweet scent of myrrh and frankincense, and all of the spices of the apothecary."

Obviously, this is a source that speaks to our desire for justice, to the removal of evil from this world and to the glorious consequences that will come on that day. That would seem to be something about which all decent people could agree. However, in Shir HaShirim Rabbah (3:8), this Midrash is carried a step further and is said to represent a clash of values. Some of the nations of the world, says the Midrash, understood this manifestation coming from the desert to mean that G-d was the fire and G-d was the smoke. The truth, of course, is that the power of justice came from the Ark, from the Torah in the Ark and from the presence of G-d in the Ark. The Midrash is a reminder that for many in the world, including those who perpetrated this act and even for some who oppose them, physical power is the be-all and end-all. For Jews, it is the power of G-d, the power of the ideas and values of Torah that are the controlling principles in all areas of life. Those were the true sources of power that created the sweet aroma in the Midrash, not the raw power of fire and destruction.

In the months ahead, we are going to be sorely tested in terms of those values, and we must remember that at the base of this tower of smoke from Shir HaShirim, it is those values which created the tower and which need to lead us.

So here you have it. Within TaNaCH, we are presented with twin towers as we had twin towers before Tuesday, and as we have them no longer. These are twin towers of smoke. There is the tower of Yoel with its fire, its blood, its destruction and its symbolic representation of many of the tragedies of Jewish history. On the other hand, there is the tower of smoke mentioned in Shir HaShirim. That is a very different tower. It is a tower of justice, a tower of Jewish values, a tower of Torah. It is that second tower that will eventually dissipate the first and bring us what we seek so desperately this week.

I am going to end with one last remarkable source that with a few small word changes, really expresses all of our hopes and all of our emotions this day. A little bit of background to the source needs to come first. I am sure you all know that in the early years of the last century, America was considered the great Midbar--the great spiritual desert, and that there was real concern on the part of the Rabbinic authorities in Europe when anyone contemplated going to America, because they were afraid that the immigrant would be lost to Judaism. Rabbi Meir Simcha HaCohen of Dvinsk, the Meshech Chochmah (Vayikrah 19:18), writes the following words in that regard: "This is true even of Jews in the Diaspora, that even though they are forced to flee to America, (the great desert) nonetheless, they will not be scattered, and they will not be lost. Instead, in all places that they reach, they join with one another, they become communities and groups working together for the sake of Torah and service with many acts of charity and good deeds. Therefore, there is fulfilled in them, "Who is this who rises from the desert? It is a tower of smoke spreading its sweet scent of myrrh and frankincense, and all of the spices of the apothecary."

Those words could be written with slight changes about America today. I will provide that paraphrase as follows. Here in America, in New York and Washington, there are patches of ground that have become sites of searing desolation, veritable deserts in the sense of places where life has become impossible and where wreckage and ruin is the only thing that we can find. But America will not scatter, America will not shatter, America will not be lost. In all places where Americans are, we will come together, we will join one another and we will become communities and groups working in service, doing great acts of charity and marvelous and heroic good deeds. In us, then, as proud citizens of this country will be fulfilled the verse, "Who is this rising up from the desert as a tower of smoke? It is a tower of smoke spreading its sweet scent of myrrh and frankincense, and all of the spices of the apothecary."

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk concludes as follows: And this teaches us about G-d's Divine and Personal Providence. It is that Divine and Personal Providence that we pray for this day, and that we hope and trust we will find during the days, months, and years ahead. May it appear in the tower of smoke of Shir HaShirim that will rise to overcome the symbolism of the tower of smoke in Yoel, and the terrible searing imagery of the tower of smoke that we have lived with since last Tuesday. May G-d grant all of us strength and blessing. Shabbat Shalom to you all.