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"Clinging on for Dear Life"

Over the last four years since my father died, z"l, I have often been heard to say, "I wish my father were alive to see this." I wish, for example, that he had lived to see the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. I occasionally wish I could send him a sermon I wrote, or show him the newly published anthologies to which I contributed articles. I want him to know that my brother was appointed to a national post with the American Jewish Committee. And that my brother and his girlfriend, Susan, a woman my father adored, did get married. I want him to know about Tracy's new job with Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. He would be so pleased.

But really it doesn't even take that much. Know what I mean? I wish my father had lived to see all these newly minted quarters – you know – one from each of the fifty states, for my father was an avid collector of bicentennial quarters (for reasons that escape me), and I think he would have liked these new options for collectors. It doesn't take much for me to wish my father were still alive.

I can read a book or an article, and think, gosh, I wish I could show this to Dad. I want to tell him funny stories about the children I know – some of whom he met once or twice – but he'd like the stories even if he didn't know the kids. I want to tell him jokes I heard, or tell him that I remember jokes he told me. That kind of thing. It doesn't take much for me to wish my father were still alive.

On the other hand, it takes something huge and horrible, like terrorists flying hijacked planes into the Pentagon, and knocking down the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, for me to be glad that my father is already dead. It takes the sudden and violent deaths of thousands of people for me to be grateful that my father did not live to see that moment.

The Hebrew term for the Days of Awe —Yamim Noraim — can also be translated as the Days of Fear – and for most of us the latter phrase has never been so apt as it is this year.

I don't know if it's an odd sort of protective impulse that makes me want my father to be spared such horrors, or maybe more likely, it's my fear that he wouldn't have an answer for me, wouldn't know how to comfort me. This past week I've been thinking a lot about fathers, and mothers, who have the

unenviable task of trying to talk to their children about what has happened. And trying to go on with life as usual. . .Tracy said to me Tuesday she couldn't stop thinking about a scene from her favorite movie, "Truly, Madly, Deeply." I knew which scene she meant. When Jamie, the dead lover of the main character, Nina , returns as a ghost to his beloved. In their touching reunion, they end up chatting for a time about how he spends his days now that he is dead. And he tells her this story about a child he knows named Alice, who also died, and whose parents set up an area at the park where Alice used to play, full of swings and wooden animals that have plaques on them saying: "From Alice's mom and dad, in loving memory of Alice, who used to play here." And Jamie tells Nina, "you see parents take their child off the swing and see the sign, and then they hold on to their son and daughter so tightly…clinging on for dear life…"

Tracy and I imagine that's what parents have been doing this past week. Parents and all the rest of us too – Tracy and I certainly have been --"clinging on for dear life." For a man who was not a professional scholar my father was a lifelong learner on many subjects, especially history. And for a Jew, my father was quite knowledgeable about Islam, even teaching some adult education classes comparing Islam and Judaism. If he were still alive, I think he would at least be able to tell me what most of us already know – that whoever is behind the terrorist attacks of last week, they do not represent Islam anymore than Yigal Amir truly represented Judaism when he took it upon himself 6 years ago to assassinate Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. We've long known, from lots of examples through history, that it is possible, somehow, to begin with a moral religion and so distort it that it becomes something else altogether. In this case, the distortion becomes evil. No God that any major religion believes in would call for or condone what happened last week in New York and Washington or in those airplanes.

In a way, with the shattering of those two towers, the stone tablets of the ten commandments have also been shattered, in that we are looking at an enemy who operates from a moral sphere so unrelated to our own as to be unrecognizable. It puts me in mind of the line from a William Butler Yeats poem:

"Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world"

[excerpt from "The Second Coming" 1921]

Yet despite the fact that we have lost our world trade center, we have not lost our moral center. Nor, finally, have we really seen in this past week anything the world has never seen before. Despite the fact that none of us could have imagined what took place before it did, nor can we now really fathom the enormity of what happened, it's nonetheless true that the acts and actors of last week's terror were not the first even in our lifetimes to loose horror upon the world. They

merely, perhaps, hit closest to home, shattering both our sheltered lives and our false sense of security. And they left us with so many haunting questions – had it been I, what would I have done? would I have acted heroically? would I have tried to save others or just myself? run away from trouble or run to see if I could help?

I've been thinking a lot this past week not just about parents – those gone from us, and those still around and able "to hold their sons and daughters so tightly" even as they flail about in search of something to say to their puzzled children – I've been thinking too about rabbis, and clergy of all sorts, and therapists, and politicians, and all the rest of us who are questioned by others: how? why? who? what next? Is this what religion brings? what kind of a god would let…You know, I'm sure, the questions. And we who are expected somehow to know the answers, it turns out know only what all of us know: that there are no answers, no explanations.

No answers, no explanations, you'll get none here, not from me and not from Judaism either. Yet even though Judaism will give no answers, it does, I believe, give us meaning – not in the acts of violence or the deaths of thousands, but meaning in the life that continues despite the smoking ruins and the ruined lives. Meaning and reason – the meaning and the reasons we need to go on in the face of so much horror, so much fear, so much uncertainty, so much unbalance. The meaning behind our impulse to "hold on to our loved ones so tightly, clinging on for dear life."

Tomorrow morning we will hear, as we do every year on Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur, the often terrifying, and long prayer called the Unetanah Tokef, the prayer that says, "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die." Have we ever known a more appropriate time to contemplate the challenges of that prayer? One of the many verses in that prayer reads: u'vashofar gadol yi'ta'ka v'kol d'mamah dakah yishama. The great shofar is sounded and a still small voice is heard.

The great shofar is sounded – u'vashofar gadol yi'ta'ka Fran will shout this line when she sings the prayer tomorrow morning, sometime before we ourselves will hear many blasts of the shofar. In the prayer itself, the great shofar is perhaps a reference to the Book of Exodus, to the very loud voice of the shofar atop Mt. Sinai during God's revelation. When the Israelites gathered, hundreds of thousands of us, at the foot of the mountain, the loud voice of the shofar announces to us something incredible – not only the presence of God, but the gift of the ten commandments that follows almost immediately, the commandments that allow us to live in community, indeed to thrive in that way of life.

v'kol d'mamah dakah yishama "and a still small voice is heard." You'll hear Fran whisper this line tomorrow morning. In this verse our prayer quotes a passage from First Kings, a cryptic yet moving story of the prophet Elijah, who in a moment of near despair, pursued by his enemies, asks God to take his life. Instead an angel comes to give him sustenance, and then Elijah sets forth on a journey alone for forty days and nights, arriving alone at Mt. Sinai [called Horeb in Kings and some places in Torah], the very mountain where his ancestors, Moses and the Israelites, had heard the voice of the shofar and the voice of God. And here the voice of God comes to Elijah, asking, "why are you here, Elijah?" And Elijah replies that he has always been devoted to God, and now "I am all alone and they seek to take my life." [18:9-10] And God says, "Go out and stand before [Me], the Eternal, on the mountaintop." Then the Eternal passed by. A furious wind split mountains and shattered rocks in the presence of God, but God was not in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake—but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, fire—but God was not in the fire. And after the fire, a still, small voice -- v'kol d'mamah dakah." [18:11-12]

Elijah hears the kol d'mamah dakah when he is at his lowest point. When, despite his ardent efforts on God's behalf, the people of Israel have broken their covenant with God, and Elijah finds himself alone and near despair, saying, "take my life, Eternal One." [see 18:10 and also 4] What did Elijah hear there on that mountain? what was the kol d'mamah dakah, and what did it do for him? The incredible revelations on the mountainside did not necessarily "cure" him – after the revelation God asks him the exact same question: what are you doing here, Elijah, and he gives the exact same answer. God's revelation does not necessarily change Elijah, it may not even have inspired him (it's hard to tell for sure from the text), it did, however, seem to enable him to go on, to return to people, to live in the world again.
That second word d'mamah, appears somewhere else in the Bible. It is used to describe Aaron, first High Priest, brother of Moses, when he watched his own sons be suddenly and unexpectedly incinerated by a fire "that came forth before God," when, as apprentice High Priests, they offered their first offering at the altar. "Aaron was silent," says the Torah, va-yi-dome Ah-ha-ron. "Aaron was silent" when he saw his own sons incinerated. What a stark and cryptic statement – silence is often inscrutable. It could mean so many things.

The commentators and midrash writers tell us all sorts of things about Aaron's silence. It means, say some, he quietly accepted God's judgment. He was afraid. He was unmoved. It is why Aaron was called a peacemaker – he did not object or complain. I wonder. Is that what you hear in the statement, "Aaron was silent"? Va yi-dome Aharon. There are many words for silence in Biblical Hebrew, but the one the Torah uses to describe Aaron's silence – a word similar to the still small voice Elijah hears on the mountain -- comes from a root that also means "to wail,

groan, lament." Perhaps that in fact is what Aaron was doing there after watching his sons die. A wail, an inward, even silent wailing perhaps.

That kind of silence, that kind of wailing, is what I imagine my mother was doing last Tuesday morning, alone in her apartment, after watching the explosions on television and before (and after) she heard that my brother, her only son, and my niece, her only grandchild, were both okay. That kind of silence, that kind of wailing, is, I suspect, what many of us have been doing this past week as we watch the news reports over and over again.

That kind of silence, that kind of wailing, is also what we've been doing all this past year as the 2nd Intifada in Israel – almost exactly a year old today – goes on and on, collapsing any hope of peace there in our beloved Israel, turning so many dreams to nightmares.
Are any of us sorry to see the year 5761 depart?

It may not be easy to accept that God is in these faint voices, or even silences, rather than in the fire or wind or earthquakes. We may still find ourselves inclined to expect God in the disasters, in the implements of destruction. We may insist on keeping God the "who" that we blame when the bad things happen. Or we may be inclined to assume God is nowhere to be found. But these texts, I think, turn those ideas around, suggesting that God is not against us but with us, not an absence but a presence. The presence that keeps us from imploding under the crush of despair. They tell us that God is not in the catastrophe, but in the stunned or groaning silences of grief that follow -- be they Aaron's or our own.

The great shofar is sounded -- u'vashofar gadol yi'ta'ka The prayer we will hear tomorrow reminds us that the blast of the shofar once upon a time announced the presence of God, and it reminds us of a time when all the world [according to midrash, it was the whole world, not just the hundreds of thousands of Israelites who heard] heard God's voice speaking the 10 commandments. Some say God spoke them in a whisper, and others that God's voice was like the sound of thunder, and still others say that each person heard God's voice differently, as the most familiar, the most comforting voice they knew – the voice of their mother or their father perhaps. However God's voice sounded, the words God's voice spoke – the 10 commandments – were God's wish that human beings learn to live connected to one another, protective of one another, that we learn to live in community.

v'kol d'mamah dakah yishama "and a still small voice is heard." And the prayer we will hear tomorrow reminds us of God's quiet, wordless presence with the prophet Elijah, the presence that implied "I am not in the earthquakes or the fires or the winds," "I am not in the eruptions, the explosions, the killings, the havoc wreaked upon the world by those who hate." "But I am here in the silence that

follows the trouble, in the groaning and the wailing, and the sorrow -- I am here beside you, crying with you . . . and gently urging you on." Who shall live and who shall die? who in their time and who not in their time? Our prayer is not a recipe for how to survive, it is a statement about real life, about the simple fact that we do not know who or when or why – we only know we will live and we will die, and that only the way we live is up to us.

One of the ministers I heard speaking on television the other night said in the midst of the horror he kept remembering a phrase one of his teachers had taught him: "not everything that happens comes from God," he said, "but God comes from everything that happens"

I have no doubt that God is here with us, silent perhaps, weeping with us, holding us as we weep in one another's arms. It is that presence – whether we recognize it or not, whether we feel it or not -- that lets us go on, makes us go on, makes us want to go on, "holding so tightly, clinging on for dear, [dear] life."

Shanah Tovah

A a bonus poem from Grace Paley (just 'cause I like it – not 'cause I'm using it)

That Year

In my family
people who were eighty-two were very different
from people who were ninety-two

The eighty-two year old people grew up
it was 1914
this is what they knew
War World War War

That's why when they speak to the child
they say
poor little one . . .

The ninety-two year old people remember
it was the year 1905
they went to prison
they went into exile
they said ah soon

When they speak to the grandchild
they say

yes there will be revolution
then there will be revolution then
once more then the earth itself
will turn and turn and cry out oh I
have been made sick

then you my little bud
must flower and save it

Leaning Forward, Poems by Grace Paley, p.84

Last Tuesday when the two towers collapsed, a strange image came into my mind. It was an image of those two hijacked airplanes crashing into the two stone tablets upon which God had written the ten commandments. It's not that I saw the WTC as representing all the morality of the 10 commandments, nor did I see the destruction of the towers (and everything else that happened that day) as a declaration that all humankind was tossing our ethical values onto the mountain of rubble still burning in lower Manhattan. I saw the towers as the shattered tablets, I think, because I realized that what we are up against is something totally outside the scope of the 10 commandments. Like the Nazis before them, and so many misguided political groups throughout history, the tablets shatter merely in the sense that we are facing an enemy who pays our value systems no heed, who works from some other system entirely. This is no even playing field. We won't even be able to apply any rules of war we might know. Chances are we won't be able to defeat these enemies, not really, not without risking our own moral grounding, so the best we might be able to do is live despite them.