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Beth Chayim Chadashim

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"the grief of terror/the terror of grief"

I want to read you a brief excerpt from one of the many stories that came in the aftermath of the horrible and horrifying events of Sept. 11. Some of you may already have seen this whole story on e-mail – I hope so, I know some of you heard me or Jeremy Lawrence share parts of it at other recent services. It supposedly comes from a talk given by an almost 22-year-old Pakistani Muslim man named Usman Farman, who, until September 11, worked in building #7 at the World Trade Center. As Usman tells the story: "We were evacuated to the north side of building 7. Still only 1 block from the towers. The security people told us to go north and not to look back. 5 city blocks later I stopped and turned around to watch. With a thousand people staring, we saw in shock as the first tower collapsed. No-one could believe it was happening. . .The next thing I remember is that a dark cloud of glass and debris about 50 stories high came tumbling towards us. I turned around and ran as fast as possible. . . I fell down trying to get away. "I was on my back, facing this massive cloud that was approaching, it must have been 600 feet off, everything was already dark. I normally wear a pendant around my neck, inscribed with an Arabic prayer for safety... A hesidic [Orthodox] Jewish man came up to me and held the pendant in his hand, and …read the Arabic out loud for a second. What he said next, I will never forget. [With a deep Brooklyn accent] he said "Brother, if you don't mind, there is a cloud of glass coming at us, grab my hand, lets get the hell out of here". He helped me stand up, and we ran for what seemed like forever without looking back. "He was the last person I would ever have thought, who would help me. If it weren't for him, I probably would have been engulfed in shattered glass and debris. . . I would most likely be in the hospital right now, if not dead. Help came from the least expected place, and goes only to show, that we are all in this together . regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity."

Besides the moving story about Muslim and Jew, I was struck by another aspect of Usman's tale, one I suspect its author did not think about. When I re-read the story my imagination was captured by these two sentences: "The security people told us to go north and not to look back. 5 city blocks later I stopped and turned around to watch." I wonder if the security people's instructions, and Usman's action remind any of you, as they did me, of a biblical story? [any response?]

In picturing Usman running from the cloud, looking back, then running and falling and nearly being killed in the process, I couldn't help but think of Lot's wife.

Remember the story in the Book of Genesis? As she and her family escaped from the burning cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's wife looked back and became, says Genesis, a pillar of salt. Of course this begs the question: am I comparing the World Trade Center, with its twin towers, even with its own zip code, to the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, destroyed by God because not even 10 righteous people could be found living in them?

So I need to say LOUD AND CLEAR: NO! I AM NOT comparing the WTC to S & G. I do not believe that the terrorists were working for God, or that God believed the towers should come down. A certain one or two of my clergy "colleagues" may believe such a thing, BUT I CERTAINLY DO NOT.

I only bring up Lot's wife to compare her to the rest of us, to the ones who – like Lot and his wife and daughters – literally had to run away from the twin towers in order not to be killed; and to those of us far away who kept looking – obsessively – at the videos of the towers, the planes crashing into them, the flames, the smoke, the smoldering, their fall. Nearly all of us can play in our mind's eye those shots from nearly any angle, any speed – real time, slow motion, fast forward, rewind.

The image of Usman -- our young Pakistani Muslim friend -- looking back, falling, nearly being overwhelmed by the cloud of glass and debris, haunts me in the same way I am haunted by the image of Lot's wife becoming a pillar of salt. The rabbis and the commentators have little to say about Lot's wife. They try to explain her peculiar fate by saying it was a punishment, though the text doesn't say that, and that she must have committed some sin involving salt. Overall, though, the commentators don't spend too much time on her really, nor does the Torah itself -- virtually all it has to say about her is contained in that one verse: "And his wife looked behind him, and she became a pillar of salt" [Gen. 19:26]. The Torah doesn't even bother to give her a name. No one seemed very interested in poor Mrs. Lot until more recent contemporary women commentators give her a little more attention.

But it wasn't until I thought about her in conjunction with Usman and the thousands of others running away from the cloud and the collapsing towers on September 11, that I understood what happened to Ms. Lot. Surely, the salt that paralyzed her came from her tears . . . tears of grief as she stopped to look back at her beloved city, as she stopped to look back at where her other daughters and their husbands still remained, having refused to flee, thinking the warning was a joke [see Gen. 19:14]. Surely the salt that froze her into a pillar came from her tears . . . tears of grief as she saw what befell her home, her daughters, her friends; tears of horror as she looked at the cities crumbling to the ground, burning in "fire and brimstone" (yes, the Torah is the source of that expression); tears of worry and fear and emptiness as she thought about what might lie ahead.

Salt, is a preservative but as we all know, ironically, in too great a quantity, salt is also a killer. The Dead Sea in Israel is so called because it is so salty that nothing can live in it. So too, salty tears can be healing, but if a person can't stop crying, his or her very life is endangered. I see the potential all around us. I worry that many of us are in danger of suffering the fate of Lot's wife. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying "get over it already." I'm not saying, "don't feel that way," or "don't cry." On the contrary, I want us to grieve – I know we need to – I want us to hold on to each other; I want us to have been doing all those things we've been doing the last two weeks. And I know it has only been two weeks and a day – not much in the scheme of things, not much time at all when it comes to such pain. But I am also saying we must figure out how to go on . . .each at our own pace to be sure and in our own way. . . but we need to go on. We'll never "get over it" exactly, how could we? and especially not yet while we're still taking in the enormity of it all. . . but . . . eventually . . . I think sooner than some of us would be inclined to do . . . we must go on.

I am saying go ahead and grieve, but I am also saying: let's not become captives of our grief, don't let it incapacitate us, paralyze us, freeze us; let's not become encrusted in the salt of our own tears or the tears of others. Let's not turn into a pillar of salt like our poor dear Ms. Lot. By the way, more than one collection of midrashim [Midrash Tanhuma 4:8 –and Sefer Hayashar, a medieval chronicle of biblical history first printed in Italy in the 16th c.] do give Lot's wife a name. The name they give her is "Edith." Odd choice, do you think? Edith in Hebrew is tydi[e Adit, the feminine form of the word "witness." [see Biblical Women in the Midrash by Naomi Hyman, Aronson, p.35, ftnt 3; and Judith Antonelli, p.40, In the Image of God: A Feminist Commentary on the Torah]

Perhaps this is what we have most to be afraid of – the witnessing. Ask survivors of any atrocities – any human cruelty. It's not that we don't know such hatred exists in the world (has always existed). It's not that we don't know that vicious hate-based crimes against humanity happen ongoingly all over the earth. We know all too well that the world, our lives, our people Israel have had no shortage of collective trauma and tragedy. But this one we see, some people we know were there, many of us had visited the WTC ourselves. This one leaves 10-15,000 American children and some foreign children too – children a lot like our children – children growing up in childhoods not unlike most of ours – now suddenly and violently and cruelly and senselessly without a parent (some lost both parents). Some NYC commuter towns lost several hundred residents. Some congregations lost 25 or 30 members – all on one day. Haven't we Jews had enough to be witness to, do we have to take on this one too?

Can we really say, as I hear so often these days, that we have not lost our innocence until now? [We heard that six years ago too, when a Jew killed Yitzhak Rabin] We? We Jews? Some call our religion a lachrymose one – based on tears

shed from centuries of terrible persecution. We even have a Jewish holy day each year – Tisha B'av -- whose reason for being is to mourn all the collective losses our people have experienced for thousands of years. We who lost six million souls and so much else within the lifetime of many of us, surely we're not just now losing our innocence?

So how do we explain these feelings? this lethargy? When will we make it through one whole day without being caught up short with a new thought or some reminder of what happened, not to mention all the uncertainty about what's to come? "When," asks Fran, "will my sense of humor return?" And when will collective depression end? and our tempers return to normal? when will our joie de vivre reappear? when will we be able to wish one another a sweet new year or a happy birthday without tempering it in some way? And when, by the way, will those things return naturally, for I have another worry as well about some of us. Even as I worry that some of us are in danger of paralysis due to grief, I worry that others of us are in danger of the opposite – of stuffing it all down, putting it away some where (denial is also a powerful tool), not dealing with the fear, the grief, the worry, the sorrow. Some of us have turned off the TV and the radio, and even our computers – to protect ourselves, we say, we don't want to look, don't want to know. And I don't fault any of us for that desire, but we do need to be aware of that impulse as well.

Tomorrow during the day we will recite again, as we did on RH, the long prayer known as the Unetanah Tokef, best known for its verse: "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed…who shall live and who shall die". It's one of the few prayers recited only on RH and YK, and also recited on both RH and YK, and though centuries old, it feels, say some, like it must have been written just last week. I want to mention another part of this prayer that we often don't notice. It's sort of hiding there in the part we mostly do notice, the part that not only asks "who will live and who will die?" but also offers that unsettling list of different ways in which we might die. But tucked in there with the "kinds of death list" are several other questions, vital ones for us witnesses, for us survivors, whose task is to grieve and to help repair our broken world: "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and Yom Kippur it is decided . . . who shall have rest and who can never be still, who shall be serene and who will be confused, who will be tranquil and who will be tormented, who will be impoverished and who enriched, who will be brought low and who will be lifted up. [note: a variety of prayerbook translations here]

"But teshuvah, and tefilah and tzedakah annul the evil decree." Or as one prayerbook [Reconstructionist] put it:

But repentance, prayer and just (righteous) acts "make easier what God may decree, make easier what life holds in store, make easier facing the world, make easier facing ourselves." [Kol Haneshema Mahzor, p. 875]

What's happened in our world since September 11 threatens us in all kinds of ways, and in part how we deal with our feelings about it will help determine whether we will remain as we've been these last two weeks: restless, confused, tormented, impoverished, brought low; or whether we can find again rest, serenity, tranquility, spiritual enrichment. How we act, what we do for ourselves and in the world will help determine if we will yet again be lifted up.

In Judaism, we are taught that grief acknowledged but not exaggerated, grief given its proper time but not allowed to go on indefinitely, grief permitted but not given free rein, grief done in the company of dear ones and community and not all alone, can eventually restore our equilibrium and bring us back to life. One way Jews grieve in community is to periodically bring all our griefs together in one place, as we'll do tomorrow afternoon at our Yizkor memorial service.

A colleague of mine, Rabbi Cynthia Culpepper, in her commentary on Lot's wife suggests that perhaps Lot's wife turned herself into a pillar of salt, so that she might serve both as a memorial to the past and a guidepost to the future. A wordless guidepost and a wordless memorial – like silence itself, we must make of it what we can. For me, Edith, Lot's wife, is a reminder of the difficult role of being witness, and also of the preciousness and the danger of tears and of grief. Edith, my salty witness, reminds me of the need to mourn the human loss, but also the need to put it in perspective in our own lives. We can look back, but we can't only look back; we can grieve and we can be afraid, but we can't let the salt of our tears overtake and paralyze us.

It occurs to me that Lot's wife, Edith, may not have been paralyzed only by her own tears. Perhaps what froze her there were the cumulative tears of her family and all the others who might have escaped from their burning city. And perhaps some of God's tears were shed there too, for the destruction of so many of God's creatures, and for the failure of the people made in God's image – perhaps God shed tears for a magnificent creation gone so awry. More than enough tears were shed, I'm sure, to make a salt pillar.

Remember our friend Usman, who looked back and almost died? I barely mentioned what we all probably loved most about that story – that lovely and funny Jewish fellow who appeared from no where and saved Usman's life. Do you suppose this story is even really true? We so want it to be, but does it really matter one way or the other? I don't think it matters because whether they're real people or not, I suspect they've been saving lives all week, since the story first began circulating.

We Jews so love this story of this Jewish guy who might easily – almost excusably – have let hatred or prejudice or just fear or selfishness or an instinct of self-preservation get the better of him that day, but who – clearly because of his Jewish values we like to think (as if no other people have such values!) – risked his own life to help a stranger. And who among us would have faulted him if he'd kept running right by Usman Farman without stopping? (Usman Farman – Us man – U.S. Man? Far man – is his name some American Pakistani Muslim version of "Everyman"?)

The nameless Jewish hero of our story [should we call him Edith? or just Ed perhaps], we think, must surely have been remembering the verses in the Torah portion we'll be reading tomorrow afternoon: "Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor. . .Love your neighbor as you love yourself," [Levit. 19:18]. For although no one would have blamed him for running right by, our Chasidic friend Ed did stop, and when he did he kept Usman and maybe himself too, and maybe for that matter us as well, from turning into a pillar of salt, from being only, or not even, a witness. In stopping and helping (and maybe even in using humor – yes, I'm sure the humor is part of it), our Jewish friend did all three things we're encouraged to do in our terrifying unetanah tokef prayer, the three things that our prayer says "avert the severity of the decree." Or to be more literal: "annul the evil decree." Do you remember them? Tefillah, tzedakah, tshuvah [in Unetaneh Tokef prayer, but based on Genesis Rabbah 44:12].

How did "Ed" do tefillah -prayer? Remember what Usman described? "I normally wear a pendant around my neck," he said, "inscribed with an Arabic prayer for safety . . . A hesidic [Orthodox] Jewish man came up to me and held the pendant in his hand, and looked at it. He read the Arabic out loud for a second." Tefillah – prayer – our Hasidic friend prayed out loud – okay it was a Muslim prayer for safety, but he knew a prayer to God when he saw one (where do you suppose he learned Arabic anyway?).

What happened next? Our Chasidic friend performed an act of tzedakah – of just action, of righteousness, of doing the right thing. Remember? "What he said next," Usman narrates, "I will never forget. …he said 'Brother, if you don't mind, there is a cloud of glass coming at us, grab my hand, lets get the hell out of here'. He helped me stand up, and we ran for what seemed like forever without looking back.

Tzedakah – just action: In extending a hand, he saved a life. The second to last sin in the traditional long, long list of sins recited on Yom Kippur is Al cheyt shekhatanu lifanecha For the sin we have sinned against You beet'sumet yad: "in the matter of extending a hand." For our Chasidic friend this year let's change cheyt – sin – to mitzvah: Al mitzvah 'For the mitzvah we have performed before You in the matter of extending a hand.'

And what's the third recommendation from our prayer? What will help annul the evil decree?

Tshuvah – repentance. With one act – reaching out a hand to a "stranger" in trouble, no wait – more than a stranger – to one whose religion was known by this Jew to have been part of a long history of trouble for his own people – by reaching out to Usman, our Jewish friend did tshuvah repentance – on behalf of every Jew, every person, who blindly – or seeingly – hates people of the Muslim faith . . . hates people different from us (just because they are different from us). And don't forget that the word tshuvah – repentance – comes from the root meaning "turn" or "return" – when we do tshuvah we turn toward our true self, we return to God, we turn toward others – and in this case, he (and his newfound friend) did what Lot's wife had not managed to do – they "turned" away rather than toward the source of their anguish: remember? "He helped me stand up, and we ran for what seemed like forever without looking back."

Usman's story brings us to tears, to be sure, but not tears of grief, not the tears that threaten to engulf us and leave us stranded, paralyzed, lifeless like Adit, Lot's wife. Usman's story brings us to life-giving tears, the same kind that come from averting any evil decree that might be hanging over our own lives this Yom Kippur.

Let this Yom Kippur 5762, 2001 serve for us as a monument and a guidepost, a vantage point from which we can bear witness and remember and grieve for whom we lost, and for what we lost, even as we begin to turn and go on with life. Let this Yom Kippur, this day of atonement, be for us this year a day of at-one-ment, a day meant to be set aside to allow us to be at one – at one with our own self, at one with others – strangers and neighbors, friends and loved ones -- at one with our tradition, at one with God, at one with what we as Jews, as human beings, as creations of God, can do now to help repair our shattered world and heal our broken hearts.

G'mar hatimah tovah
May each of us be sealed in the Book of Life for a year filled with healing, and with blessing, and with all the tears that the lives we choose to live will bring our way.