

NITZAVIM
the shabbat before Rosh Hashanah 2001

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Two weeks ago the Torah portion was called ki tetze - which means, "when you will go out" - and last week's portion was entitled ki tavo - meaning, when you will come in. This week's portion is called nitzavim - which means, "standing," and it begins: "You are standing today, all of you, in front of God your God, your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, every man of Israel, your infants, your women, and your alien who is in your camps, from one who cuts your wood to one who draws your water" [Deut. 29:9-10]

How apt the titles of these Torah portions: Going out, coming in, standing, for in the last two weeks we were going out and coming in, coming and going, as usual, but this week we were left standing, standing with our mouths agape at a sight too terrible to comprehend. All of us, our leaders, our tribes, our elders and officers, every man, woman and child, every citizen and every alien, every one - we were left standing, staring, crying, aghast at what we saw.

Last Tuesday, as I watched the news videos over and over again, a poem by Archibald MacLeish, a poem I had left behind years ago, rifted back to me. The poem is called the "End of the World." I won't read it all to you, just the end:

The End of the World

Quite unexpectedly the top blew off:

And there, there overhead, there, there hung over
Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,
There in the starless dark, the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings across the cancelled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing -- nothing at all.

--Archibald MacLeish [1920s]

The poem came back to me before I remembered all of its lines, I remembered only the name of the poem - "The End of the World" --and the line, "quite unexpectedly the top blew off." But when I read the whole poem again (my friend

Danny Miller found it for me on the internet in about 30 seconds), I was struck by the accuracy of the images:

quite unexpectedly the top blew off thousands of faces, dazed eyes starless dark vast wings across the cancelled skies the sudden blackness, the black pall

The gentle Archibald Macleish, an attorney as well as a poet, once a Librarian of Congress, and assistant secretary of State under Franklin Roosevelt, wrote this poem decades before [in the 1920s] the invention of the atom bomb, yet even though he is long gone from us, he somehow long ago seemed to have gotten it right.

Except, except not quite all correct. Not his last line there MacLeish misses, thank God, there he's wrong:
the sudden blackness the black pall Of nothing, nothing, nothing -- nothing at all.

For while it's true that where had stood the once tallest towers in the world there was a sudden blackness, while it's true that in the space where had stood the once tallest towers in the world there seemed now to be nothing, once we looked down instead of up, yes even in the terrible rubble and smoke, what we saw was far from nothing - it was something amazing -- the best of humanity coming from the worst of humanity:

it was the rescuers and the ordinary citizens doing extraordinary acts;

it was the quiet interactions of people one on one;

it was the kindness with which people treated one another everywhere all day on Tuesday and since;

it was the outpouring of support and sympathy from all over the world (even from some unexpected places and persons);

it was the quiet vigils, and the prayer gatherings, the hand holding and the hugs;

it was all those inspiring stories that are being told of simple acts and astounding feats of courage and strength and resolve.

It was the rush of so many to say, yes bring judgment against the perpetrators but do not become terrorists ourselves in our rush to judgment.

Do not forget our humanity in the face of their inhumanity.

Do not forget what unites us in the face of such attempts to divide us.

Do not forget love in the face of such hatred.

And one more thing in the midst of all this . . . all those questions about God:

- how could God let this happen? where was God in all of this?

I come back to our Torah portion, to our standing before Moses listening to God's invitation. For there with Moses, we were not standing our mouths agape in

horror. As we stood there with Moses, no top blew off unexpectedly, rather, as we stood all of us together there, God issued an invitation: "When all these things befall you," says God - "the blessing and the curse that I have set before you - and you take them to heart and you return to God your God. God your God will take you back in love." [Deut. 30:2-3]

God's invitation to us to return, and God's promise to return to us in love, uses the Hebrew word we've been using a lot this month of Elul, this month of preparation for the days of awe: the word is shuv, as in tshuvah, repentance, return, turning, self-reflection - the assignment Jewish tradition gives us during this month of getting ready. When we return or turn to God, then God will turn to us, will take us back in love.

It's such a tenuous time, such a sad time, such a frightening time, not the best time perhaps to be walking into the Days of Awe . . . or maybe it is, maybe it's just the right time to be turning within-searching our hearts for the best within ourselves; maybe it's just the right time to be gathering together with people we care for, turning our hearts to one another; maybe it's just the right time to be turning our hearts toward God, inviting God to turn to us. . . in our fear, in our smallness, in our anger, in our love.

Shabbat Shalom