YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**A Letter from the Rashei Yeshiva**

**TO OUR BROTHERS IN DISTRESS**

**IN THE WAKE OF THE TERROR ATTACKS AGAINST AMERICA**

Dear Friends, *Achim le-tzara*,

To the verbal and pictorial tidal wave which has engulfed us since Tuesday's cataclysm, there is little one can - and possibly, should - add. And yet, upon reflection, I find the suggestion that I set down some brief thoughts, to be sent to a Har Etzion constituency to whom they might be meaningful, striking a positive chord. I have no illusion about having anything novel to present. Indeed, in the context of the tragedy and under the impact of its enormity, I should regard the quest for expressive novelty as debasing, as bordering on desecration of the calamity and the memory of the stricken. All I can and seek to offer, as a *shaliach tzibbur*, is an encapsulated rendering of a Jewish and Israeli response, as experienced and expressed within the enclaves of a *beit midrash* in the Judean Hills.

At the most basic plane, "thoughts" is of course wide of the mark. Numbing pain, chilling sorrow, gnawing anxiety - all gripping us viscerally rather than cerebrally - obviously comprise our immediate human response. And yet, if our feelings can be communicated at all, we cannot but have recourse to the medium of ideas.

To speak of a Jewish response is not to negate the universal aspect. Commiseration with human suffering as such is endemic to our tradition, expressed, as the Rambam stated (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 10:12), in key verses:

"For it is written, 'God is good to all, and His mercies are upon all His creatures' (Psalms 145:9), and, 'Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace' (Proverbs 3:17)."

And presumably, when the tragedy is of such staggering proportions, even the most clannish among us are genuinely grieved. Nevertheless, one can, at this dark hour, discern a specifically Jewish and Israeli response; and this in, primarily, three respects.

The first concerns the locus of the tragedy. New York and its environs is the epicenter of Diaspora Jewry - both demographically and spiritually, by far the largest and most powerful focus of Jewish life in the *Golah*. Hence, whatever our universal commitment, it is only natural that we are doubly gripped, ethnically and ethically, by its particular suffering.

The second likewise concerns the locus of the catastrophe, but very differently conceived. Our empathy for the victims and their families would be acute even if the World Trade Center or the Pentagon had been demolished by an earthquake. In fact, however, they were attacked by evil incarnate, out of hatred for the United States and what it represents; and, quite apart from the revulsion engendered by bestial inhumanity, that element is inexorably related to the Jewish connection. Broadly speaking, the attacks were conceived and executed as part of an Islamic onslaught against the West, in general, and Christianity, in particular. Patently, however, America's sustained support of Israel and its identification with many of its causes and values was a critical factor, which, for us, adds a significant dimension to the tragedy. *Rishonim* asserted that a person who is killed by our enemies simply because he is Jewish is regarded as having died "*al kiddush Hashem*," in sanctification of God's Name, even if he never chose martyrdom and, possibly, is not even a believer. We may reasonably state, analogously, that a country which is attacked because of its support for the Jewish people and its state is likewise credited as having suffered while being engaged in the *Ribbono Shel Olam*'s cause.

What that status, objectively, entails is not for us to surmise. We can, however, subjectively attest to the impact that the Jewish connection has, and should have, upon ourselves. These frightful days have rekindled our sense of what the United States, historically and currently, has been. I speak not only of its present position of global leadership but of its inherent character and agenda. There is, surely, much to criticize in American culture - aspects of materialism, rugged individualism, crassness, shallowness if not vulgarity; and there is truth to some of Solzhenytsin's strictures decrying the lack of spirituality. None of this, however, should obscure the fact that, more than any other major modern country, it has been, collectively, a prime champion of Avraham *Avinu*'s two principal causes: monotheistic faith (*emunah*) and generosity - *hesed*. We have felt anew appreciation, as both awareness and gratitude, of that commitment's having redounded to the benefit of Jewry; and that appreciation has deepened our sorrow and sharpened our anxiety.

Finally, our response is Jewish insofar as it is grounded in Jewish roots regarding relation to suffering in general. I hesitate to speak blandly (in what could indeed be universal religious categories) of the uses of adversity or the merit of acceptance, lest seemingly cliched religious sensibility be misconstrued as glib insensitivity; and the last thing we might countenance is a facile and remote *tsidduk ha-din* for the tragedy of others. Surely, however, we ought follow the Rav's counsel: It is not for us to explain suffering but rather to cope with it, morally and religiously, our mettle and our faith being tested, steeled, and humbled within its crucible. We look to the *Ribbono Shel Olam* for solace and surcease, even as we prayerfully determine to make His cause ours, even as we strive, in purgation and repentance, to ennoble our spiritual self. We are driven to recognize the full force of the *midrash* which, while commenting on a verse addressed, in its direct context, to *knesset Israel*, nevertheless has clear universal import:

"'I, even I, am He that comforts you' (Isaiah 51:12) - Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: It is the way of a father to have mercy, as it is written, 'As a father has mercy on his children;' and it is the way of a mother to console, as it is written, 'As one whose mother consoles him.' The Holy One, blessed be He, said: I act as father and mother." (*Yalkut Shimoni*, 474)

Particularly, in these days of judgment and mercy, as we fuse prayer for the redemptive epiphany of "*Melokh al kol ha-olam bi-khevodekha, ve-hinase al kol ha-aretz bi-yekarekha*" - "Reign over the entire world in Your glory, and be exalted over all the earth in Your grandeur" - with the quest for personal and collective *teshuvah*, we share in the searing grief and in the yearning for rehabilitation

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"For the enemy has persecuted my soul; he has trodden my life down into the ground; he has made me to dwell in darkness, as those that have been long dead ...

I stretch forth my hands to You; my soul thirsts after You, like a thirsty land.

Answer me speedily, O Lord; my spirit fails; do not hide Your face from me, lest I be like those who go down into the pit.

Cause me to hear Your words of steadfast love in the morning, for in You do I trust; cause me to know the way in which I should walk, for I lift up my soul to You ...

Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God; let Your gracious spirit lead me on level ground." (Psalms 143)

With best wishes for personal and collective *ketiva va-chatima tova* for a year of life and peace,

Aharon Lichtenstein

To our brothers and sisters in the United States, and to their relatives in Israel and elsewhere, may God bless you from Zion:

During this most difficult and tragic hour, we are all a single family, Jews and gentiles alike - all the nations of the world. All nations, that is, with the exception of those who removed themselves from the community of mankind and destroyed the image of God with which they were created. They destroyed it to the point of non-recognition, and became like beasts of prey.

My heart - and all of our hearts - is with the many victims, Jews and non-Jews; my heart, and all of our hearts, goes out to the families who, in a matter of seconds, lost their loved ones.

"O Lord God of retribution, O God of retribution - appear!" (Psalms 94:1). Avenge the blood of Your creatures who were murdered so cruelly.

Dear brothers and sisters, we know that the villains who attacked New York and Washington, killing thousands of people whom they considered infidels, intended also to undermine Western culture, which is based on principles originating in the Torah and in the words of the prophets. We are confident that the United States will very soon recover from the devastating blow it suffered and show wisdom, stamina and strength in its war against these despicable forces.

I would like to emphasize an additional point. From the time of our forefather Abraham, the Nation of Israel has been dedicated to sanctifying God's Name in the world. As members of this nation, we cannot ignore the appalling "*chillul Hashem*," the desecration of God's Name that occurred before the entire world. These evil people murdered in the name of our God, the Lord of the universe; they killed thousands in their fanatical and cruel belief that they were carrying out God's will. As we rend our garments as a sign of bereavement for the victims, we must tear them as well for the terrible *chillul Hashem* that has occurred. We also plead with the Almighty: Look and see what these wicked people have done to us and what they have done to Your great and sacred Name! "You, our God - cast them down to the nethermost pit, for they are murderous, treacherous men," as King David writes in his Psalms (55:24).

The Talmud (Shabbat 77b) describes five fears that exist in the world, including the elephant's fear of the mosquito. A mosquito can cause the elephant pain, but it can never overcome or even debilitate it. The People of Israel sense deep feelings of friendship towards the United States for all it has done for the Jews and the State of Israel. We are confident that, please God, America will claim its leadership role, with even greater vigor, as a world power.

In the Days of Awe soon to be upon us, we pray, "Instill Your fear within all Your beings, and Your Awe within all that You created; and all beings will fear You, and all creatures will bow before You." I believe that the free Western world must, during this time, do some soulsearching as well. It must examine itself to see whether it had an exaggerated sense of self-confidence as a result of its technological strength and scientific achievements. Western society sometimes projected a sense that we can manage without divine assistance. It now turns out that the world, even in our time, needs God's grace.

We are reminded of Isaiah's prophecy (2:12-17):

"For the day of the Lord of Hosts shall be upon all that is proud and arrogant, against all that is lofty - that it shall be brought low:

Against all the cedars of Lebanon, tall and stately, and all the oaks of Bashan; against all the high mountains and all the lofty hills; against every soaring tower and every mighty wall; against all the ships of Tarshish and all the gallant barks.

Then the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down

And the pride of men shall be made low;

And the Lord alone shall be exalted on that day."

Since time immemorial we pray on Rosh Ha-shana on behalf of the Jewish People and on behalf of all nations: "All inhabitants of the world pass before Him like sheep."

This year, as we stand in prayer on the Days of Awe, we hope to intensify our prayers for peace upon all of us.

We will pray for our well-being here, in the Holy Land, where over the course of the past year we have found ourselves engaged in a difficult struggle.

We will pray for the well-being of our Jewish brethren, wherever they are.

We will pray for the well-being of the entire world.

We will pray for the well-being of the many wounded, that the Almighty shall grant them a complete recovery from the heavens.

May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year,

Yehuda Amital