Today marks the 17th anniversary of 9/11, the terrorist attack that felled the World Trade Center and hit the Pentagon in the United States. The attacks happened in close proximity to the High Holy Days and sent all of us scrambling to rewrite sermons in light of what had just happened. The world has become quite a different place since 9/11 and I thought today might be an appropriate time to look bac, before we recite *Kaddish Yatom* (the mourner’s *Kaddish*) and reflect on what was happening and what we were thinking on that fateful day. What I share with you this morning are some of my reflections as I spoke to my congregation on *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Sabbath that falls between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. …

… The events in New York and Washington this past week have shaken us all… My daughter Elizabeth and I were walking down the streets of Manhattan just a little more than six weeks ago, drinking in the summer sunshine and that incredible New York atmosphere.

I was driving in my car in Calgary when I first heard the news and I was devastated and worried. One of my closest friends from rabbinical school lives on Long Island, but her husband works in Manhattan and I desperately need to know that he was all right. After several tries, I got through to her home and learned that he was, indeed, safe and sound. I know for many others the news about friends, colleagues and love ones isn’t as positive and their hope is fading.

In the aftermath of any disaster, I am often fascinated by the scope and the extremes of human behaviour in reaction to the disaster. There were some responses that can only be described as ‘sickening’. In parts of Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, children and adults danced in celebration of the attack on the world’s only super power. There were some less than gallant stranded passengers in airports and my sister, and IT specialist, fielded at least one nasty call from a customer who couldn’t understand why what happened in the U.S. should affect his receipt of a FedEx package. Incredibly, he actually wanted her to retrieve the parcel from the FedEx depot at the Calgary airport and sent the package via Greyhound – the borders were closed and this “package” was a set of architectural drawings, not a replacement kidney. She told him to wait and be patient.

On the other side of things, there were responses that can only make you be proud to be a Canadian, proud to be a member of the human family. There is the gallantry of the rescue workers who are working tirelessly to retrieve as many people as possible from the carnage. There were thousands of Canadians and Americans who immediately lined up to make blood and aid donations and Canadians who opened their homes to stranded, diverted travellers. In Calgary, stranded country music awards starts organised a benefit concert and raised thousands of dollars for the Red Cross in just one day. [I recall at the time, an American congregant of mine described herself as “feeling proud of both her countries today.]

There is a parallel here between what’s happened in the U.S. and what’s been happening in Israel in the wake of every suicide bombing in the past 11 months. We are shocked, pained, even devastated at first. We grieve and mourn the dead, but we immediately begin to tend to the living – retrieving as many as is humanly possible from the midst of the carnage – and we begin to rebuild. In the coming weeks and months the investigations will continue. Security and threats to security at airports, borders, and all major centres will be assessed and reassessed and new measures to prevent this sort of thing from happening again will have to be taken. And they will be.

At the beginning of the Torah portion, Nitzavim, is a passage which we will read again at Yom Kippur. We are told that we stand together this day with the choice of life and death, blessing and curse; then we are told to “… choose life so that you and your children may live” [Deut. 30:19]. There were babies being born on Tuesday September 11, and their parents wondered aloud about what this will mean in terms of a legacy for their children. Their birthdate will be forever linked with this tragedy. It is, of course, quite true that that link will be made.

But there’s another way of looking at it: “… therefore choose life so that you and children may live.” It is good, no it’s more than good, it is absolutely essential and wonderful that in the face of this enormous tragedy and loss of life, new life was making its way into the world – especially into America’s corner of it…

At that time, this insight was a powerful revelation for me on a very personal level. A little more than two years earlier my 25 year-old cousin had committed suicide on my birthday. I had been having a hard time celebrating that day after his death. For those next two years I thought it would be his yahrzeit – that it could no longer be my day of celebration. But I realised that week of 9/11 just how wrong-headed I had been. As sad and I’ll use the word again – tragic – as my cousin’s death was I was still here. I was and am still alive. And I have to go on.

In the wake of 9/11 people described our world as being ‘forever changed.’ That’s quite true, but it is the nature of human history. Every time there is a significant leap in technology, whether it’s the invention of the wheel, the steam engine, the internal combustion engine, a vaccine, telephones, electrical power grids, spaceships, personal computers, microwave ovens or cell phones, our world is forever changed. Every time there is a change in government, whether through democratic processes, and quiet or violent revolution, our world is forever changed. Every time there is a terrorist attack, a war, a pandemic, we choose to enter a pact or withdraw from one, our world is forever changed.

Change is in our very nature. What matters is how we react to and embrace that change. Do we respond with fear, paranoia and trampling of human rights? Or, do we respond with resilience, compassion and the dogged determination to hold onto our humanity in the face on the inhumanity of others? As cataclysmic as the assault on America was – and all the terrorist assaults since – humanity is still here. We are alive and every day is a new opportunity to demonstrate compassion, rationality, resilience and strength. In short, every day is an opportunity to assert the best that it is to be human. My message back then was to not let the terrorists define who we are – not to let them rob us of the freedom to determine how we go about being human just because that have lost sight of their own humanity. As sad an awful as that assault on our American cousins was and all the terrorist attacks suffered since, we are still here and new life is being born every day. And that’s as it should be. Our American cousins demonstrated their resilience and strength and we demonstrated ours. They bounced back and rebuilt. We must continue to grow, to explore, and to embrace life – to find reasons to celebrate.

On Erev Rosh HaShanah, I spoke about being in the process of ‘becoming’, of constantly striving to be the better versions of ourselves. If we do this collectively then we also become a better version of what means to be human and that, I believe, is the best way to honour the memory of those lost on that fateful day 17 years ago. We must continue to choose life so that we and our children will continue to live.

eaizkze daeh dpy

I wish you good year, and may we all be inscribed in the Book of Life for Blessing.