



FINDING GOD IN THE RUBBLE

By Nosson Scherman

Before the Jewish army went into battle in Scriptural times, the *Kohain mashuach milchamah* (the Kohain anointed for battle) would speak to the troops and exhort them not to lose heart, but to trust in the salvation of the One in Whose Name they were about to fight. Then he would enumerate categories of troops who should leave the field because they were not fit for battle. One of them was "...the man who has built a new house and has not inaugurated it. Let him go and return to his house,

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lest he die in the war and another man will inaugurate it" (Deuteronomy 20:5). Rashi explains the reason for such a man's exemption: It would be heartbreaking if he were to die and his new un-lived-in home were to become someone else's property.

The Imrei Emes of Gur gives a novel but telling interpretation of the nature of this "heartbreak." A soldier may find himself in mortal danger on the battlefield and lament his imminent death because he had not had a chance to enjoy his new home! How heartbreaking, says the Imrei Emes, that a Jew will waste the last thoughts of his life on his empty house and not on a spiritual reckoning of the empty parts of his life. Instead of filling his final moments with *teshuvah*, which will accompany him to the World to Come, he thinks about bricks and mortar, carpets and

curtains, that will be of no avail to him.

That sort of person should not be in a Jewish army, because he will be distracted and lack the spiritual capacity to inspire his comrades and gain God's help.

Such is the human condition. War should make Jewish soldiers focus on the ultimate Man of War and their standing as His servants, but people tend to focus on trivialities instead of what God wants of them. So it is in the media-saturated modern world. No one in the United States, perhaps even in the entire world, will ever forget where he was when the hijacked planes-turned-missiles slammed into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Life has changed for us all and will not be the same for years, if ever. The networks and the media were obsessed with the tragedy, quite understandably so. And wonder of wonders, not only Major

League Baseball, with its 162-game season, but even the National Football League, canceled their schedules for more than a week. Who could have imagined that anything could be big enough to make America forget its infatuation with sports? The spate of letters with anthrax spores and warnings about the potential of worse plagues have terrified the country even more.

America was fortunate that President Bush and Mayor Giuliani rose to the occasion magnificently, calming, rallying and imbuing the country with a spirit and determination not seen since Britain in the Blitz and America after Pearl Harbor. Our leaders exhorted us to go back to business as usual, attend ball games, spend money, and otherwise show Bin Ladin and company that America cannot be cowed or intimidated—or forced to engage in soul-searching. All well and good. But is that what God wanted of *Klal Yisrael* when He allowed the catastrophe to happen? Aren't we like the soldier who is too busy lamenting his house to think about his soul, or about the spiritual resources needed to overcome enemies?

Let us not be sidetracked by the question “where was God and why did He let it happen?” Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato explains in *Da'at Tevunot* that God's plan for the world will be carried out no matter what, but there are two ways in which it can happen. If the Jewish people are worthy, God works His will through “reward and punishment,” as He did in the wilderness and at many other times in Jewish history. When that happens, we can understand events as they unfold: virtue begets reward and sin begets punishment. But when Israel is less worthy, as has been the case during our periods of downfall and exile, God withdraws, as it were, from His *obvious* guidance of history; He is still present, but hidden. Things happen seemingly at random. Pundits and analysts will pontificate; denizens of the Sunday shout shows will bluster, but when one seeks to divine God's presence, there is more bewilderment than certainty.

Undoubtedly, the collapse of the World Trade Center a week before Rosh Hashanah had a message for Jews, but we must seek it. Throughout our history, our great spiritual leaders read messages in events. The Chofetz Chaim would say that a famine in India or an earthquake in Japan was meant to tell us something—and it surely was not that God wanted to remind us to attend ball games and malls, and show our enemies that they could not change us. To the contrary, they *should* change us—or rather we should be wise enough to know that God was orchestrating events to wake us up.

Make no mistake, the president, governor, mayor and all the others who

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bear responsibility for the functioning of society must do their jobs. So must Jews who are responsible for the physical or economic well-being of others, and those who must support their families. But this does not require that we read every word in the newspaper and engage in endless debate over whether Israel should be in the Bush coalition or Syria should be on the Security Council. All the talk and outrage will not change history.

To the contrary, the continued unfolding of events should have convinced us that our role is not to dictate to God or His creatures what they should be doing. A prominent Anglo-Jewish weekly headlined its post September 11th issue “America is Israel.” And, indeed, it seemed so certain in the aftermath of the attack that the United States—and perhaps even Europe—would understand the nature

of the terror that Israelis live with, that the Jewish State would be front row center in any coalition against terror, that the free ride for bloody organizations like Hamas and terrorist states like Syria was over, that Colin Powell would stop preaching “even-handed” restraint and equating suicide bombing with self defense.

It was not to be. As Rabbi Shimon Schwab, *zt”l*, told this writer more than ten years ago, “Israel does not have a friend in the world. America is not an enemy, but it is not a friend.” Many Jews today might nod their heads in agreement. Rabbi Schwab continued, “I am convinced that what protects our brothers and sisters in Israel is the merit of the *kollel* families that endure poverty and hunger for the sake of Torah.” Perhaps not so many of our brethren would agree with that, because we have become saturated with the preachments of the media and our host culture.

What a tragedy. *Selichot*, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur. Despite the unmistakable proof that the mightiest country in the history of the world and the symbols of its military and economic power are vulnerable to the cruel madness of a malevolent cave dweller—so many of us still turn to our TV's instead of our Tehillim.

We have forgotten the power of Torah and prayer. Surely the Torah readings of the weeks surrounding the Twin Towers attack should have reminded us that Israel's role in the world is to make it a host for Godliness, and that it is perilous for the world and ourselves to make ourselves hosts of worldliness. During the Days of Awe, we prayed for God to cast fear upon all His creatures. He did. How did we react? By heeding Rudolph Giuliani's call to defeat the terrorists and acting as if nothing happened?

Jews were chosen to illuminate the world with Torah, *tefillah*, *mitzvot*, and *chesed*, to repudiate the notion that man is the source of all power. The alarm was sounded on September 11; let us respond by waking up to our responsibility and vision as the nation of Torah. **JA**