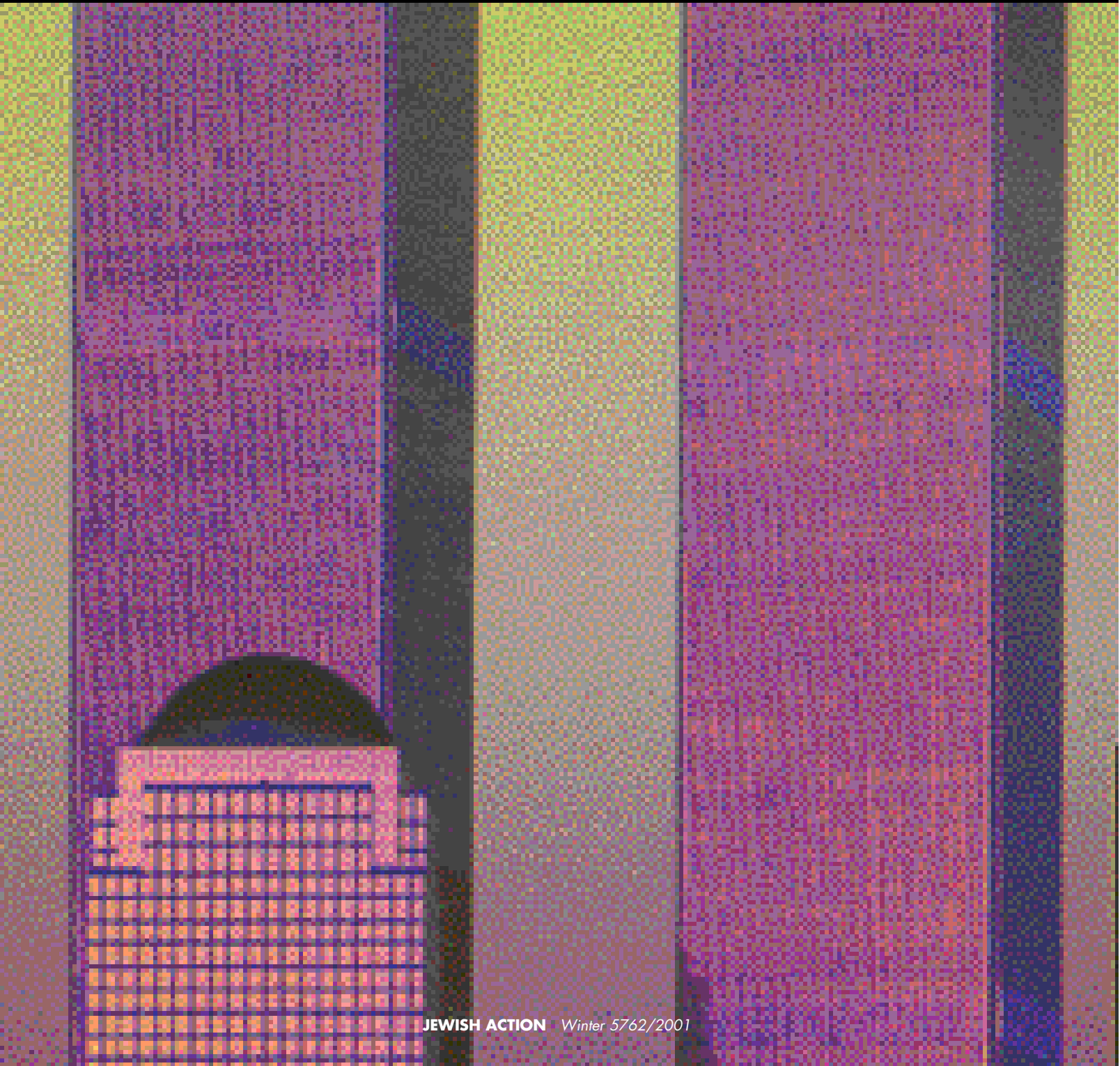


# SECOND

**And God said to the Satan: From where  
and said: From going to and fro in the**



# THOUGHTS

By Emanuel Feldman

**dost thou come? And the Satan replied to the Lord earth, and from walking up and down in it (Job 1:7).**

**I**n terrifying fulfillment of Isaiah 2:15,<sup>1</sup> the commanding towers of America's success have come crashing down upon us all and lie beneath our feet in a heap of rubble. The proud Brobdingnagian shafts that seemed to pierce the heavens themselves have been reduced to a desolate graveyard in which are buried not only countless lives but also our illusions of power and invulnerability. The national and personal implications are staggering, particularly as the suffering of tens of thousands begins to seep into our souls.

Our grief and shock are deepened by the fact that the United States has historically been a *malchut shel chesed*, a nation of generosity and kindness. Although far from perfect, by and large, it has demonstrated, more than any other land, the finest instincts of respect for religion, faith in God, kindness and generosity—including its continuing support of the State of Israel. All this, of course, has made it the archenemy of all those who loathe these very ideals.

How does one begin to react to

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such a catastrophe? It is not within the power of our finite and mortal minds to know the why of such suffering. But we can know how to address it. The response of the prophet Jonah, when his ship was foundering in a raging windstorm, is instructive: "*Besheli hasa'ar haggadol hazeh...*" ("Because of me is this great tempest upon you...")(1:12). This is a genuine religious reaction. He does not look around for scapegoats or for others to act: the storm is a message to himself.

Once upon a time—was it only a few months ago?—those twin towers pointed their mighty fingers at heaven; now the apocalyptic rubble points its ashen fingers at the heart of each one of us: how are you going to respond to this?

For anyone who claims to possess a modicum of religious sensibility, it is not enough to take refuge in military strikes against the enemy—as necessary as these may be—or to proclaim defiantly that we will rebuild the towers. To be content with this and nothing more is to divert our eyes and turn a deaf ear to the call. For the spiritual need is to search for the enemy lingering within our souls and to look for ways to begin rebuilding our inner selves.

With sincere acknowledgment and gratitude to America for all the good that it represents, there is no gainsay-

ing the fact that the USA also contains much materialism, greed, and vulgarity. Inevitably, these have had their impact on Jewish attitudes. For example, the idea of *mistapak bemuat* (making do with little) was once a major theme of Jewish religious life. No more: it has all but vanished. Conspicuous consumption is the norm, as witness the spectacular waste and self-indulgence in the most Orthodox of *semachot*. Everyone knows that Bene Beraq's Rechof Rabbi Akiva and Boro Park's 13th Avenue are so haute couture that even secular matrons prefer to shop there. *Tzeniut*, modesty, once the hallmark of the Jewish character, has met the same fate. It has become restricted to the few inches of fabric involved in skirt and sleeve lengths, and has been refused entry into limitless areas like discretion of the mouth or modesty of the spirit for both men and women.

To rebuild our spiritual selves requires taking a long, hard look at those very selves. Where to begin? A good beginning would be to recognize and address the hubris and hedonism that have crept into our daily lives; the casualness and cynicism that dull our relationship with God; and the aloofness and self-righteousness that occasionally attend our connections with our fellow human beings.

It is true that the world and our own lives will never be the same, that we are now living in a new reality. We now use words that sound foreign to American ears—words like fear, uncertainty, and insecurity. *Fortune Magazine*, in its October 1<sup>st</sup> edition, lamented that “seeing the Twin Towers used to make us feel secure.” With their collapse, insecurity and vulnerability are now part of the daily vocabulary of America, as they have been for Israelis for a very long time.

But ironically, a sense of vulnerability before God is a positive and essential element of the religious life. One who does not feel vulnerable might technically perform all the *mitzvot* and be an observant Jew; but he is not yet a fully religious Jew. One cannot approach God with a personal sense of indestructibility; one can only approach Him with a complete sense of humility: “*kedalim ukerashim dafaknu delatecha*” (“like paupers and indigents do we knock on Thy door”).

One can build a powerful personal religious edifice based on a sense of vulnerability before God. Channeled vulnerability of this kind—based on the knowledge that we are not independent operators in this world, but are dependent on family, friends, institutions, strangers, and mostly on our Creator—can, paradoxically, lead to a life marked by serenity, self-confidence and inner peace.

How seemingly incongruous is the repeated theme of the Yamim Noraim: “*Uvchen tan pachdecha...*” We ask God to “instill the fear of Thee in all Thy creatures.” We who live in such comfort and ease—we pray for a sense of fear? And yet fear and trembling before God are the basic terms of the religious lexicon. The sound of the shofar is designed to instill within us this same sense of vulnerability: “*Im yitaka shofar beir veam lo yechedadu*”—“Can a shofar sound in the city,” asks Amos in 3:6, “and the people not tremble?” And our daily morning worship begins with the phrase from Psalm 111:10: “*Reshit chochmah yirat Hashem*”—“The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord.”

But the idea of *yirat shamayim* (fear of Heaven) has somehow fallen out of favor in our invulnerable paradise. Except in a yeshivah *musar shemuess* (lecture), one rarely hears about it. We sophisticated modern Jews have even taken that word *yirah*, “fear,” and softened it into an amorphous “awe” or “reverence.” We can live with awe and reverence, but fear is so primitive.

## **...a sense of vulnerability before God is a positive and essential element of the religious life.**

We are urged by our secular leaders to attempt to return to normal life. Perhaps the wiser course would be to try not to return to our normal lives and to business as usual. If we now live in a new reality, that new reality lies within each individual Jew. If what seemed to matter on September 10<sup>th</sup> was fashions and box scores and holdings and what to wear to the next reception, what matters now is how to go about discovering God, how to look at our fellow creatures, and how to view our own selves. If the things that matter most to us after September 11<sup>th</sup> are unchanged from the things that mattered to us on September 10<sup>th</sup>, that would be a spiritual calamity.

As an unlettered professional football player put it on September 12<sup>th</sup>: “It don’t matter diddly-squat who goes to the Super Bowl this year.”

We have heard inspiring tales of heroism in this disaster. But heroism is required not only in times of crisis but in ordinary daily life—ordinary heroes. Such heroism is giving of our selves and our resources even when it is difficult, trying to heal hurts, and extending true

sympathy and compassion at all times. When evil, hatred and barbarism run rampant, there is one certain way to strike back: by consciously introducing their very antithesis—the elements of goodness and healing and serious prayer and intensive *mitzvah* performance—into the world we live in. When evil men distort the name of religion, we can create sanctification of the Name by our honesty and humanity and genuine piety.

We have been rudely awakened. The world has changed. The center of gravity has changed. We now know that Satan is not just a Biblical parable, but that even today he stalks the earth to and fro, up and down, and that we are vulnerable. But we can rescue something crucial from all this—for with this new insight we can knock on God’s door and perhaps be afforded a favorable hearing.

And, who knows, something good might yet emerge from our crumbled towers. Genesis 11:4 describes the very first tower that mankind tried to build: “Come, let us build a city and a tower whose top will reach the heaven...” But God saw their evil intentions and scattered them upon the face of the earth. The tower was never completed and fell into ruin.

That scattering and that ruin signaled a dilution of man’s inner strength and spirit, a weakening of his connections with God and his fellow human beings: “They did not understand one another’s speech.”

But the collapse of our modern towers seems to have ignited something different: one begins to discern—is it a mirage?—a renewal of man’s inner spirit, a strengthening of his bonds with other human beings, and a mysterious reconnection with his Creator. Perhaps it is a fond hope, but just maybe we are nearing the “end of days,” a time when mankind finally changes direction from the course it took at the beginning. **JA**

### **Notes:**

1. There Isaiah speaks of God bringing down “...every tall tower and every fortified wall.”