



Dear Friends,

Twenty years ago, I was the Rabbi of The Jewish Center on the Upper West Side in Manhattan. 9/11 is a day I will never forget. I remember the burnt smell in the air that morning and the flow of people walking uptown to escape the wreckage below. A large convention area was turned into a morgue and a number of city rabbis were asked by the precincts to drive downtown to help comfort the bereaved families who they expected to come to identify their loved ones. The highway downtown was empty as everyone was fleeing in the opposite direction. Upon arrival, we soon realized that our efforts were in vain for there were no bereaved families present, as the smoldering buildings would not leave any remains to be identified.

Not typically known for their connectedness, New Yorkers were suddenly united with one another. Instead of vying for taxis, for example, passengers pulled over their cab to pick up others waiting on the curb. Shopping trips were scheduled for previously anonymous neighbors and outreach to New Yorkers in need was the common parlance of the day. There was a true sense of solidarity.

Much love and appreciation were directed to our first responders. Our local firefighters from Engine Co. 74 were called to the towers after the attack. In their attempt to save others, one of their men, Ruben Correa, 44, was killed when the South tower collapsed. Upon hearing of the loss, our congregation worked to sanctify his memory and support his family. During Yizkor on Shmini Atzeret, I invited the entire Engine Co. 74 to join us in the sanctuary. They entered in full gear and stood at the head of the congregation, receiving the heroes' greeting they so richly deserved. One of the firefighters ascended the podium and spoke about his friend Ruben. There was not a dry eye in the house. We took it upon ourselves to raise funds for Ruben's three young daughters, so that they would have the resources to attend college or the school of their choice after they graduated secondary school.

I remember going to the fire house to ask what more we could do to show our support and appreciation. One of the firefighters motioned to me to look around at all the people who were bringing flowers and offering their condolences. Now, he said to me, everyone is here to show their support.

But over time people will forget and go about their lives. The question is where will you be in ten years from now, twenty years from now? That is the question.

Everyone in the city was afraid of a second attack. There was a real feeling of insecurity. Manhattanites who once felt invulnerable were suddenly exposed. People naturally looked to their synagogues and religious sanctuaries for support and comfort. The afternoon prayer service on September 11th was packed. There were no special announcements, no calls for a special service. It was simply organic and natural for people to turn inwards to their community and upwards to God to find solace during this dark and frightening time.

In approaching this anniversary, I looked back at my sermons during this time. My brief remarks before Neilah, the last prayer at the end of Yom Kippur, were particularly poignant and painful. After noting the searing images we all saw that week, I told the story of the image we did not see. The image of the person trapped on the top floors of the World Trade Center with no hope of escape, knowing that these were his last minutes alive. Such was the story of one young Jewish man, son of a well-known family in Brooklyn, husband and father. Trapped on the upper floors, he called his wife on his cell phone to say goodbye. He was on the phone with his family for 45 minutes before he was cut off. His last conversation.

Thinking about Yom Kippur, the day of Judgement, I asked the congregation to consider what that conversation would sound like if it would be us in such a tragic situation. What last words would we say? How would we express to our spouse how important his or her love is to us? What dreams and wishes would we share for how our children should be raised? Would we express disappointment in our life or would we feel accomplished? What would I say to my wife? How would I say goodbye to my children?

Who would have known that 20 years later, we would be standing in a battle against a worldwide pandemic? That many of the same feelings we experienced of vulnerability, fear and solidarity would return. What have we learned from 20 years ago? What have we learned from last year? How have we shaped our lives to better respond to the challenge that the “last conversation” poses to all of us?

To me, at least one life lesson from these past experiences is clear. A couple of weeks ago, I returned to the Upper West Side and visited Engine Co. 74. The firefighters at the station were surprised when I walked in and inquired what they could do for me. None of the men in the room were working in

the station on 9/11, so I introduced myself as the former rabbi of the local congregation and told them the story of my visit to the fire station the week after the terrorist attack. I shared with them the question posed to me by the firefighter that has been etched in my mind for twenty years. And I said to them that I just wanted to come by and let them know that we remember, that we are forever grateful, and that I am here to say thank you.

And for all of us in our extended Yeshiva University family, we will forever remember those who were lost and will continue to strive to create a better future for all.

Ari Berman

To listen to Dr. Ari Berman's upcoming talk, "Of Ghosts and Ancestors: Teshuva of Yom Kippur" on Sept. 12 at 1 p.m. EST, [click here](#).

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