

Reflections on Tragedy and Triumph

By Tsvi Blanchard

I was on the way to a meeting when I heard the news about a plane hitting the World Trade Center. By the time I arrived, the second plane had hit the other tower. Desperate, I made call after unanswered call to my wife, who works in the area, until it was impossible to reach Manhattan at all. Finally, I reached our daughter, who had spoken to her earlier. My wife had been running late and never left the house. Safe.

As the news of other attacks came in, our group scrapped the meeting agenda. Instead, we talked about the attack and its implications. What would it mean for America? For Jews? Then, after about half an hour, someone pointed out that, given where our family members and friends worked, we would all know someone who was injured or killed. That had happened in 1993 and would happen again this time. As that fact slowly sank in, we ended the meeting so that we could look after our families, friends and those in need.

Human suffering and vulnerability are personal and particular. We do not want to be comforted by a general philosophical or political understanding. We want to live. And we want those we care about to be safe. And, as the details became better known, we learned just how much we cared about many people we didn't even know personally—the man jumping off the building, the guy hopelessly trapped who called to say goodbye to his family, the EMTs, the firefighters and the police. Like those friends whose e-mail messages asking if we were okay, these people reminded us of how individual the pain of misfortune is and of how wide and communal the caring response to it can be as well.

Beyond engaging in and supporting the hard work of rescue and recovery, we coped emotionally with the tragedy by telling each other stories—stories of narrow escapes

and amazing saves, of heroes and sacrifices, and even of villains and their evil. We traded our stories and we began to heal.

As I thought of our stories, I realized that they revealed the deepest values we hold. During the first few days, I heard the following stories repeatedly:

A man stayed to help his paraplegic friend and was killed when the second tower collapsed. This man's children told his paraplegic friend's family: Dad died as he lived—devoted to being there for others even at the risk of his own life.

People, surrounded by smoke and in the face of impending death, called their families to say, "I love you."

Firemen, policemen and EMTs were killed when the towers collapsed because they rushed into the building in their zeal to help the victims.

These are the stories of heroes. In them I hear the same basic message: Love is stronger than death (*Song of Songs* 8:6).

During these painful days, as I have listened to such stories, I have found my mind returning again and again to a few simple ideas. First, responding to worldwide terror requires more than particular military or economic strategies, however necessary such strategies may be. A long-term response to global terror demands a global vision grounded in the strongest power we know—love that takes us beyond ourselves. Love of country is praiseworthy, but we will have to care about more than America alone.

Of course, we have to be realistic. Serious political or ethnic conflicts around the world are not just going to disappear. Nevertheless, I believe that our response to such conflicts must be global and it must be informed by the vision of a "civilization of love"—a civilization that deals with ethnic, political and economic conflicts by increasing justice and decreasing the domination of the weak by the strong.

Finally, even on a day-to-day level, human life can be painfully demanding and hard. Perhaps it is time for us to acknowledge that love and solidarity are a better overall basis for society than acquisition, competition and domination. I have been told that such ideas are "idealistic," but as I saw both the evil carnage and the moral heroism in the face of this tragedy, I wondered whether sometimes idealism isn't actually the best kind of realism.