

Erev Rosh Hashana 5787 (5787.1)
September 11, 2026

Twenty-five years ago today, America was in chaos, stung with unfamiliar feelings of fear and terror. Yet within a matter of days, our nation went from traumatized to unified. Political, racial and other divisions disappeared as we united behind a sea of American flags flying from cars, buildings, bridges and more. We rallied behind President George Bush, whose approval rating surged to 90% as we entered the Gulf War.

On Rosh Hashana, we turn from our daily routine and try to focus on how to bring improvement to both our individual and communal lives. One key step is to learn from every experience, both the positive and the negative. Twenty-five years ago today, America learned what most of the world already knew: our world can be a very dangerous place.

During World War II, Americans relied upon newsreels, radio and newspapers to keep us informed of what was happening thousands of miles away. During Viet Nam, we watched TV, listened to the radio and read the paper to stay up to date.

Major foreign attacks on American soil were extremely rare in the twentieth century. Notable exceptions were, of course, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which brought America into

World War II. Unlike Pearl Harbor, however, the 9/11 attacks did not happen thousands of miles away. The horror was, literally, in our backyards.

For ninety-nine days, as we crossed the George Washington Bridge and the Tappan Zee Bridge, plumes of smoke from the pile were visible as we gazed southward. It was like a scene from an apocalyptic movie, but this horror was all-too-real.

The Jewish people has seen and experienced the worst that humanity had to offer in the twentieth century and for nearly two thousand years before that. As we remember 9/11, as we recall the Holocaust, as we look at our world today, we have to wonder: why? Why, with all the awe-inspiring advancements we have made in science and technology is humanity still stuck in the rut of destruction which has plagued us for thousands of years?

Tragically, our nation and our world are filled with those who are skilled at blaming others, yet incapable or unwilling to assign any blame to themselves.

Yet that is precisely why we gather here tonight, tomorrow and, for many of us on Sunday. The only way that we can begin to comprehend how we have contributed to the problems of our communities and our nation is by taking a slow, serious look at ourselves and our actions of the past year.

That is why services don't last fifteen minutes. For if they did, we wouldn't have those "aha moments" as we go through all the prayers and the readings. Most of us are constantly on the run, lacking the time for serious reflection.

Today we pause . . . we reflect . . . we repent . . .and we realize that we are part of the problem. As the immortal comic character Pogo defined it in a 1970 poster in observance of the first Earth Day "we have met the enemy and he is us."

Earlier this summer, I received a notice for jury duty. Like many, my first impulse was to hope that I didn't get called or to find a way out. After all, jury duty means putting one's life on hold for a week or more. Then, it hit me. This is precisely the reason that America and so much of the world have sunk so low.

Those who have the wisdom and the skills to contribute positively cannot continue to use that wisdom to opt out. The result of letting other people do it has been leaders at every level, from the local to the national, who rarely command respect. What distinguishes them from us, however, is that they stepped up, for whatever reason, when so many of us failed to do so. If we truly want a better society, we must do more than simply talk about it.

Early in the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve's son Abel put a lot of time and effort into bringing a quality offering to God. By contrast, his brother Cain brought an offering to God which demonstrated very little effort. Understandably, God rejected Cain's offering and told him to resist the temptation to take the easy

way out. God told Cain to try again and do better. Instead, Cain killed his brother.

As a Jewish community, not just here in Pearl River but across our nation and our world, we have to look at ourselves and our standing and ask “what happened?” A few generations ago, much of the country and the world viewed us with admiration and respect. Today . . .

It isn’t all about Israel, which I will be talking about in upcoming sermons. Much of it, I believe, is about something else . . . leadership.

Who are the leaders, the prime influencers of our Jewish community, both locally, nationally and internationally? No, it is not the rabbis. The primary movers and shakers of most Jewish organizations may or may not have good Jewish values. They may or may not have wisdom. However, what most of them do have is money . . . lots and lots of money.

Years ago, our national Jewish community made a tragic, yet understandable, error. We took those with enviable-financial resources and made them the decision makers, rather than the ones who finance the decisions.

Many synagogues view the size of one’s bank account as a primary qualification for leadership. Wealth should certainly not disqualify anyone from leadership, but neither should it automatically qualify them. We are a people which has traditionally been guided by the wisdom, morality, ethics and values of our Torah

tradition. When we substitute wealth for Torah, we lose our direction and, in fact, our purpose.

In recent years, we have watched, seemingly helplessly, as America traveled this same misguided path. We have allowed billionaires and wannabe trillionaires to enrich themselves and to foist enormous societal changes upon us.

These titans of technology have built amazing companies, to be sure. Yet a minyan of moguls should not possess the right to totally transform American society without input from its hundreds of millions of citizens. Our leadership has failed us.

Technology moves swiftly; government reacts slowly. Money certainly makes it easier for agendas to be enacted, especially when it is used to influence our leaders. However, both the Jewish and American communities have witnessed the ability of the people to effectively speak truth to power. Just note the current reaction against data centers around the country.

As everything from our privacy, our climate, our economy, our civil rights, our elections and our liberties deteriorate before our eyes, we have the option to let the moguls continue to lead us on their self-appointed path or we can promote our own agenda.

Frankly, I am not all that optimistic. So many Americans, including our Jewish community, live with a crisis mentality. We go along, without protest, until an

emergency arises and then we try to figure out a solution. Sometimes that tactic can succeed, as with the Covid pandemic. However, our current leaders are loath to learn from history. Be it an attack on the foundations of our government to the risk of another pandemic, we are completely unprepared. It isn't that we aren't aware; we just are not motivated to act.

As we begin this new year, we have two options. We can plan for the future, understanding our goals and how best to achieve them. Or, like Abel's brother Cain, we can prepare a hasty response and hope for the best. As our Torah portion on Yom Kippur morning will remind us, we do have a choice. What we have done or failed to do up to this point is no longer the point. The choices we make going forward will determine our future.

What are the values that we want to promote as Americans, as Jews, as non-Jews who are part of the American-Jewish community? Hopefully, we can do a lot better than the shanda, the disgrace that passes for leadership in Washington, in Israel and around the world.

As Americans, we possess the sacred privilege to select our leaders, which means that when we look out and see what we have, we often get what we deserve. We have been persuaded to elect leaders with lots of money and good speaking and debating skills. However, if we seriously want to bring about positive change, we have to make better choices and demand better candidates. We need to get involved in the process, even at the cost of our personal comfort.

So many world leaders use the exact same playbook. They speak of their broad love for the masses and for the nation and then go and advance their own personal agenda and bank account, with little thought of the public, except for how they can fleece us.

Judaism has always taught that actions speak louder than words. We are judged by the tzedakah we give or we don't give . . . the integrity we do or we do not display in our lives . . . the causes we support and those we don't . . . the leaders we elect and those whom we reject.

Next Friday will mark the one hundredth anniversary of the famous, yet usually misquoted, observation of the noted Baltimore Sun columnist H. L. Mencken. On September 18, 1926 he wrote "no one in this world . . . has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people. Nor has anyone lost public office thereby."

Until we prove Mencken to be wrong, his century-old observation would still seem to be true. There are those who put on a show and there are those who truly believe in and work for the cause.

On Rosh Hashana, we are commanded to reset our priorities, for we have gone astray. We need to change the path we have been travelling if it has not brought us where we want to go. We sound the shofar to proclaim "Wake up! Look around you and do something before it truly is too late."

The world used to move very slowly, but that world is rapidly disappearing. Around America, people, laws and institutions are being changed to totally transform so much of life as we have known it. As always, the choice is ours. We can let others do as they please or we can speak up and act up.

This is our day to choose; this is our day to pick a side. In his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Elie Wiesel said, “neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim . . . To be a Jew is to carry a torch of light in a world that often seems dark. Let your light shine brightly and be proud of who you are.”

One person can make a difference and among the many amazing and dedicated members of our Social Action committee (which makes an enormous difference in the community), I want to give a public shout out to two of our own social-action giants.

For decades, Diane and Bob Sussman have been selflessly out there delivering food, protesting injustice, attending meetings and making a positive difference in our region. They seek no attention, but their actions have inspired many others to perform the mitzvot of helping the vulnerable, rather than ignoring and abusing them.

To paraphrase a famous Hasidic story, no one is asking you to be Bob and Diane, but on the High Holy Days, we are called to be the best of who we are.

On this Rosh Hashana, this anniversary of creation, I cannot believe that God is happy with the job we are doing of caring for our world. Like Cain, we can do so much better.

Twenty-five years ago today, we were rudely reminded that passivity is not an option. If we want to truly make America great again, we need to serve on juries; we need to work for candidates and causes which align with our values. We need to get our hands dirty, to go out, show up, speak up. Above all, we must understand that when we choose not to get involved, that space will be filled by those with different values.

Every year, I bring up the wisdom of Rabbi Tarphon. Nineteen centuries ago, he taught *“lo alekha ham’lakha ligmor, v’lo atah ven horin l’hibatel mimena”*, it is not up to you to complete the task, but that doesn’t mean that you can abstain from it.” In other words, we all have to do our share, not just someone else. You, me, all of us.

Working together from now till November and throughout the year, we can give ourselves better leaders and, hopefully, better results. However, it will only happen if and when we choose to get more involved. If not you, then who? And if not now, then when? AMEN

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