RABBINIC RESPONSES TO SEPTEMBER 11TH

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Table of Contents

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Rabbinic Responses to September 11th

Daniel Slipakoff, MSW

The thesis presented investigates the actions of rabbis in the field as they responded to the trauma and tragedy surrounding the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. This thesis contributes a literary investigation of the sermons given on the High Holy Days 5762, as well as a series of conducted one-on-one interviews which detail the actions, thoughts, and reflections of rabbis who served institutions and congregations during this time. This thesis pairs the responses of rabbis in the field with a review of biblical sources responding to tragedy. This thesis also provides a foundational understanding the how the brain and body respond to threat and trauma, in order to provide scientific grounding to the best-practices carried out in the field.

The goal of this thesis is to provide resources and encouragement to clergy who unfortunately must be prepared to respond to an increasingly volatile world. The aim is to provide insight into the struggles that clergy may have faced and offer best-practices of how they managed to serve their communities during a moment of crisis.

This thesis is divided into two parts: “Thinking About Terror” and “Responding to the Moment.” The first part provides a foundational understanding of terror and trauma in two chapters. The first chapter explores brain anatomy and bodily reaction to threats. The second chapter explores the traditional Jewish responses to tragedy through sacred texts. The second part of this paper is dedicated to rabbinic responses to September 11th. This portion of the thesis is structured as a timeline of events, starting from the day-of actions and concluding with memorial practices and notable remaining influences from the devastating attacks.

Introduction

On Saturday, August 12th, 2017 a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia escalated from violent to deadly as a car plowed into a group of counter-protestors and killed 32-year-old Heather Heyer.[1] The rally was widely covered by news and social media outlets – from my living room I saw the car ram through the crowd. As an American, the eruption of violence was heartbreaking. As a Jew, the sight of neo-Nazis marching through the streets, and the first-hand accounts shared from the local Jewish community were petrifying.[2] One week later, I joined my colleagues and faculty from the New York campus of Hebrew Union College for our year-opening *kallah*. I could not help but look around the room and wonder how any of us would respond to an attack. I thought immediately to my upcoming High Holy Day pulpit in rural Pennsylvania. I considered asking the congregation to hire a security guard, and I wondered how or if I would approach a gunman who entered the synagogue.

On October 31st, 2017 I ended my day of classes at Hebrew Union College at 3:05pm. On that sunny Tuesday afternoon, I walked through Washington Square Park, past the preparations for the famed Village Halloween Parade, and into the subway at West 4th Street. By the time I made it to Times Square, word had spread of a terrorist attack. At 3:04pm, a man turned a rented pickup truck into a missile as he swerved on to a pedestrian walkway, murdering eight innocent victims and wounding twelve more.[3] I made it home to Philadelphia with plans to take my one-year-old son trick-or-treating for the first time. A dear friend and rabbi had come to join us for the night, but before we

[1] (Astor, Caron and Victor 2017)
[2] (Zimmerman 2017)
[3] (Barron 2017)

could go in search of candy, she needed to write an email to her congregation addressing the tragic attack. I sat and watched, impressed by her ability to compose herself and compose a message which would speak to the hearts of her congregants. When I asked her how she knew what to say, she answered sullenly "unfortunately, I'm getting used to it".

A month before the Halloween attack, the Las Vegas Massacre shook the nation. A week later on November 5th, a deadly mass shooting occurred at a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. 2017 ended as one of the deadliest years on record in America for mass shootings and terrorist attacks.[4] I, like many Americans, spent that winter confronted by terror and uncertainty. The endless waves of violence surging through our country left me constantly wondering what would happen next. My love for concerts and sporting events became riddled with anxiety as I scanned large crowds for exit points and signs of suspicion. But the sense of terror which I personally felt and saw in others was not entirely new. I had sensed it before, maybe more than once, but certainly most poignantly following September 11th, 2001.

The winter straddling 2017 and 2018 also marked the beginning of my thesis process. The entirety of the Jewish experience lay open before me, with the opportunity to explore more topics than I could ever imagine. I always envisioned pursuing a practical thesis which could serve my work in a congregational setting. Try as I might, I could not escape the imprint of the violence of 2017. Dealing with crisis is an essential part of the role of the rabbinate. In a moment of catastrophe, clergy are often looked to for guidance, comfort, and faith-based answers on how to respond. This is no easy task,

[4] (Manella 2017)

bearing in mind the spectrum of variables which a respondent must consider. Crises are very difficult to prepare for, considering their unexpected nature, and the immediacy in which a response is frequently demanded. Despite the spirituality assumed to be inherent in clergy, disaster preparedness is not a forgone conclusion. As Rabbi Zahara Davidowitz-Farkas and Reverend John Hutchinson-Hall concluded in their article "Religious Care in Coping with Terrorism", "the religious community is now aware that the appropriate provision of spiritual care in the context of disaster is a learned skill and not one you can assume to be present in all clergy."[5] Assuming nothing and desiring to learn an invaluable skill, I selected the topic which I now present.

My decision to explore rabbinic responses to terror was, and continues to be, a mission of hope. I set the goal of learning all I could about how rabbis respond to great moments of crisis in hopes of thinking through the unthinkable and foreseeing the unforeseeable. I sought to harvest best practices from my respected mentors and leaders in the field and share their wisdom so that future rabbis could be more prepared to lead their communities in times of great need.

I chose September 11th as the case study for my research for several reasons. The sheer magnitude of the event demanded a response from rabbis in many different roles: from the pulpit, in pastoral care, as leaders of organizations, and more. I saw this wide range of demands as a way to cultivate a more holistic view of the variety of responses. Concurrently, the enormity of September 11th had a crystallizing effect on memories. Most people can remember exact details of their traumatic experience and I saw that this clarity would be helpful during the personal interviews I intended to conduct. I saw

[5] (Davidowitz-Farkas and Hutchison-Hall 2005)

personal interviews as a powerful research tool, and also an enriching personal opportunity to enhance my own active-listening and pastoral skills. And finally, the eighteen years which have passed since September 11th provide an opportunity for hindsight unavailable for recent attacks. Through my interviews I have found great wisdom in the reflections of rabbis on the events surrounding September 11th and how those events continue to impact their rabbinate to this day.

Knowing that I would prioritize personal interviews, I sought to find more sources which captured responses to the tragedy. I decided to study sermons which were delivered following the attacks. I contacted the American Jewish Archives and gained access to their collection of sermons from across the country responding the events. As it happened, the High Holy Days for 5762 began on September 17th, 2001. The proximity of a major catastrophe to the most important sermon-giving opportunities of the calendar year created a mass of material and a wide range of themes and approaches to explore as rabbis struggled with the incredibly challenging situation.

The question "what is there to say in a moment like this?" leads to two repositories for response: personal reactions and traditional resources; and the best responses are often gathered from both storehouses. In order to gain better access to the latter, I chose to study traditional Jewish responses to crisis and trauma. By better understanding these sacred sources, I focused an important lens through which to see modern responses. My four texts (Deuteronomy, Lamentations, The Book of Psalms, and The Book of Job) offer unique perspectives on pain, suffering, and God's role in our world. The varied responses to a central theme exemplify the diversity of thought

throughout Judaism which I believe to be one the tradition's most sacred and beautiful features.

But in order to gain a better understanding of the world of trauma and terror, I knew I needed to go beyond the sacred texts. Very early in my research it became obvious that humans needed safety before searching for spirituality. This discovery led me to seek a better understanding of the functions of the brain and body during threats and trauma so to better understand the physiological needs of congregants and clergy leaders alike as they dealt with tragedy. This grounding in science would allow me to compare both the traditional Jewish biblical responses and the responses to September 11th to what scholars deemed necessary to the brain and body. I sought to identify where Jewish responses met those needs and where it missed the mark.

This paper is presented in two parts. The first part provides a foundational understanding of terror and trauma in two chapters. The first chapter explores brain anatomy and bodily reaction to threats, steered by the work of psychiatrist Dr. Bessel van der Kolk. The second chapter explores the traditional Jewish responses to tragedy through sacred texts. The second part of this paper is dedicated to rabbinic responses to September 11th. Mirroring the brain's response to threat, this portion of my thesis is structured as a timeline of events, starting from the day-of actions and concluding with memorial practices and notable remaining influences from the devastating attacks. The similarities between the brain's response to threats and the process of responding to the attacks were strikingly similar.

It is my hope that this paper provides future clergy with resources and encouragement to best serve their communities. The thought of responding to a crisis is

terrifying and intimidating. Many conversations around the events of September 11th contained the phrase “I had no idea what I was doing”. And yet, rabbis were able to trust their instincts, rely on their experiences, and use their stores of knowledge to face the challenge and help steer their congregations through the roughest of waters.

May the experiences of the past inform future healing.

May all who read this know that they have what it takes to make a meaningful impact in someone’s life.

Chazak, Chazak, V'nitchazeik –

Courage, Confidence, and may we Strengthen one another.

Part I: Thinking About Terror

Chapter 1: How the Brain Responds to Terror and Trauma

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk introduces his description of the anatomy of the brain in the following manner: "The most important job of the brain is to ensure our survival, even under the most miserable conditions. Everything else is secondary."[6] When we think about the function of our brains we often think about creativity, critical thinking, or brow-furrowing philosophy. But engaging in all these activities is ancillary, and completely irrelevant if our bodies are under attack… or if our brains perceive that we are under attack. In order to understand how individuals may function in the wake of traumatic events, it is necessary to gain at least a cursory understanding of how the brain functions in such situations. For clergy, we face the reality of encountering people suffering from trauma or other psychoses who come to us seeking help and understanding. In order to properly serve this probable segment of our population, we must equip ourselves with a foundational knowledge of what these people are feeling. The section below attempts to crystalize some of the mechanics of the brain and the central nervous system, in hopes that this knowledge will be a useful tool in better understanding those seeking spiritual care in the wake of suffering.

[6] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 55)

The Brain in Three Acts

The human brain consists of three distinct sections, which developed "bottom up" over the course of human evolution.[7] The phrase "bottom up" helps learners comprehend the organization of the brain and how the newer, more complex sections of the brain developed on top of and around the older sections.

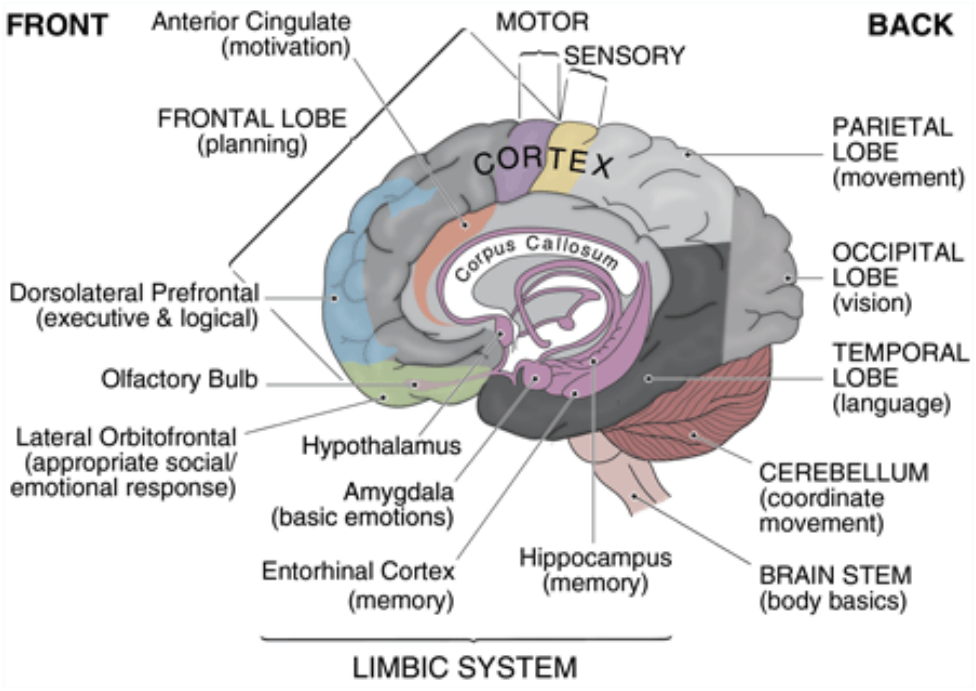


Figure 1(Your Brain and What It Does: A diagram of how the brain works n.d.)

The oldest section of the brain is the brainstem. Located where the spine connects to the brain, the brainstem accounts for the most basic functions, ones we share with many animals hence the brainstem is frequently referred to as the "animal brain" or "reptilian brain". Bodily functions such as breathing, eating, sleeping, and waste removal are all aspects controlled by the brainstem, and notably operative from birth.[8] Healthy humans consider these functions to be in a sense automatic. However, when these

[7] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 59)
[8] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 56)

foundational systems are not operating properly (for example if we have trouble breathing or sleeping), the entire brain and body are thrown off balance.[9]

Located above the brainstem, in the center of the brain, is the limbic system. Where the brainstem is concerned with internal issues of the individual, the limbic system is concerned about the interactions between the individual and the outside world.[10] The limbic system works to label outside stimuli; helping to differentiate between familiar or strange, pleasure and pain, and danger and safety. The limbic system develops during infancy and toddler years, just as humans are beginning to interact with the world around them. Where the brainstem is known as the "reptilian brain", the limbic system is often referred to as the "mammalian brain", signifying the limbic systems importance in group dynamics and caring for offspring. Van der Kolk describes the tandem of the brainstem and the limbic system as the "emotional brain". As he describes it, "the emotional brain initiates preprogrammed escape plans, like the fight-or-flight responses. These muscular and physiological reactions are automatic, set in motion without any thought or planning on our part, leaving our conscious, rational capacities to catch up later, often well after the threat is over."[11]

The conscious, rational capacities which react to process our instinctual reactions are found in the youngest and most advanced part of the human brain, the prefrontal cortex or the frontal lobes. The prefrontal cortex has developed to encase the limbic system in all mammals, but is thickest and most developed in humans. This section of the

[9] As a way to combat the tendency to overlook the importance of these primal functions, our liturgy includes prayers such as אשר יצר, inviting contemplation of and gratitude for the proper functioning of the simplest structures within our bodies.
[10] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 56)
[11] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 57)

brain allows for our abilities to ascribe meaning to objects, develop highly advanced speech patterns, and create predictions based on previous experience. The frontal lobes also house our ability to develop empathy and the ability to comprehend how others may feel. The development and function of the prefrontal cortex is essential to the development of healthy and intimate human interactions.

The rational function of the frontal lobes has the capacity to override the emotional brain when the prefrontal cortex senses the automatic reaction to be a dangerous one; for example, resisting the urge to lash out physically during moments of anger. It must be noted that the stronger the reactions from the emotional brain, and the subsequent hormone release, the more difficult it will be for the prefrontal cortex to make path corrections.[12]

The Autonomic Nervous System

All the responses we have to stimuli are regulated by our Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). The ANS is controlled within the limbic system by the hypothalamus, and functions without much conscious effort from humans, but the functions it controls are strongly tied to our sense of fight-or-flight response. The ANS controls our heart rate, digestion, pupil dilation, and sexual arousal.[13] The ANS is comprised of two subdivisions which work in concert: the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) and the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS). The SNS works to accelerate the actions of the body, while the PNS serves as the decelerator. The two are most easily explained through our breathing. When you breathe in, the SNS sends adrenaline through the body, and prepares for

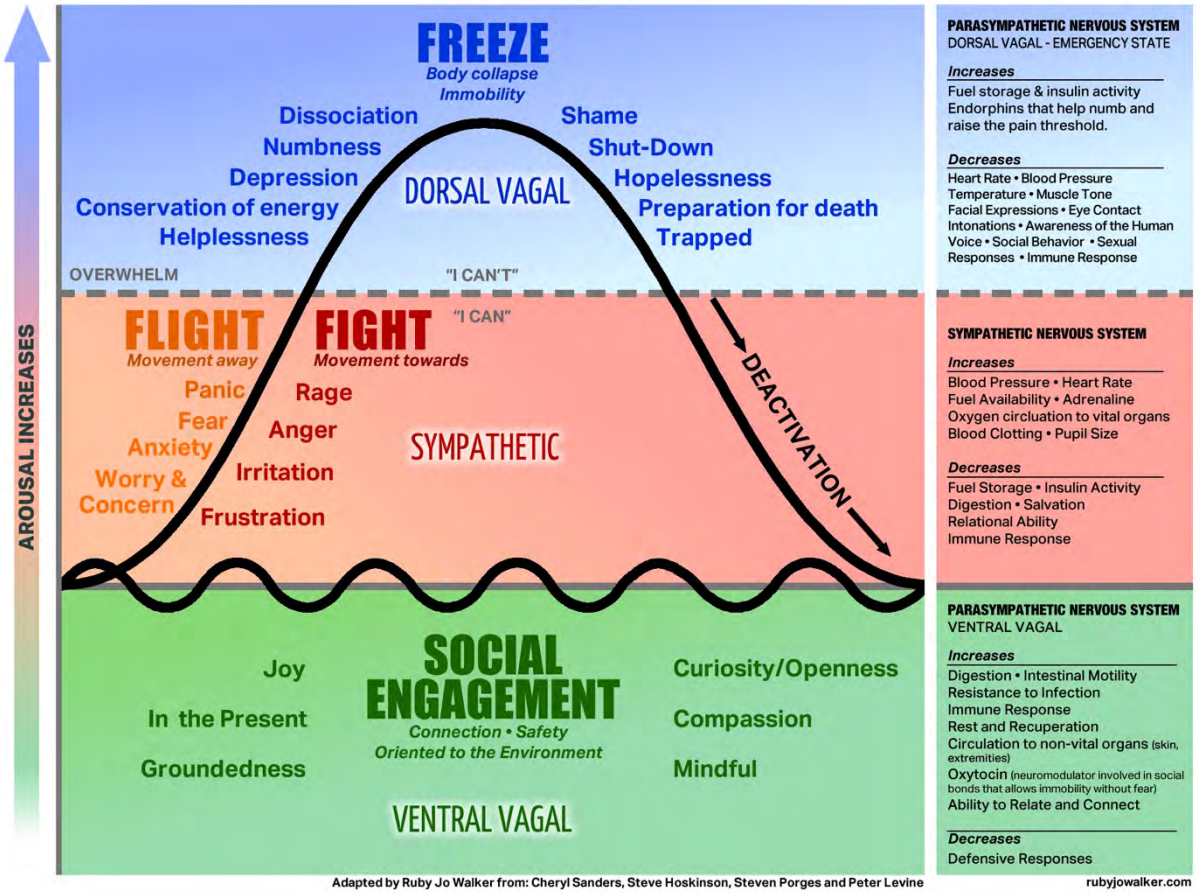
[12] Ibid. 60.
[13] (Jänig 1989)

movement. Think of someone gasping in fright, and the subsequent muscle tensing and rapid heartbeat. The PNS can be felt working in the deep exhales of yoga and meditation. The heart slows down and the muscles relax.[14]

As mentioned, the limbic system and the ANS is responsible for sending adrenaline and other stress hormones throughout the body. One of the misconceptions about stress hormones is that they are inherently bad. We all complain about feeling stressed or jumpy, most likely in response to the hormones being released into our bodies. The hormones are released with the intention of energizing us to face a challenging task at hand. Issues arise when an increase of hormones is met with inaction. The energy from the stress hormones needs to be used somehow, or else the buildup in the body can lead to physical problems.[15] The desire to burn this energy is inherent. As we will see in the chapter covering responses to crisis, there is a natural energy to actively engage and "do something". What is often perceived as a moral duty appears to possess physical roots as well.

In 1994, Researcher Stephen Porges developed his Polyvagal Theory which seeks to explain the evolution of our responses to threats, while emphasizing social relationships as an evolved and primary tool for protection. The Polyvagal Theory presents three responses to threats. From evolutionarily oldest to youngest they are: freeze, fight-or-flight, and social engagement. Examining these three responses in this order allows the reader to comprehend the evolutionary developments in the brain and how they bring about change in our reactions to danger.

[14] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 79)
[15] (van der Kolk, How Trauma Lodges in the Body 2017)



[16]

When a threat presents, the last line of defense is to freeze or play dead, or "constriction" as referred to by Judith Herman.[17] In these situations, the Dorsal Vagal Complex (DVC) is relied upon to power down organs and preserve energy.[18] Think of moments of terror in which a person feels shortness of breath, or pains in their chest and gut, or in extreme scenarios evacuates their bowels. These are all examples of the DVC at work, a helpless response in the face of the most challenging threats. Those relying on

[16] (Walker n.d.)
[17] (Herman n.d., 42)
[18] (Porges 2001, 130)

their DVC are often removed and distant socially, noticing or caring very little for the people around them.[19]

Before resorting to activating the DVC, the body will first engage the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS). The actions of the SNS are what we know best as fight-or-flight responses. Where the DVC focuses on immobilization, the SNS focuses on mobilization. Blood flow is increased, sweat is produced as a defense mechanism, and your eyes widen to be more observant and responsive to surroundings.[20] The DVC tries to close off the outside world, the SNS prepares us to meet it head on.

The final evolution according to Porges serves as the brain's most advanced and developed first line of defense. The Ventral Vagal Complex (VVC) is our social response. In moments of crisis, we seek out others for help. "In situations of terror, people spontaneously seek their first source of comfort and protection. Wounded soldiers and raped women cry for their mothers, or for God."[21] The VVC is essential in human communication in part because of the ability to regulate the fight-or-flight of the SNS in a way that builds group dynamics and limits threats amongst known entities.[22] According to Porges, the VVC controls our voice and our empathic feelings, and he believes that the tone and volume of our voices can be a powerful tool in escalating or deescalating situations.[23] Porges would explain that a scream or a cry for help as an initial response to a threat is relying not only one's own VVC, but the VVCs and the empathy of those

[19] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 85)
[20] (Porges 2001, 131)
[21] (Herman n.d., 52)
[22] (Beauchaine, Gatzke-Kopp and Mead 2007)
[23] (Dykema 2006)

nearby. Pleading for mercy to an assailant is an attempt to connect to the same system within your attacker.

Neuroplasticity

Routines and normalized behaviors allow for routinized brain activity and create a sense of calm and safety. That baseline feeling of safety allows for the brain to focus on more ambitious projects such as exploration, play, and cooperation; the brain of someone who feels constantly under attack specializes in managing feelings of fear and abandonment.[24] The baseline sense of safety or threat is subject to change depending on environmental variables, and so too is the response from the brain. All three of these sections of brain are comprised of networks of nerve cells known as neurons. These neurons can and do change over time in response to stimuli received from other parts of the body and perceived by our senses from the outside world. The changes made, and the repetition of actions leads to the creation of memories: motor, sensory, cognitive, and affective. The way these memories are stored is what Bruce Perry refers to as "use-dependent fashion". The more we recall a piece of information (our route home from school, the names of new friends, the notes played on a piano), the more regularized the response in our brain.[25] I spent 2014 living in Jerusalem, experiencing a fair share of air-raid sirens. When those sirens sounded, we had limited time to run for shelter from potential rocket attacks. The sound of the siren was unforgettable but not entirely unique. When I returned home that summer, I worked at a summer camp located next to the local fire station. Whenever the fire alarm sounded, I found myself on edge and hyperalert. My

[24] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 56)
[25] (Perry, et al. 1995, 290)

time in Israel conditioned a flight response to the sound of the siren. It took most of the summer, and many repetitions of the siren sound with no subsequent danger, to desensitize to the alarm.

The Pieces of the Puzzle

Now that we have established a basic foundation of the main sections of the brain, we can take a closer look into the components of the brain and their specific response to moments of threat and trauma. In order to begin, sensory information received must be taken from the sense organs to the brain and processed. This is done in the thalamus, which is found within the limbic system.[26] The thalamus allows the brain to take the elements from the outside world and makes sense of them to determine what is going on. It not only organizes, but filters outside information, allowing for focus on what is most present and important. In the event of a trauma, where the thalamus is not functioning properly, the story gathered from outside stimuli is disjointed and out of sequence. When the thalamus shuts down, the filtration system ceases to exist, and the brain is at risk of sensory overload.[27]

Our bodies are frequently responding to events before our brains understand what is happening. When the thalamus is properly functioning, the message, “this is happening” is passed to two centers; the amygdala located within the center of the reptilian brain, and to the cognitive center in the prefrontal cortex. The information will reach the amygdala first, where the event taking place will be quickly categorized as threatening or non-threatening. If the event is labeled “threat”, the amygdala sends a

[26] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 60)
[27] Ibid. 70.

signal to the hypothalamus and the brain stem, which immediately release stress hormones (such as cortisol and adrenaline) through the ANS in order to coordinate a bodily response.[28] All this, from the amygdala to the full body response can happen before the initial message passes from the thalamus to the prefrontal cortex for rational consideration. In essence, we often find ourselves processing after we have taken action.

Traumatic history impacts the neuroplasticity of the amygdala and may lead to a tendency to label more information as threats, leading to a heightened sense of defensiveness or aggressiveness.[29] The amygdala makes snap judgements based on the potential of threats but is not able to differentiate between real threats and close approximations. If you find yourself outside at night in early July and hear a loud bang, your amygdala responds first and sends the message for you to duck down or gasp in fear. It is up to the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC) to determine that the noise was in fact nearby fireworks which pose no immediate danger. Though the MPFC responds to the thalamus more slowly than the amygdala, the response is still very quick, allowing order to be restored and major stress responses avoided.[30] The MPFC works as a control on the actions of the amygdala. But in people suffering from PTSD, there is an imbalance between the two centers. The amygdala responds strongly, the MPFC is unable to curtail the actions, and threats are perceived where none exist. The traumatized then spends more time in heightened states (activated by their fight-or-flight, SNS system) or in states

[28] Ibid. 60.
[29] King Saul from the Book of Samuel comes to mind. He presented as a paranoid man who vacillated between bouts of aggressive violence and tearful pleas for mercy. See for example I Samuel 18:10-11 and I Samuel 24:16.
[30] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 62)

of paralyzed fear (activated by the DVC) without necessarily knowing why.[31] This constant state of alert for the sake of self-preservation is known as "hyperarousal".[32]

On either side of the MPFC sit the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. Both are part of the rationalizing prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) but preform different tasks towards that goal. In this instance, the term "self-centered" can be a useful mnemonic device. The MPFC, and other areas towards the midline of the brain, focus on the experience of self, asking "am I safe?" or "are my needs met?". The DLPFC focuses more on the relationship between the body and the outside world. The DLPFC relies on past experience to influence the expectations of a current one. One of the most important pieces of information for the DLPFC is that events are finite and therefore tolerable. A flu shot might hurt but it is far more bearable knowing that the pain will end rather shortly. When a traumatic event occurs and the DLPFC does not function, that knowledge of the temporality of moments erodes, and sufferers can feel like their painful episode will never end.[33][34]

A final piece of the brain worthy of discussion is the Broca's Area, located in the left frontal lobe. Broca's Area is the center of language in the brain. The area controls both language production and language comprehension. Damage through trauma to the Broca's Area, known as aphasia, can negatively impact a person's ability to format coherent speech.[35] People with damage to their Broca's Area struggle to express what has

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[31] (Herman n.d., 34)
[32] Ibid. 35.
[33] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 69)
[34] This fact makes me think of the well-used Hebrew phrase גַּם זֶה יַעֲבֹר, "this too shall pass", often offered as a way to cope with difficult moments. For victims of trauma, whose brains are unable to see the end to their suffering, this is a difficult concept to hear, and most likely an inadequate pastoral tool.
[35] As described by Aharon Appelfeld in ***Sippur Hayim***: "Speech does not come easily to me, and it's no wonder; we didn't speak during the war. It was as though every disaster defied utterance: there was nothing to say… I've carried my distrust of words from these years".

happened to them. Telling one's story can be a very helpful way of overcoming trauma and being unable to do so can cause great suffering.[36] According to van der Kolk, "we need to also find methods to bypass what they call the tyranny of language."[37]

Dissociation

One of the telltale signs of experienced trauma or PTSD is the phenomenon known as "dissociation":

> Dissociation is a word that is used to describe the disconnection or lack of connection between things usually associated with each other. Dissociated experiences are not integrated into the usual sense of self, resulting in discontinuities in conscious awareness. In severe forms of dissociation, disconnection occurs in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception. For example, someone may think about an event that was tremendously upsetting yet have no feelings about it (International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation n.d.).

Through a dissociated experience, the stress hormones released during the actual trauma are released again. Because the trauma remains unresolved, the cycle of hormone release and defensive reactions repeats and repeats, developing routine neural pathways and becoming more engrained in the brain.[38]

In the past, the idea of being able to dissociate, and remove oneself from the pain of a traumatic experience was seen as a positive coping mechanism, but recent research has shown that persons identified with dissociative symptoms were highly likely to develop somatic symptoms without an identified physical cause.[39] The feeling of numbness is associated with dissociation. Those suffering from dissociative symptoms have been known to seek out ways to numb themselves with drugs or alcohol, or on the

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[36] אֲדֹנָי שְׂפָתַי תִּפְתָּח prays for the opening of lips and the ability to properly express praise and gratitude. These words can be painfully meaningful for those struggling to reclaim their own speech and their own narrative.
[37] (van der Kolk, How Trauma Lodges in the Body 2017)
[38] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 67)
[39] (van der Kolk, Roth, et al. 1996)

other side of the of the spectrum turn to thrill seeking and dangerous situations as a way to chase the elevated feelings associated with adrenaline release.

Is it Trauma?

> "Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror and evoke the responses of catastrophe."[40]

The attacks of September 11th, 2001 were unprecedented tragedies in American history. There is no question that those living in New York City, Washington DC, and Somerset County, Pennsylvania were dramatically impacted by the events. But numerous discussions considered whether the impact of the events should be classified as a traumatic experience. Given the definition by Judith Herman above, there is an emphasis of proximity and physical harm present in a victim of trauma. Bessel van der Kolk argued that "trauma is largely confined to people who live below 14th Street in Manhattan, and the closer you get to Ground Zero, the higher the likelihood, that something will have permanent impact on your system."[41] The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) agrees, stating that there needs to be an established exposure to the event.[42] In his 2005 research review, William Schlenger points to several studies surrounding September 11th which point to this theory. "Findings indicated that 7.5% of the adults living in Manhattan south of 110th Street were probable cases for PTSD… and those living south of Canal Street (i.e. closest to the WTC site) were nearly three times as likely to be probably cases of PTSD as those living further away."[43]

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[40] (Herman n.d., 33)
[41] (van der Kolk, Conversations with the Experts Trauma and PTSD: Aftermaths of the WTC Disaster n.d.)
[42] (American Psychiatric Association 2000)
[43] (Schlenger 2005, 99)

Still others contended that given the scope and scale of the attacks, visible from great distances and close-up on television screens across the country, that indirect or "low dose" exposure could be considered traumatic and produce psychological impact.[44] Silver et al.'s findings "strongly suggest that the effects of these terror attacks were not limited to communities directly affected."[45] While their surveyed sample was self-selecting, and not clinically diagnosed, there is an argument to be made that the events were so catastrophic that the threat of harm of the attacks was enough to traumatize those who were not directly in harm's way.

Conclusion

In the wake of September 11th, more New Yorkers sought support from a clergy person than they did from a therapist.[46] When engaged with a seeker suffering from trauma or other emotional distress, it is essential that we as clergy have a base line understanding of the various systems and deficiencies that may be impacting the individuals with whom we engage. An understanding of brain function can help us better understand why a person appears aggressive or guarded, hyperactve or stoic. Understanding the natural, and often involuntary responses to danger is critical in shaping our approach to dealing with tragic moments.

As part of our Jewish tradition we possess many different approaches to dealing with trauma and suffering. In the next chapter, we will examine a selection of traditional texts which address tragedy from a variety of different perspectives. Keeping in mind the lack of scientific grounding held by our ancient ancestors, we will examine where their

[44] (Silver, et al. 2005, 138)
[45] Ibid.
[46] (Davidowitz-Farkas and Hutchison-Hall 2005, 567)

responses aligned with our modern understandings, and what we can learn from our departures from the tradition.

Chapter 2: Jewish Biblical Sources Responding to Trauma

In the midst of tragedy, where does the sufferer turn? Depending on a variety of personal and situational variables, it is difficult to pinpoint one approach, let alone one text which will effectively soothe all those in pain. Some seek reassurance in their connection to the God, some seek an outlet for their anger. Some seek comfort, others a voice to their confusion. The beauty of the Jewish canon is the vast diversity of texts within. Over the course of Jewish history, many writers have wrestled with the questions surrounding tragedy and loss, offering a sense of empathic understanding to those who feel that they agonize in isolation. Speaking about utilizing Psalms, but befitting all biblical literature, Rabbi Simkha Weintraub writes:

> "many have found words that "work" for them, or that help uncover their own words, hitherto obscure or inaccessible. Even though some of the language or images may seem alien, when one digs deep enough one may find wellsprings of great impact."[47]

This chapter presents texts from three biblical books which speak to this spectrum of perspectives on loss and suffering. The books of Psalms, Lamentations, and Job each approach pain differently, and can be connected to the different elements of the brain which were discussed in Chapter One. As we will see later in Chapter Three, clergy seeking to connect with their congregants in times of need lean heavily on these texts. In order to properly explore these texts, it is essential to begin with the foundational theology of Deuteronomy; the bedrock text with which all subsequent biblical sources are in dialogue.

[47] (Weintraub, Psalms as the Ultimate Self-Help Tool n.d.)

Deuteronomy: The Foundations of the Covenant

Deuteronomy, the 5th and final book of Torah, is narratively focused on the Israelite camp as they prepare to embark across the Jordan River, and finally enter the Promised Land, after 40 years in the desert, and 400 years enslaved in Egypt. As leader of the camp, Moses delivers a series of speeches, the bulk of which focus on the rules and regulations to follow once the Israelites, but not Moses himself, enter the Promised Land.

As mentioned in Chapter One, our brains and bodies crave structure and order, homeostasis. Being able to follow predictable pathways through life allows for healthy brain development, and routine and repetition allow us to expand our focuses elsewhere. In this context, it is no wonder that the theology of Deuteronomy is so foundational for Judaism. The book lays out the rules and structure for a covenantal relationship with God quite simply: follow the rules and you will be rewarded, disobey and you will be punished. Every facet of one's life can be tied back to this construct – health, family, wealth, status, etc. There is no chance or accident, only order and justice.

Deuteronomy embodies an attempt to hold the Israelite community together in the midst of an existential crisis. Facing attacks from the Assyrian empire, King Josiah made decrees to centralize life and worship around Jerusalem, in a sense retreating to the capitol and stronghold. The laws of Deuteronomy, pseudopigraphically placed in the mouth of Moses, who himself faces the reality of his own death, all come as a part of a contract directly tied to ownership over the land. Possession of the land represented safety and prosperity, and it was under attack.

The most essential expression of the requirements of the Israelites towards God may be a three-fold charge found multiple places throughout Deuteronomy; that the

Israelites should walk in the ways of God, obey God's commandments, and heed the call of God. As written in Deuteronomy 26:17:[48]

יז אֶת-יְהוָה הֶאֱמַרְתָּ הַיּוֹם לִהְיוֹת לְךָ לֵאלֹהִים וְלָלֶכֶת בִּדְרָכָיו וְלִשְׁמֹר חֻקָּיו וּמִצְוֹתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו--וְלִשְׁמֹעַ בְּקֹלוֹ	**17** You have affirmed this day that the Lord is your God; that you will walk in God's ways, that you will observe God's laws, commandments, and rules, and that you will heed God's voice.

The reward for such behavior focuses around the idea of being plentiful, both in harvest and in birth, as evidenced in Deuteronomy 7:12-14:

יב וְהָיָה עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמְעוּן אֵת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם--וְשָׁמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְךָ אֶת-הַבְּרִית וְאֶת-הַחֶסֶד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֶיךָ	**12** And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, the Lord your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant that He made on oath with your fathers and shall keep with thee the covenant and the mercy which He swore unto thy fathers,
יג וַאֲהֵבְךָ וּבֵרַכְךָ וְהִרְבֶּךָ וּבֵרַךְ פְּרִי-בִטְנְךָ וּפְרִי-אַדְמָתֶךָ דְּגָנְךָ וְתִירֹשְׁךָ וְיִצְהָרֶךָ שְׁגַר-אֲלָפֶיךָ וְעַשְׁתְּרֹת צֹאנֶךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֶיךָ לָתֶת לָךְ	**13** He will love you and bless you, and multiply you; He will bless the issue of your womb and the produce of your soil, your new grain and wine and oil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock, in the land that He swore to your fathers to assign to you.
יד בָּרוּךְ תִּהְיֶה מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים: לֹא-יִהְיֶה בְךָ עָקָר וַעֲקָרָה וּבִבְהֶמְתֶּךָ	**14** You shall be blessed above all other peoples: there shall be no sterile male or female among you or among your livestock.

The fruitfulness inherent in God's promise again shows a tie to the land. Only through bumper crops and herds could one thrive, and only through the birth of the next generation could the Israelites achieve lasting national success and security.

[48] Unless otherwise noted, the Hebrew translations for the Deuteronomy section are based on the JPS Tanakh, and further edited by the author.

The first phrase in the tripartite from Deuteronomy 26:17 could be slightly unclear: what does it mean to walk in God's ways? The answer may become clear when examining a very similar pericope from Deuteronomy 10:12:

יב ...לָלֶכֶת בְּכָל-דְּרָכָיו	**12** …to walk *only* in God's paths

The additional term בְּכָל, "only", implies that there are other paths to follow, implying the temptation to follow other gods. Deuteronomy makes it abundantly clear that the God of Israel will not tolerate straying from the path towards the service of other deities, as displayed in Deuteronomy 6:14-15:

יד לֹא תֵלְכוּן אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים--מֵאֱלֹהֵי הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבוֹתֵיכֶם	**14** Do not follow other gods, any of the gods from the people around you.
טו כִּי אֵל קַנָּא יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּקִרְבֶּךָ פֶּן-יֶחֱרֶה אַף-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בָּךְ וְהִשְׁמִידְךָ מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה	**15** For the Lord your God, who is in your midst, is a jealous God – lest the anger of God blaze against you and God exterminates you from the face of the earth.

The consequence of such betrayal is to encounter the full wrath of God. Presented in such terrifying imagery, the text aims to control readers with fear, conditioning devotees to never even consider worshipping other gods, thus diminishing the power of Israel and its God.

The necessary exclusivity of Israel's God, the potential wrath of Israel's God, and the importance of the land come together in terrifying climax in Chapters 28 and 29. Chapter 28 opens with 15 verses of potential blessing should the Israelites uphold their covenant with God; but the chapter ends with 53 verses of graphic and violent curses that

will befall Israel if they stray from God's path. The curses overflow into Chapter 29, wherein the following is written:

כג וְאָמְרוּ כָּל-הַגּוֹיִם עַל-מֶה עָשָׂה יְהוָה כָּכָה לָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת מֶה חֳרִי הָאַף הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה	**23** And all the nations shall say 'Why did God act thusly towards this land? From whence comes this great wrath?'
כד וְאָמְרוּ--עַל אֲשֶׁר עָזְבוּ אֶת-בְּרִית יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתָם אֲשֶׁר כָּרַת עִמָּם בְּהוֹצִיאוֹ אֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם	**24** They will be told: 'Because they forsook the covenant of the Lord, the God of their fathers, which God made with them when God brought them up out of the land of Egypt;
כה וַיֵּלְכוּ, וַיַּעַבְדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יְדָעוּם וְלֹא חָלַק לָהֶם	**25** and went and served other gods, and worshipped them, gods that they knew not, whom God had not allotted to them.
כו וַיִּחַר-אַף יְהוָה בָּאָרֶץ הַהִוא לְהָבִיא עָלֶיהָ אֶת-כָּל-הַקְּלָלָה הַכְּתוּבָה בַּסֵּפֶר הַזֶּה	**26** Therefore the anger of God was kindled against this land, to bring upon it all the curse that is written in this book;
כז וַיִּתְּשֵׁם יְהוָה מֵעַל אַדְמָתָם בְּאַף וּבְחֵמָה וּבְקֶצֶף גָּדוֹל וַיַּשְׁלִכֵם אֶל-אֶרֶץ אַחֶרֶת כַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה	**27** and the Lord uprooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as is the case to this day'.

Similar threats in varying levels of descriptive violence are found throughout Deuteronomy, drawing clear the connection between disobeying God and consequential severe punishment. Even the success of the Israelites is at times described not as their own merit, but as punishment for their neighboring foes, as in Deuteronomy 9:5:

ה לֹא בְצִדְקָתְךָ וּבְיֹשֶׁר לְבָבְךָ אַתָּה בָא לָרֶשֶׁת אֶת-אַרְצָם כִּי בְּרִשְׁעַת הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מוֹרִישָׁם מִפָּנֶיךָ	**5** It is not because of your righteousness or your virtues that you will be able to possess their country; but it is because of their wickedness that the Lord your God is dispossessing those nations before you.

Deuteronomy conditions the reader into obeisance through fear and existential threat, and confidently lays out an ideology for how the world functions. The traditional reach of the text extends well beyond its moment of authorship, and influences the Jewish perspective on theodicy for millennia until the current day.

Lamentations: See God, How Distressed I am

Deuteronomy lays out the hypotheticals to the fate of the Israelites, should they choose to accept or ignore God's law. Lamentations occurs within the same belief system surrounding action and reward, but the hypothetical has become a reality. Lamentations captures a traumatic moment and the subsequent response within the construct of the Deuteronomic understanding of reward and punishment. The emotionally charged text responds to the destruction of the Temple, the siege of Jerusalem, and the exile of the Israelites surrounding the year 586 BCE. Frozen in the moments of destruction, Lamentations captures the terrible fear that God has severed God's bonds with Israel, perhaps irreparably. Lamentations 2:1 grieves:[49]

א אֵיכָה יָעִיב בְּאַפּוֹ אֲדֹנָי אֶת-בַּת-צִיּוֹן-- הִשְׁלִיךְ מִשָּׁמַיִם אֶרֶץ תִּפְאֶרֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא- זָכַר הֲדֹם-רַגְלָיו בְּיוֹם אַפּוֹ	**1** Alas, in his anger the God makes loathsome dear Zion. God hurled down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel; and disregarded his footstool on the day of his anger.

The image of God's footstool refers to Jerusalem, and specifically the Temple Mount, oft considered to be God's dwelling place on earth. Jerusalem, both the sacred space and its citizenry, has been ripped from Heaven's doorstep and thrown into disarray from the attacks. Though as we will see the suffering is immense, the understanding of why such

[49] Translations for the Lamentations section are based on Adele Berlin's translations of Lamentations and further edited by the author.

tragedy befell Jerusalem remains relatively clear. Lamentations 2:17 captures the belief that all the atrocities are a result of failure to uphold the Deuteronomic covenant:

יז עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר זָמָם בִּצַּע אִמְרָתוֹ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה מִימֵי-קֶדֶם--הָרַס וְלֹא חָמָל וַיְשַׂמַּח עָלַיִךְ אוֹיֵב הֵרִים קֶרֶן צָרָיִךְ	**17** God did what God had planned, he carried out his word, as he ordained long ago. He destroyed and showed no mercy. And he made the enemy rejoice over you, he raised the horn of your foes.

In Lamentations 1:18-20, God's judicious punishment is exemplified in suffering felt in many different ways across multiple levels of society; from maidens and youths to priests and elders.

יח צַדִּיק הוּא יְהוָה כִּי פִיהוּ מָרִיתִי שִׁמְעוּ-נָא כָל-עַמִּים (הָעַמִּים) וּרְאוּ מַכְאֹבִי--בְּתוּלֹתַי וּבַחוּרַי הָלְכוּ בַשֶּׁבִי	**18** God is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word. Listen well, all you peoples, and see my pain. My maidens and youths have gone into captivity.
יט קָרָאתִי לַמְאַהֲבַי הֵמָּה רִמּוּנִי כֹּהֲנַי וּזְקֵנַי בָּעִיר גָּוָעוּ כִּי-בִקְשׁוּ אֹכֶל לָמוֹ וְיָשִׁיבוּ אֶת-נַפְשָׁם	**19** I called to my lovers, but they deceived me. My priests and elders expired in the city as they searched for food to sustain their lives.
כ רְאֵה יְהוָה כִּי-צַר-לִי מֵעַי חֻמַּרְמָרוּ--נֶהְפַּךְ לִבִּי בְקִרְבִּי כִּי מָרוֹ מָרִיתִי מִחוּץ שִׁכְּלָה-חֶרֶב בַּבַּיִת כַּמָּוֶת	**20** See God, how distressed I am, my innards churn, my heart is flipped over inside me, how very bitter I am. Outside the sword deals, inside death.

Verse 20 begs God to רְאֵה, to behold the tragedies which befall the Israelites. The desire for a witness is a common trope in survival literature, and an essential aspect of modern pastoral care.[50] However, the narrator of Lamentations seeks and does not find support. Multiple times throughout the book, there is mention of אֵין מְנַחֵם, "no comfort". The lack

[50] As taught by Rabbi Dr. Nancy Weiner.

of security and ease signifies that the sufferers cannot return to homeostasis and cannot begin to recover.

Lamentations is written in the immediacy of the moment of tragedy, when emotions are at their rawest, and fundamental ideologies of how the world should function are cast into doubt. In terms of Chapter One we can place Lamentations in the conversation between the thalamus, amygdala, and hypothalamus. In Lamentations we are given a view of the woe and panic as the writer(s) attempt to make sense of the world collapsing around them. As Lamentations 3:54 wails:

נד צָפוּ-מַיִם עַל-רֹאשִׁי אָמַרְתִּי נִגְזָרְתִּי	**54** Flood waters cover my head, I said, 'I am doomed'.

This phrase being uttered in Jerusalem, miles from the sea, is clearly metaphorical and paints the picture of hyperstimulation, and a person who cannot gain control over their senses. More than any other biblical text, the author of Lamentations appears to be trapped in a moment of suffering with no pathway to normalcy. The connection to the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex is severed, and the victims struggle to see any end to their suffering.

The Book of Lamentations can serve as an empathetic outlet for those suffering through their own trauma. The gruesome details put to words the emotions that many sufferers are incapable of describing on their own. Lamentations offers little in the ways of solace, instead offering to climb into the pits of despair and cry alongside the afflicted, as in Lamentations 2:11:

יא כָּלוּ בַדְּמָעוֹת עֵינַי חָמַרְמְרוּ מֵעַי--נִשְׁפַּךְ לָאָרֶץ כְּבֵדִי עַל-	**11** My eyes were worn out from tears, my stomach churned, my bile was spilled out over the breaking

שֶׁבֶר בַּת-עַמִּי בֵּעָטֵף עוֹלֵל וְיוֹנֵק בִּרְחֹבוֹת קִרְיָה	of my dear people, when little children and babies collapsed in the city squares.

Just as Deuteronomy served as a foundational influence, so too does Lamentations impact the mentality and theology of the Jewish tradition. "The destruction of Jerusalem is the event in which the long narrative from Genesis through Kings culminates, about which the prophets warned, and which leaves its mark on all subsequent literature of the Bible."[51]

Lamentations closes with one of the great existential cliff hangers of Bible. Later generations found the challenges raised by the book's conclusion so distressing and unsettling that they chose to repeat Verse 21 after Verse 22, in hopes of ending on a more optimistic note. Lamentations 5:21-22 reads:

כא הֲשִׁיבֵנוּ יְהוָה אֵלֶיךָ ונשוב (וְנָשׁוּבָה) חַדֵּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם	**21** Take us back, oh God, to yourself; O let us come back. Make us again as we were before.
כב כִּי אִם-מָאֹס מְאַסְתָּנוּ קָצַפְתָּ עָלֵינוּ עַד-מְאֹד	**22** But if you have utterly rejected us, and remain so very angry with us...

The penultimate verse prays for a return to normalcy, and a way out of the seemingly unending pain and suffering. This uncertainty concerning the end of pain echoes the experience of a person with trauma induced damage to their dorsolateral prefrontal cortex as discussed in Chapter One.[52] It is a prayer that one would hope to be answered. But the final verse calls the very act of prayer into question, and asks the unanswered questions "what if we strayed too far"? What if God never protects Israel in the way it was once?

[51] (Berlin, Lamentations 2002)
[52] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 69)

What if there is no turning back? Leaving the entire book without a conclusion creates a powerful image of uncertainty in a God previously unquestioned.

Psalms: From Where Will My Help Come?

The Books of Psalms is one of the more widely accessed Jewish resources for those in need of healing. Responses to trauma are arrayed in a spectrum, varying from person to person and even day to day, moment to moment. Though many are familiar with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' Five Stages of Grief, many current psychologists argue that the concept of stages misleadingly presents a proposed timeline and a pathway out of grief.

> "Grief is the normal and natural emotional response to loss.... No matter how much people want to create simple, bullet-point guidelines for the human emotions of grief, there are no stages of grief that fit any two people or relationships."[53]

In this frame, the many pathways that can be created through readings from the Book of Psalms provide multivocal guidance for those seeking solace from suffering. Some psalms speak prayerfully towards hope and connection with God, while others curse the lack thereof and bemoan dire situations. Below I have included a selection of psalms, aimed at reflecting the various theological responses to pain and suffering found throughout the collection of 150 poems.

Psalm 23: Because You are With Me

Psalm 23 is perhaps the most recognized of all the 150 psalms. It is recited at funeral services and other moments of mourning and memory. The psalm's frequent

[53] (James 2009)

usage traces directly to the content of the verses which portray a very intimate relationship with a God who always provides for the Psalmist. Psalm 23 depicts a very close relationship between the Psalmist and God split between the two halves of the Psalm. In the first half, the Psalmist deploys a metaphor of a sheep and a shepherd. Taking on the characteristics of one who must be provided for, the Psalmist declares "לֹא אֶחְסָר, I will not go lacking". The first two verses describe the provisions granted a safely grazing sheep: lush green pastures and still waters from which to drink. The third and fourth verses add an element of existentialism as the Psalmist declares that God has returned his souls, נפשי ישובב, potentially from the brink of death. And even when faced with the valley of the shadow of death, the Psalmist remains unafraid "כי אתה עמדי, because You are with me".[54] This almost tangible proximity to God has been used as a source to comfort the afflicted for generations when searching for a connection to God.

In Verse 4 we also see שבטך ומשענתך, "Your rod and Your staff" being wielded as measures of protection and comfort. The שבט, or rod, is considered more of a weapon, in this case a defense mechanism against would-be attacks.[55] While the מִשְׁעֶנֶת, the staff, is a more crutch-like aid to lean upon in a time of need[56]. These two tools in parallel create a spectrum of care that can be provided by God in varying scenarios; God serves as both a protective warrior, and a stabilizing support. For those suffering through traumatic experiences, either or both of these images can ease differing feelings of pain and woe.

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[54] The translation of בגאי צלמות to mean "valley of the shadow of death" is problematic, but acceptable. As Robert Alter writes: "Philologists assume that the Masoretic *tsalmawet* is actually a misleading vocalization of *tsalmut* – probably a poetic word for 'darkness' with the *ut* ending simply a suffix of abstraction – the traditional vocalization reflects something like an orthographic pun or folk etymology (*tsel* means 'shadow', *mawet* means 'death'), so there is justification in retaining the death component" (Alter 2007, 79).

[55] Cf. Exodus 21:20, Proverbs 10:13.

[56] Cf. Exodus 21:19, 2 Kings 18:21.

The second half of Psalm 23 changes metaphors and depicts a banquet being hosted at God's table, נגד צררי, "opposing those who are hostile towards me". This comfort in the midst of danger matches the message found in the first half of the psalm. The sixth and final verse of the psalm includes a jussive petition to be pursued by goodness and kindness "כל ימי חיי, all the days of my life". Modern interpreters have taken this phrase to refer to a natural life and existence on Earth, but the traditional interpretation of the text takes an approach which understands the phrase to refer to an afterlife.[57][58] The understanding that the psalm prays for eternal closeness to the divine makes it a deeply meaningful reading when either facing death, or mourning a recently departed loved one. In these moments, many feel a deep-seated desire to speak this eschatological view into existence. The repetition of such a psalm has the potential to create a reliable pathway in the brain, in a "use-dependent fashion", much like neuro-plasticity discussed in Chapter One. The phrase offers a sense of calm and reassurance which can help in de-escalating someone from a heightened dorsal vagal response (fight or flight and increased stress hormones), towards a more mindful and level return to homeostasis.

Psalm 121: God Neither Slumbers nor Sleeps

The imagery throughout Psalm 121 places the reader on a dangerous road besides a pilgrim seeking protection from God. The psalm can speak to all readers on whichever challenging path they find themselves, be it literal or metaphorical. The first first two lines of the psalm speak in the first person (עֶזְרִי, עֵינַי) as the traveler lifts his eyes towards

[57] (Alter 2007, 79)
[58] (Berlin and Brettler, Psalms 2004, 1293)

the hills surrounding Jerusalem. The worried, but confident pilgrim asks and answers his own question in chiastic structure:

מֵאַיִן יָבֹא עֶזְרִי – *From[A] where will my help[B] come?*
עֶזְרִי מֵעִם יְהוָה - *My help[B] comes from[A] the Lord.*

The song then transitions to second person voice for the remainder of the song. Perhaps this psalm features multiple speakers, one consoling and blessing the other, or perhaps the psalm recreates the inner-monologue of a solo traveler trying to encourage himself in a time of trouble.

The two-word phrase which best describes the main message of Psalm 121 can be found in Verse 5: שֹׁמְרֶךָ יְהוָה, "the Lord is your keeper". Interestingly, this marks the only appearance in the Tanakh of the root שמר, *to guard or keep,* with the second person, singular, masculine possessive suffix. This context provides the reader with valuable and intimate outside validation in a time of distress. The root שמר appears six times throughout the eight-line psalm, continually reinforcing the image of God as guardian. The root personally addresses the subject, but also refers to God as שֹׁומֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל, the *keeper of Israel*, adding a historical reminder of the covenantal relationship between God and the Jews, and a perspective on the world beyond the individual.

Psalm 121 utilizes several merisms, in attempt to capture the all-encompassing reach of God's protection. Verse Six contains merism as well as contrasting morphological parallelism to further expand the support of God. יוֹמָם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא־יַכֶּכָּה וְיָרֵחַ בַּלָּיְלָה*, by day the sun will not smite you, nor the moon by night.* The verse contains the classic opposite pairs "night and day" and "sun and moon", signifying that God will continue to be your keeper at all times and through every hour. The line translates well to English, but the Hebrew allows for even further contrast of the pairs. The plural,

indefinite יוֹמָם grammatically contrasts the singular, definite בַּלָּיְלָה. Similarly, the feminine, definite הַשָּׁמֶשׁ contrasts the masculine, indefinite יָרֵחַ. These oppositions in the structure of the text further emphasize that at all times God guards the subject. Merism also appears in Verse 2. God is identified with the descriptive clause עֹשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ, *maker of heaven and earth*. This merism serves to encompass the entirety of creation. The universal grandeur of the phrase contrasts the personal plea of the single traveler to create an image of God that is simultaneously as infinitely large as it is personal and familiar.

The Psalmist further creates the image of God's constant vigilance with the imagery, or lack thereof, of God sleeping. In verses three and four, the words for slumber and sleep: יִישָׁן, יָנוּם are used three times, each accompanied by a negative. All three are found in the third person imperfect, signifying that God never sleeps. Combined with Psalmist's belief that God guards over him, God's alertness is a positive declaration of God's ever-present protection. The idea of a sleeping God, on the other hand, would imply that God's followers are in danger, and lacking God's protection. It is worth considering, that in the event of a sleeping God, the obedience of the righteous also goes unwitnessed. A sleeping God sees neither rebellion nor obedience.

Psalm 86: I Cry Out to You

The choice to include the 86th Psalm in this study celebrates this psalm as an archetypal supplication. As Robert Alter explains, "a reader going through the Book of Psalms in sequence by this point will have encountered almost every line of this poem,

with minor variations, elsewhere."[59] To be certain, the formulaic nature of the psalm does not make it any less evocative and meaningful. The Psalmist introduces himself as one might before a king, as pious but possessing little merit, referring to himself as עַבְדֶּךָ, *your servant*, three times throughout the psalm. One who reads this psalm in their own time of need may feel a natural connection to an author who depicts himself as poor and in need.

The first half of the psalm abounds with the theme of call and response, as the verbs קרא, ענה, אזן (call, answer, lend ear to) are all repeated along with the back and forth usage of the pronouns I and You. But the relationship that the Psalmist seeks appears to be out of reach. Instead of being in conversation with God, the prayer is struggling to gain God's attention. In Verse 3, the speaker cries out "חָנֵּנִי אֲדֹנָי כִּי אֵלֶיךָ אֶקְרָא כָּל־הַיּוֹם, *Grant mercy on me oh God, for I cry out to you all day long*". The response from God has not yet been received despite constant attempts at connection by the author. This refrain is picked back up in Verse 16, "פְּנֵה אֵלַי וְחָנֵּנִי, *Show your face to me and grant me mercy*". Despite the one-sided nature of the relationship, the Psalmist remains devoted to God. As Verse 7 demonstrates, the writer calls on God even in the most distressing moments of life with confidence that God will answer, despite conflicting evidence from other verses. The remainder of the psalm heaps praise onto the Divine. God is heralded as kind, forgiving, and slow-to-anger to name a few. These exaltations appear as an attempt to either entice the deity to respond in a time of great need, or to reassure the author of previously held convictions. Different modern readers may gravitate towards different responses, either desperately pleading for grace amidst great uncertainty and feelings of little control or using the psalm to seek affirmation of a strongly held faith.

[59] (Alter 2007, 303)

Psalm 7: Do Not Reject Us Forever

For many seekers in the wake of an attack, there is understandable anger towards the attacker. The Psalms give voice to this feeling, often in the form of a supplication to God. In many of these psalms, the request is for God to respond in kind, or *lex talionus*. This plea falls in line with the Deuteronomistic view of theology, where actions should be met with a fair and judicial response.

In Psalm 7, the author is under attack from a foe. Verse 2 includes three requests for protection from God: חָסֶיתִי, *I seek your refuge*, הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי, *deliver me*, and וְהַצִּילֵנִי, *save me.* What follows in Verses 4 to 6 however, serves as a vow of innocence, which contradicts the theology of direct correlation between action and consequence.[60] Three phrases in Verses 4 and 5 begin with אִם, the beginning of an "if-then" conditional. The sentiment is best captured in the first phrase of Verse 5: אִם־גָּמַלְתִּי שְׁוֹלְמִי רָע, *if I have dealt wickedly with one at peace with me*. The emphasis on the שְׁוֹלְמִי appears to imply an unknown enemy, and an author hard pressed to determine who seeks to destroy him. The "then" element of the clause appears in Verse 6, with three terms for destruction matching the three pleas in Verse 2:

יִרְדַּף אוֹיֵב ו נַפְשִׁי וְיַשֵּׂג וְיִרְמֹס לָאָרֶץ חַיָּי וּכְבוֹדִי ו לֶעָפָר יַשְׁכֵּן סֶלָה, *then let my enemy pursue and overtake me, let him trample my life into the earth, and let my honor dwell in the dust.* The clause serves as a vow of innocence for the author who, confident in his innocence, offers up terrific consequence if he has indeed acted immorally.[61]

[60] (Alter 2007, 18)
[61] Ibid.

Based in his assumed innocence, the author now calls upon God to fight as his champion. In Verse 7, God is called upon with the command קוּמָה יְהוָה, *Arise oh God!*, which appears elsewhere in Tanakh as a call to battle.[62] The verse concludes with the request: עוּרָה אֵלַי מִשְׁפָּט צִוִּיתָ, *awake yourself for my sake, and demand justice*. The verb עוּר, *to awaken*, is often used in connection to God in times of need and doubt. The use of עוּר infers a God who sleeps, leaving God's followers undefended and at risk. Psalm 44 presents a poignant depiction of the vulnerability felt in the absence of God. The psalm depicts Israel under the control of its enemies, seemingly placed in their midst due to the actions or inactions of God. In Verse 24, the Psalmist cries out to the Lord, exclaiming that with a decree from God, the Israelites can once again overcome oppression. In the absence of a response, the Psalmist begs: עוּרָה לָמָּה תִישַׁן אֲדֹנָי הָקִיצָה אַל־תִּזְנַח לָנֶצַח, *Awake! Why do you sleep my Lord? Awaken! Do not reject us forever*. Returning to our psalm, the plea of the Psalmist is for God's attention to bring judicial oversight and restore order to the Psalmist's world.

The psalm concludes with the confidence of a return to order and a threat to those who continue to practice evil. Verses 16 and 17 declare the writer's sustained confidence in the Deuteronomistic sense of justice that those who sin will be punished by their own actions. In Verse 16 it states that he who sets a trap will fall prey to it. In Verse 17, the message is even more clearly connected to the theme of the psalm. יָשׁוּב עֲמָלוֹ בְרֹאשׁוֹ וְעַל קָדְקָדוֹ חֲמָסוֹ יֵרֵד, *his mischief returns on his own head, his violence descends on his crown*.

In this psalm and many others, the personal efforts to assert innocence are overpowered by the pleas and predictions that one's enemies will suffer their due. Anger

[62] Cf. Numbers 10:35, Psalm 3:8.

is a natural response to suffering, especially when that suffering is deemed unjust. When suffering comes at the hands of others, that anger mixes with the desire to return to an ordered world and becomes vengeance and demands for retribution. Many people shy away from confronting these hardened emotions in others because of the outwardly aggressive nature that they embody. Such an avoidance however, isolates the person experiencing the anger and does not allow for an appropriate release, much like pent up stress hormones in response to a threat. Reading psalms which address these emotions can aid in that release by giving credence to the emotions to an isolated sufferer.

Psalm 88: Rejecting God, Anger and Despair

Psalm 88 depicts one who is very close to death, presumably from prolonged illness. As written in Verse 4 and 5, וְחַיַּי לִשְׁאוֹל הִגִּיעוּ: נֶחְשַׁבְתִּי עִם־יוֹרְדֵי בוֹר הָיִיתִי כְּגֶבֶר אֵין־אֱיָל, *I am on the verge of Sheol. I am counted amongst those who descend into the pit, I have become a man without any strength.* This dismal outlook, be it metaphorical or realistic, leads the Psalmist to understandably morose thinking. Verses 7 through 9 place blame on God for the state of the Psalmist, centering on themes of darkness and isolation.

Verses 10-13 ask God if the dead are able to offer prayers and praise. The repetition of the biblical parallelism for three straight verses, each verse starting with an interrogative *hey*, reads as biting if not sarcastic. But the author wants God to know that he is not yet dead, and vehemently clarifies in Verse 14: וַאֲנִי ו אֵלֶיךָ יְהוָה שִׁוַּעְתִּי וּבַבֹּקֶר תְּפִלָּתִי תְקַדְּמֶךָּ, *But me, I cry out to God for help. And in the morning, my prayer is before you*. These cries to God are similar to the Porges' Ventral Vagal response seen in Chapter One. Here aimed towards God, but in reality seeking support and comfort from anyone who might hear.

What follows in Verse 15 is the climax of the psalm, in which the Psalmist demands answers for his isolation: לָמָּה יְהוָה תִּזְנַח נַפְשִׁי תַּסְתִּיר פָּנֶיךָ מִמֶּנִּי, *Why God have you rejected me, why do you hide your face from me?* God's watchful eye is often used to characterize God's protection. The lack of God's gaze and the light often associated with it is felt in the darkness of this unanswered cry. Nowhere in Psalm 88 is there admission of guilt, or efforts made towards atonement. There are no words of actual prayer and supplication in this psalm, only despair and anger. In his commentary on this psalm, Tzvi Hersh Weinreb brings the words closer to our modern sensibilities: "Our psalm is a masterful example of empathy for a dying man. It does not try to soothe him or argue against his feelings. It respectfully leaves him as he is, and reserves assurances of life and promises of hope for other occasions, and other psalms."[63]

Job: I Insist on Arguing with God

Job represents the ultimate challenge to the Detueronomic worldview. In Deuteronomy, God and humankind operate within a covenanted system of agreed upon rules and consequences. God acts justly, only distributing reward and punishment within the confines of the system. Within the first two chapters, the Book of Job removes rational order by presenting a conversation between God and הַשָּׂטָן (often considered to be Satan, but literally "the adversary") in which God is cajoled into afflicting Job. God destroys Job's family, homestead, and wealth precisely because Job is pious, and God hopes to prove a point that Job will remain pious. It cannot be overstated how devastating this narrative is to the Deuteronomic theology. The idea that God would use his most

[63] (Weinreb 2017, 448)

beloved servants as pawns in a wager is unthinkable in previously held notions of the way the world works. And yet, despite losing all which he holds dear, Job does not curse God. In Job 1:21-22, Job indeed remains pious, holding fast to his Deuteronomic worldview, and refusing to curse God.[64]

כא וַיֹּאמֶר עָרֹם יָצָתִי מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי וְעָרֹם אָשׁוּב שָׁמָּה--יְהוָה נָתַן וַיהוָה לָקָח יְהִי שֵׁם יְהוָה מְבֹרָךְ	**21** And he said; naked I came out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither; the Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.
כב בְּכָל-זֹאת לֹא-חָטָא אִיּוֹב; וְלֹא-נָתַן תִּפְלָה לֵאלֹהִים	**22** With all this, Job did not sin, nor ascribed anything unseemly to God.

But every man has a breaking point, and once Job is personally afflicted with painful boils, his attitude begins to change. Chapter 2 of Job ends with the titular man sitting in mournful silence for seven days, accompanied by three friends who sit silently beside him. When he begins to speak in Chapter 3, he curses his very existence. As evidenced in Job 3:11:

יא לָמָּה לֹּא מֵרֶחֶם אָמוּת מִבֶּטֶן יָצָאתִי וְאֶגְוָע	**11** Why did I not die from the womb? Why did I not perish at birth?

Though Job unquestionably seeks an end to his suffering, his words in Job 3:24 raise an interesting consideration when working with suffering individuals:

כד כִּי-לִפְנֵי לַחְמִי אַנְחָתִי תָּבֹא וַיִּתְּכוּ כַמַּיִם שַׁאֲגֹתָי	**24** My groaning serves as my bread; My roaring pours forth as water.

[64] The Book of Job is written in very difficult Hebrew, which opens the already perplexing text to even more nuance in translation and interpretation. For this section, the author relied on personal adaptations of the text based on the JPS translation, as well as Edward Greenstein's comments in *The Jewish Study Bible*.

Job's lamenting somehow sustains him as if it were a meal. Especially after remaining silent in the wake of his tragedy, Job's outward expression provides him with both release and energy, as one who emerges from a depressed state. The outburst is a somewhat expected response from someone experiencing tragedy. The importance of finding avenues for self-expression following a traumatic event is vital, even when the emotions which burst forth trend towards anger.

What unfolds from Chapter 3 on is an extended argument between Job and his colleagues over the nature of God and the world. Job's friends cling to the ideals of Deuteronomy, convinced that Job must have sinned in order to receive his terrible punishments. As his friend Zophar accuses in Job 20:29:

כט זֶה חֵלֶק-אָדָם רָשָׁע-- מֵאֱלֹהִים וְנַחֲלַת אִמְרוֹ מֵאֵל	**29** This is the portion of a wicked man from God, and the inheritance promised to him by God.

Job disputes them every step of the way, arguing steadfastly for his innocence, and upholding his side of the Deuteronomic covenant with God. Job argues that in fact God is in breach of the contract, as God indistinguishably punishes the good and the evil. As evidenced in Job 9:22.

כב אַחַת הִיא עַל-כֵּן אָמַרְתִּי תָּם וְרָשָׁע הוּא מְכַלֶּה	**22** It is all one, therefore I say: He destroys the innocent and the wicked.

In the midst of the dialogue with his friends, Job begins to demand a trial from God so that he can receive the explanation to his suffering which he feels he deserves. In Job 13:1-3, Job declares:

א הֵן-כֹּל רָאֲתָה עֵינִי שָׁמְעָה אָזְנִי וַתָּבֶן לָהּ	**1** Behold, my eye has seen all this, my ear has heard and understood it.
ב כְּדַעְתְּכֶם יָדַעְתִּי גַם-אָנִי לֹא-נֹפֵל אָנֹכִי מִכֶּם	**2** What you know, I know also; I am no less than you.
ג אוּלָם--אֲנִי אֶל-שַׁדַּי אֲדַבֵּר וְהוֹכֵחַ אֶל-אֵל אֶחְפָּץ	**3** Indeed, I would speak to the Almighty, I insist on arguing with God.

Much has been written on the disconnect between Job and his friends. From a modern pastoral perspective, their accusatory tone is most often labeled as unhelpful in easing their suffering friend. The most positive action from the friends comes at the very beginning of the text as they sit alongside Job, but wait to speak until he opens his mouth to lament. Once they join the conversation, they quickly make it obvious that they are far more concerned with their theology than the plight of their friend. Job's plight strongly challenges the ideology of his companions, and their responses exemplify their attempts to hold on to a crumbling worldview. In Chapter 21, Job begs his friends to step away from their own agendas and witness his tragic dilemma:

ב שִׁמְעוּ שָׁמוֹעַ מִלָּתִי וּתְהִי-זֹאת תַּנְחוּמֹתֵיכֶם	**2** Listen carefully to what I say; and let this be your comforting.
ה פְּנוּ-אֵלַי וְהָשֹׁמּוּ וְשִׂימוּ יָד עַל-פֶּה	**5** Face me and be appalled, and clap your hand over your mouth.

In preparation for his desired trial with God, Job seeks his friends to serve as witnesses to his unwarranted pain and suffering. As they fail to empathize, or even listen to Job, he

implores them to look him in the face, and to see how he has been reduced to wretchedness. Perhaps only then will they be able to relate to his pain.

Readers of Lamentations and many Psalms may be surprised to learn that God does in fact present to Job at the end of the book. In the opening of Chapter 38, God speaks to Job, מִן הַסְּעָרָה, from out of a whirlwind. The whirlwind serves as a perfect literary tool for the moment. In one respect, the swirling whirlwind captures the chaos and confusion which surrounds Job's existence and leads to his quest for answers. Secondly, God's voice from amidst the whirlwind fills Job's companions with hope; that even in the most uncertain tumultuous times, God has the power to appear and restore order. Finally, God's appearance comes in the form of a powerful natural phenomenon, evoking the awesome mystery and creative power of the universe which in so many ways defies definition.

God's introduction sets a tone for the power dynamics in the conversation that follow. In Job 38:2-3, God challenges Job and his companions:

ב מִי זֶה מַחְשִׁיךְ עֵצָה בְמִלִּין-בְּלִי-דָעַת	**2** Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
ג אֱזָר-נָא כְגֶבֶר חָלָצֶיךָ וְאֶשְׁאָלְךָ וְהוֹדִיעֵנִי	**3** Gird now, your loins like a man; I will question you and you will inform me.

God declares that both Job and his companions speak from a place of ignorance as they attempt to contemplate the greater workings of the world. In Verse 3, God tells Job to gird his loins, like one who will be going to war or performing physical labor, before making it clear that God will be the one who asks the questions.

And while God ends God's opening salvo with וְהוֹדִיעֵנִי, "and you will inform me", God's subsequent approach makes it very clear that Job's opinions are not being sought.

Marc Zvi Brettler calls the following monologue from God, "the longest list of rhetorical questions in the Bible."[65] God points out to Job that the world exists infinitely far beyond Job's chronological and geographical conceptions by pointing out the lack of knowledge God accused Job of earlier in the verse. As evidenced in Job 38:12:

יב הֲמִיָּמֶיךָ צִוִּיתָ בֹּקֶר ידעתה שחר (יְדַעְתָּ הַשַּׁחַר) מְקֹמוֹ	**12** Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?

God's presentation succeeds in making Job, and by extension all humans, appear as an infinitesimally small element of the grander universe. And yet, God nonetheless speaks to Job, answering the call of the suffering individual. A wide spectrum of thinkers and theologians continue to wrestle with the theological implications of God's appearance to Job. God responds and appears, which could be considered more than enough divine contact for Job or any human. However, God does not clearly explain Job's suffering in a way which would theoretically ease the sufferer's woes. God's appearance demonstrates that the universe exists so far beyond Job's purview, that even if God chose to explain the workings of the world to Job, the human being would be incapable of comprehending it.

After meeting with God, Job appears to grasp the magnitude of his situation. Clasping his hands over his mouth in a sign of stunned deference, Job eventually answers God in Chapter 42:3b, 6:[66]

ג לָכֵן הִגַּדְתִּי וְלֹא אָבִין נִפְלָאוֹת מִמֶּנִּי וְלֹא אֵדָע	**3b** Indeed, I spoke without understanding of wonders beyond me, of which I did not know.

[65] (Brettler 2007, 252)
[66] Job 40:4

ו עַל-כֵּן אֶמְאַס וְנִחַמְתִּי עַל-עָפָר וָאֵפֶר	**6** Therefore I am disgusted, but I am consoled that I am dust and ashes.

In Verse 3, Job indeed acknowledges the wonderous possibilities of God's universe, and arguably recognizes the nearsightedness of his self-centered rage. It remains equally plausible that the wonders which Job failed to recognize refer to God's attention to every detail of God's creation which include Job himself.

Verse 6 marks Job's final words of the book. In the interpretation above Job holds a spectrum of emotions which may not appear to support one another. Job remains in suffering, and remains angry and dejected. God's answer which does not remove Job's pain leaves a bitter taste in Job's mouth as he comes to a place of resignation that he will indeed never know why tragedy befell him. In that resignation, Job finds his burden lifted. As he reaches the understanding which evaded him throughout his ordeal, he recognizes that he can let go of his torturous quest for answers. Job ends his words in a way many sufferers may find relatable: fluctuating between the blessing and curse of existential uncertainty.

In the de facto epilogue of the Book of Job, Job turns his thoughts outward. In Job 42:7-10, God rebukes Job's friends for not speaking truly, and acknowledges Job for his proper protestations. At the behest of God, Job prays and sacrifices on behalf of his human counterparts and is rewarded with double the bounty which God originally took from him. Job lives out the remainder of his days in comfort, and dies a good Biblical death, surrounded by generations of family. The text does not say, but one cannot help but wonder about how the trauma of Job's ordeal remained with him throughout his life. Trauma lingers, even years after a tragedy strikes. Those who go through traumatic

events come through them forever changed. One cannot often return, like Job, to a place of "normalcy". Though Job lived many years after his encounter with God, he remains defined by the experience which will forever shape his outlook on life and the universe.

Conclusion

The next chapter investigates responses to one of the greatest tragedies of our modern times. The terrorists attacks of September 11th, 2001 became a watershed moment in the lives of Americans, and very much so in the lives of clergy. Rabbis across the country heeded calls of action in ways they never thought imaginable. The texts discussed in this chapter, along with others, became an invaluable resource for healers looking for meaningful words to guide their holy work. The texts chosen each intersect with suffering at different points across spectrums of time, proximity, severity, and response. As we will see, the rabbis in the field in 2001 were asked to do the same.

Part II: Responding to the Moment

Chapter 3: The Day Of and Immediately Following

Immediate Response

Almost any story I heard about the Tuesday morning of September, 11th, 2001 began the same way. It was a beautiful, sunny day. In New York, rabbis made their way to work, or to the polls to vote in a primary election, or started the morning off slowly at home. At 8:46am EDT, the first plane struck the north tower of the World Trade Center. Less than two miles away, and with clear sightlines of the towers, students and faculty of Hebrew Union College began to gather outside and observe what many believed to be a horrific accident.[67] Seventeen minutes later, 9:03am EDT, a second plane strikes the south tower. Many of those gathered outside Hebrew Union College witness this crash. The thought of an accident vanishes, and the fear of something greater sets in.

When the brain perceives a threat, it triggers fight-or-flight responses, and floods the limbs with stress hormones as it prepares for action.[68] What did this response look like for the rabbis of New York? What were their immediate responses to the moment? For many in leadership positions, the first response was to gather and provide safety. Rabbi Nancy Wiener, the Director of the Blaustein Center for Pastoral Care at Hebrew Union College shared that the leadership of the college first gathered the entire building together in the sanctuary.[69] This action mirrors the brain's desire to keep the body safe. In

[67] (David 2018)
[68] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 57)
[69] (Wiener 2018)

this instance, the "brains" of the college sought to protect the student "body" by keeping tabs on everyone until they could process the situation and make further decisions.

Uptown, Rabbi David Adelson rushed towards his pulpit at East End Temple, knowing that in whatever happened next there would be work to be done. Rabbi Adelson and some gathered staff members set about calling through their member rolls, hoping to contact as many congregants as possible.[70] The rush to get to the synagogue shows the working of the amygdala immediately responding, while the choice to contact the members of the congregation ties to the medial prefrontal cortex which works to survey a scene and lay the ground for making informed choices moving forward.[71]

One of those choices, which may seem simple on the surface, was to keep their doors open. Rabbi Adelson shared that all day people came in off the street to use bathrooms or attempt to call loved ones from a land line, or just to seek some sort of respite.[72] In this way the synagogue became a resource for not only their congregants, but the general public as well. In comparison, another interviewee shared a story of walking through much of the city determined to reach their synagogue. When they arrived, the synagogue was locked shut, and the rabbi broke down and wept. In a time of great need, the symbolic power of an open door can carry great weight.

In a less heightened, but still alert, state across the country, Rabbi Janet Marder of Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, California awoke to the news of the attacks when her radio alarm went off.[73] Rabbi Marder explained, "there is a tendency to draw together like this when people are fighting and feel threatened, to come together and seek

[70] (Adelson 2018)
[71] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 62)
[72] (Adelson 2018)
[73] (Marder 2018)

support from one another."[74] The desire to gather speaks to the function of the Ventral Vagal Complex, which represents our social response to threats.[75] Surrounding oneself with other clergy represents our natural inclination to limit threats through strength in numbers and increase a sense of comfort.

Gathering with other clergy also creates opportunities for the sharing of ideas and working together. In Philadelphia, Rabbi Jill Maderer was only in her fourth month at Congregation Rodeph Shalom. New to the position and new to the community, she sought to find her role as the leadership team gathered to determine their next steps.[76] Where she did not feel in the position to present her own rabbinic voice, she did feel confident in gathering traditional texts which spoke to the moment for an inevitable healing service while others could focus on different details which needed addressing. In that way, her team acknowledged their individual strengths, and as a result became a stronger whole.[77]

On an organizational level, rabbis in leadership positions quickly activated in order to provide their communities with resources. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the president of the UAHC stated that his office focused exclusively on reaching out to the 850 congregations which made up the union, and providing them with the resources they could assemble.[78] At the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services of New York City, Rabbi Simkha Weintraub did the same. In the days immediately following the attacks Rabbi Weintraub fielded countless telephone calls and facilitated countless conversations on a variety of

[74] Ibid.
[75] (Beauchaine, Gatzke-Kopp and Mead 2007)
[76] (Maderer 2018)
[77] Ibid.
[78] (Yoffie 2018)

topics surrounding the attacks. As an experienced rabbi as well as a licensed clinical social worker, Rabbi Weintraub's office became a hotline for those seeking guidance on what to do and how to lead.[79]

If Not Now When?

In the midst of a threat, the body fills with stress hormones to prepare for actions regarding fight-or-flight response.[80] A majority of the rabbis I interviewed for this project mentioned the that they felt they needed "to do something". Rabbi Benjamin David, then a student at Hebrew Union College described the mix of physical and spiritual response as he and his fellow students went to give blood:

> "We all felt this need to respond somehow to do something. I mean, this sort of knee-jerk reaction to try to do something and respond in some way, it all felt so futile like, you know, give them one person giving blood, what's it going to do? But I think its good for your soul to feel okay, well, at least I've done something."[81]

Though we often attribute this sensation to a spiritual calling, it can also be traced to our body's chemistry.

Though the spirit or the body may move someone to action, knowing what to do with the sense of urgency is a different conversation. For the body, the medial prefrontal cortex functions as a counterbalance to amygdala as both respond to the perception of threat.[82] When the MPFC is able to recognize a moment as familiar, it helps to reduce stress responses and allows for more regular function, what we in clergy circles may call a "non-anxious presence".[83]

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[79] (Weintraub 2018)
[80] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 57)
[81] (David 2018)
[82] Ibid. 62
[83] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 62)

For some rabbis, relying on previous experience proved to be immensely helpful. Rabbi Peter Rigler, then a student at Hebrew Union College, shared that his experience in Israel as a counselor on the EIE program shaped his attitude on September 11th. [84] Rabbi Rigler remembered the wave of bombing attacks in the Spring of 1996, and being panicked. "I was really panicky when it happened. And the head of EIE at the time, sort of sat me down and said, 'you're not the one who's allowed to panic, you're the one who has to lead' and I thought a lot about that that afternoon."[85] A stern message indeed, but a nonetheless important one about carrying the mantle of responsibility during a crisis.

Rabbi Nancy Wiener referenced the crisis counseling training she received while earning her doctorate in Pastoral Counseling. She also possessed connections with chaplains across the city. On the morning of September 11th, Rabbi Wiener knew who to call to learn where help may be needed, and then rallied students and faculty from Hebrew Union College who had training in Clinical Pastoral Education to join her in walking to a nearby hospital to volunteer their efforts.[86]

Others turned to their pastoral experience in the aftermath. Though perhaps not personally versed in trauma and terrorism, many rabbis turned to experience in tragedy to help provide care to those in need. As mentioned in Chapter One, our prefrontal cortexes allow us to create predictions based on past experience, and those rabbis who were able to make connections to their previous experience found familiar ways to serve their communities. [87]

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[84] The Eisendrath International Experience (EIE) was a semester long program for high school students in grades 10-12 to study in Israel.
[85] (Rigler 2018)
[86] (Wiener 2018)
[87] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 60-61)

Rabbi Robert Levine at Rodeph Sholom in New York spent time with congregants who had lost a family member.[88] He pointed out that in his 25 years of rabbinic experience, he learned how to work with mourners of all types. Rabbi Janet Marder spoke about her experience working with an LGBT congregation in Los Angeles during the AIDS epidemic and the overwhelming amounts of anxiety and tragic loss which her work entailed.[89]

This lesson of previous experience proved to be a very powerful one for me throughout my thesis research. At the beginning of my project, I felt that September 11th was incomparable to anything anyone had ever faced. But over the course of my interviews I learned about the ability of clergy to pull from their personal experiences and make connections to the work at hand. One of the major takeaways from this learning is that as a rabbi, once you enter a space with a person in need, much of your surroundings fade away. Being able to sit with someone one-on-one and identify and relate to their basic core emotions is an essential part of being a healer regardless of what caused their pain. While situational variables do play a role, pastoral care experience can be transferable across a variety of situations.

[88] (Levine 2018)
[89] (Marder 2018)

Chapter 4: The High Holy Days

One of the most powerful ways a rabbi reaches a congregation is through the use of sermons. From the pulpit, rabbis speak directly to their congregants about matters which they deem important: theology, politics, social action, etc. Perhaps no time during the year is the sermon more powerful than during the High Holy Days. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, synagogues anticipate their highest turnouts of the year, and clergy typically consider these holidays to be the moments where their message has the largest audience and the greatest impact. Rosh Hashanah 5762 arrived on September 17th, 2001 – less than one week after the attacks.

In the wake of the traumatic attacks of September 11th, the duties from the pulpit shifted and intensified. The High Holy Days already feature themes of fear, uncertainty, and death. These are lofty challenging subjects which spiritual leaders work hard to confront every year, with every word choice containing the potential to embrace or alienate different members of the community. How much more so in 2001? What could one say to an audience made up of hundreds, in some cases thousands, of individuals each with their own opinions and experiences coloring the incredibly challenging moment in time? Rabbi Robert Levine captured the enormity of the challenge:

> "Everyone wants to ask, 'Okay, Rabbi, what is happening in our world? Why are these things happening?' And I think the rabbi needs to provide a worldview. And I would say that 9/11 is the absolute acid test for that. It was a time where everybody was coming up to the bimah on Erev Rosh Hashanah and that was the only thing that you could deal with. So there you were. And it was a tremendous test of who you were, how you could give people perspective, how can you give them the courage? How can you inspire them to be more than they otherwise would be? These were enormous moments."[90]

[90] (Levine 2018)

The following section of this paper explores several topics gathered from High Holy Day sermons obtained through the American Jewish Archives. I selected sermons from rabbis which I believe represent a spectrum across geography, age, experience, and congregational makeup.[91] While I hypothesized that experience and long-term relationship with a congregation might impact the approach to a sermon, I found that wisdom came from across the rabbinic landscape. Each rabbi I studied found his or her own voice during these monumental moments and delivered the message they deemed fitting for their unique congregations. During my research, I noticed several themes repeated throughout the canon of sermons. The four themes below (use of traditional Jewish sources, responses to theological quandaries, warnings concerning Islamophobia, and finding inspiration through acts of heroism) address issues in both the personal and public spheres. During this High Holy Day season rabbis worked to speak to the innermost thoughts of their congregants, and address the world rapidly changing outside their synagogue doors. The sermons discussed below responded bravely to this unquestionably daunting challenge.

Use the Sources

> "Judaism does have a Torah, two Talmuds, three thousand years of learning and growing, of out-growing and refashioning and building that each of us is lucky enough to call our own. Judaism is our heritage of learning that teaches us how to fill each minute portion of our canvas with brushstrokes of brilliance. Judaism is the Art of living, and today we are at school for lessons in the grammar and syntax of everyday life. As we go out now to rebuild a future forever changed by the recent past, it is to those lessons, that legacy that I return."[92]

[91] The rabbis chosen were picked with guidance from Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, PhD, whose knowledge of and relationships with so many rabbis across the country proved to be an invaluable resource.
[92] (Limmer 2001)

As Rabbi Seth Limmer beautifully depicts in his Rosh Hashanah remarks, Judaism holds endless resources and wisdom to be accessed in times of need. As we have seen in Chapter One, in times of crisis, the brain seeks homeostasis and calm, which can be attained by returning to routine and removing new outside variables or information.[93][94] The High Holy Days of 2001 were not the appropriate time to introduce new concepts and ideas, rather the moment called for return to the familiar. Though all of America perceived a world that had changed, being able to rely on common tropes and themes to discuss the issues of the day provided grounding and access for congregants, and a starting point for clergy, the vast majority of whom prepared new sermons within the week.

The themes utilized and discussed below served two major purposes. First, they attempt to honestly address the gravity and terror surrounding the moment in time. By offering traditional words which spoke to fear, uncertainty, doubt, and death, rabbis issued the message that they understood the range of emotions their congregants must be feeling. Secondly, rabbis turned to the same canon to find words of encouragement, and a path forward. Recognizing the darkness that many Americans saw themselves in, rabbis sought texts which offered light, hope, and encouragement. Let us now examine the use of two traditional High Holy Day texts in the context of September 11th.

The first text to be examined is *Untaneh Tokef*. The *piyyut* (liturgical poem) creates a picture of the Day of Judgement when the fates of humankind are written and sealed by the hand of God. In the first section, the *piyyut* speaks to the uncertainty and even randomness which presides over the lives and deaths of all humanity. Rabbis in

[93] (Perry, et al. 1995, 290)
[94] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 56)

2001 found this piece of text to be particularly poignant as the week-long search for answers often raised only doubts and further questions. Speaking to the uncertainty, Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus wrote, "the author of this prayer articulates everything we know about life and death, and everything we don't know about life and death... we grieve not only for those who died such horrible needless deaths, but also for our world, over which we seem to have no control."[95] Working off of Rabbi Milton Steinberg's translation of ימים נוראים (*yamim noraim*) as "Days of Fear", Rabbi Joshua Zweiback did not shy away from addressing the terror which the attacks spread over the country. Zweiback spoke honestly to his congregation saying, "these Days of Fear seem superfluous this year. Do any of us really need these prayers to contemplate the strange and awful terrors that beset us?... After the events of September 11th, will we ever need to be reminded to be afraid again?"[96]

Several rabbis, including Rabbi Dreyfus adapted the well-known "who by" section of *Untaeh Tokef*, which lists a range of fates which could befall any one of us. In the modifications of the poem, rabbis described the multitude of ways that lives were lost or destroyed in the attacks on September 11th. These modern renditions created a palpable closeness to the timeworn words, and a sense of realism that might have gone otherwise unfelt. Instead of "who by beast and who by stoning?", congregants came face to face with images that coverage of the attacks had seared into their minds, "who by jumping, and who by hijacking?"[97][98]

[95] (Dreyfus 2001)
[96] (Zweiback 2001)
[97] Translation for "who by beast and who by stoning?" from ***Mishkan HaNefesh for Rosh Hashanah*** p. 178.
[98] (Dreyfus 2001)

It is easy to sink into the darkness of uncertainty and violent death created by the beginning of the poem, but this is not the end of *Untaeh Tokef.* Indeed, the *piyyut* continues with the uplifting message:

וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וּצְדָקָה מַעֲבִירִין אֶת רֹעַ הַגְּזֵרָה	But through *tshuvah, tefilah,* and *tzdakah*, we can transcend the harshness of the decree[99]

Even in the darkest moments of fear and uncertainty, a pathway towards light is laid out. Importantly, the path described relies on actions taken by the one seeking life. In September of 2001, many rabbis used this moment in the prayer service to reflect not on mitigating a severe sentence, but as a guide for moving forward and making meaning in a life worth living. Rabbi Rosette Barron Haim wrote about the three fold process as civil service, "[*tshuvah*] returning to the high ideals which have made our country great, offering heartfelt prayers [*tefillah*] for the families of those who have lost their lives and for all the heroes in rescue and assistance, and doing what acts of *tzedakah* are possible in this moment, do indeed temper judgement's severe decree."[100]

With its poetic meter and somewhat antiquated visions of death, *Untaeh Tokef* is often placed in theoretical or rhetorical stratum. But in 2001, the message felt for many closer than ever. Rabbi Dreyfus recognized this and stressed the need to avoid taking the prayer at face value. She feared that a literal reading of the *tshuvah, tefilah,* and *tzdakah* section would lead to the posthumous questioning of the moral standards of the victims. Rather, she stressed the need to see that these three values do not "allow us to determine

[99] Translation from ***Mishkan HaNefesh for Rosh Hashanah*** p. 180.
[100] (Haim 2001)

or define the circumstances of our death – but they enable us to define the quality and value of our life."[101]

The value of life in the face of death became another major theme for rabbis during this particular High Holy Day season. For many, the source material for a conversation around the power of life came from the Torah reading for the Shabbat immediately following September 11th and repeated on Yom Kippur morning, *Nitzavim.*[102] Specifically, many rabbis turned to Deuteronomy 30:19 which reads:

הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבָחַרְתָּ בַּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אַתָּה וְזַרְעֶךָ׃	I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so that you and your offspring may live.

In the face of terror and uncertainty, these words became a rallying cry. “It could be argued that our entire Jewish heritage is in one way or another an affirmation of being, of life itself.”[103] Rabbis across the country latched on to these familiar words which gained new meaning when standing opposite the antithetical death and catastrophe which permeated the world. The emphasis in many sermons fell on the verb “to choose”. Rabbis urged congregants to make the active choice to live their lives, even in the face of fear. Only then could victory be declared over an enemy bent on forcing Americans to cower and hide in the shadows. Rabbi David Stern offered a particularly uplifting, almost confrontational expression of the moment and the powerful choice at hand. He wrote, “we come here this day to stand up and say: we may be frightened, but we will not be paralyzed. We still have the power to choose. And with that power, we already begin to

[101] (Dreyfus 2001)
[102] Not in all Reform congregations but many.
[103] (Zweiback 2001)

combat the terror. The murderers have made their choice. Now it is our turn."[104] Rabbi Stern acknowledged the potentially paralyzing fear of the moment and more importantly, acknowledged that his congregants possessed the power to overcome.

One of the most powerfully demonstrative ways to choose life came in the opportunity to celebrate life-cycle events and other *simchas* following the attacks. As Rabbi Norman M. Cohen explained, "this past weekend there were B'nai Mitzvah and weddings in synagogues throughout our nation... The *simchas* of this past weekend provided so many people with the opportunity to realize that we will overcome this attack."[105] By performing celebrations, and drawing attention to them from the pulpit, rabbis helped to give the permission to celebrate and to live life that many Americans did not feel they had.

The themes of life and death were so palpable in the days following September 11th, they seemed to leap off the pages of the prayer book. From the bimah, rabbis brought to life these traditional themes by bringing them into a world struck by terror and trauma. The best sermons found a way to meet congregants where they were, hobbled by fear and disoriented by terror, and help show those congregants opportunities to choose life, and find aspects of their lives in which they could take control.

Where Is God?

"Shall not the Judge of all the world deal justly?"[106] This question which Abraham asks God before the destruction of Sodom encapsulates many of the theological questions which rose to the surface following September 11th. Many Jews, and

[104] (Stern 2001)
[105] (Cohen 2001)
[106] Genesis 18:25.

Americans in general, struggled with holding the idea of a just and righteous God alongside the reality of acts of violent terrorism. Questions such as "how could God let such a thing happen?" and "what did we do to deserve this?" hung in the air around many synagogues. As several rabbis pointed out to me during one-on-one interviews, they did not sense the need for deep theological questions the day of September 11th or immediately following; most people were more concerned with seeking safety. The timing of the High Holy Days presented one of the earliest, if not the first, opportunity for many rabbis to address a large audience, and discuss more nuanced and existential questions concerning God's place in the world. Seeking to address these questions, rabbis offered several approaches.

One of the most recurrent conversations revolved around the concept of Free Will. Many rabbis sought to answer the question, "how could God let such a thing happen?" by shifting the active decision-making process onto humankind. As Rabbi Gunther Plaut wrote, "as I understand the Torah, God divested Himself of one essential aspect of His power when He created humanity and gave it freedom of choice."[107] Rabbi Robert Levine used our Free Will as humans to explain the atrocities of the world, "the price we pay for that freedom is that there will be random and senseless acts of evil and violence perpetrated by humans."[108] This theme allowed rabbis to spare God a trial, and instead focus on our actions, and importantly, responses as humans. Rabbis also used Free Will to highlight the potential for good in the world. It logically follows that if humankind can inflict great evil, so too can we cause great good. Rabbi James Gibson named our ability to do both good and evil as the "glory and curse of the human race,"

[107] (Plaut 2001)
[108] (Levine 2001)

and Rabbi Norman M. Cohen shared that "God is found in humanitarian efforts."[109][110] Using this belief in Free Will, rabbis urged congregants to harness their own Free Will to make positive changes in their personal lives, and the world around them.

Cohen's remarks spoke specifically to the God-like actions of individuals, but on a more basic, yet equally important level, any declaration of the existence of God made a powerful statement. Moments of great tragedy carry the ability to both weaken and strengthen personal faith. As seen in the discussion of Psalms in Chapter Two, there are some who fear God has abandoned them in times of need, and others that draw close, seeking shelter. In these moments, many congregants want to know what their rabbis believe when it comes to the existence and dimensions of God. In his congregation in New York City, Rabbi Robert Levine chose to provide comfort through his theology. "God is here. Here with the victims. Here to give us strength. Here to work with us to build a better world."[111] In his remarks, he provides reassurance in the existence of God for those who seek it, but also acknowledges the responsibility of all peoples to work towards rebuilding.

Other rabbis chose to remind congregants of previous tragedies which the Jews had survived with God by their side. Rabbi Jonathan Miller shared, "when the Babylonians carried us off into captivity, God accompanied us into our exile. During our litany of oppression, God sustained us. And when we were herded off to concertation camps, God was with us and not our tormentors. This is why we carry on."[112] Rabbi Daniel Polish also connected the past to the present by sharing a teaching on Psalm 137

[109] (Gibson 2001)
[110] (Cohen 2001)
[111] (Levine 2001)
[112] (Miller 2001)

in which God joins the exiled Israelites in weeping beside the waters of Babylon: “where was God? Grieving beside the people in the time of its most profound sorrow.”[113]

Still other rabbis decided to not speak in absolutes, and instead surrender to the mystery which surrounds the question of God. Rabbi Ellen Lippmann spoke directly to the conversation that many rabbis in the New York City area shared; the great “what-ifs” which occurred on September 11th. Countless stories were told of people missing trains, staying home sick with children, changing flights, and many more twists of fate which led to either safety or harm. While many people sought to make meaning of these chance happenings, Lippmann saw the Divine in the randomness of events. “I sense (God’s) mystery in those small changes that led to being safe or being in danger, because so often, for me, God is in the gaps we can't understand”[114][115]

Rabbi Samuel Stahl shared that he wrestled with the rational and non-rational parts of his brain, and that the non-rational “hints that maybe God has a larger plan which I cannot understand."[116] Stahl’s statement falls very much in line with the ending of the Book of Job as described in Chapter Two wherein God reprimands Job and his friends for speaking without real knowledge.[117]

Rabbi Melanie Aron also harnessed the words of Job and the stance of unknowing. Rabbi Aron used God’s response in Chapter 38 of Job as a way to criticize the outspoken televangelist Jerry Falwell who blamed Americans with “alternative

[113] (Polish 2001)
[114] The copy of the sermon made the word I assume to be (God’s) difficult to decipher, “God’s” appeared to make sense contextually.
[115] (Lippmann 2001)
[116] (Stahl 2001)
[117] Job 38:2.

lifestyles" for the events of September 11th.[118] Aron compared Falwell's finger pointing to the stances of Job's companions, saying "the Bible rejects these words as being neither helpful to the situation nor insightful in providing a deeper understanding of the workings of God."[119] In this instance, Aron used her strength in her beliefs and her skills as a teacher to defend vulnerable minority groups from the baseless accusations of hate which sadly accompanied and added to the tragedy of the attacks.

The discussion of God's role or absence in the attacks of September 11th clearly presented an opportunity to take a universal American moment and suffuse it with the particularisms of Jewish tradition. Though I have no doubt that other faith traditions faced similar questions around God and the attacks, the Jewish perspective offers what I believe to be a uniquely wide range of answers to the questions of God's identity and activity. Most of the rabbis I studied responded to the question of God in a reassuring tone, either trying to point to examples of God's presence in the glimmers of positivity, or by explaining that there are things beyond our knowing and we must come to terms with that fact. Notably absent from many of the sermons was the inclusion of psalms of pain and doubt. As discussed in Chapter Two, The Book of Psalms presents a variety of relationships with God, including ones of anger and doubt. As I suggested, Psalm 7 with its acerbic pronouncements of innocence in the face of unjust punishment and demands for God to wake up and return to the psalmist -- could have made for an excellent starting point for a sermon offering empathy to doubting congregants.

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[118] On Thursday, September 13th, 2001 on the 700 Club program, Falwell said "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'" (Goodstein 2001).
[119] (Aron 2001)

Defending Islam: For You Were Strangers in the Land of Egypt

As leaders of the Jewish community, rabbis are acutely aware of what it means to be a part of a targeted minority group. Jews and Judaism carry a long history of being a minority group and suffering repeated hatred and oppression. This reality of Judaism reaches back through the ages all the way to the Biblical accounts of the exile to Babylonia and enslavement in Egypt. Following the attacks of September 11th, many Jews no doubt felt under attack once more. And though politics surrounding Israel and the ever-present undercurrents of American anti-Semitism were prevalent, many Jews found themselves as a part of the larger American collective seeking a response to the attacks. Many Americans, including Jews, found themselves in a state of hyperarousal, leading to a fight-or-flight response. We have already discussed the rabbinic response to the flight response, encouraging congregants to "choose life" and resist the urge to withdraw from the world, but the opposite response proved just as concerning.[120] Many a rabbi took time in their High Holy Day sermons to address the tendency to fight, and the dangers of pointing blame at the Muslim community. Rabbi Ellen Lippmann recounted her experience in Brooklyn:

> "Immediately following on the heels of the attacks, the slander began: 'It's those damn Arabs,' someone told me when I went to vote, not realizing what had befallen us. I reminded her of Oklahoma City's bombing and how wrong we who blamed the Arabs had been. But when it began to seem that it had indeed been Arabs, Muslims, who killed without regard for life or status, Americans, New Yorkers, Brooklynites began to seek revenge by turning on Arabs, Muslims, who had nothing to do with the destruction. Children in school, women wearing headscarves were harassed and attacked, men were beaten and even killed."[121]

[120] (Stern 2001)
[121] (Lippmann 2001)

Neurologically, the desire makes sense: there is a desire to identify the threat and eradicate it. But rabbis worked to speak past the reptilian brain, the limbic system, towards the emotional brain, the cognitive, rational centers of the prefrontal cortex. Most rabbis did so by preaching patience, empathy, and love.

As discussed in Chapter One, the brain needs time for the prefrontal cortex to catch up to the limbic system in moments of trauma.[122] Though this fact relates to the split-second activities of the brain in response to trauma, the expanded concept can apply to our process of dealing with information as it unfolds. Wise rabbis verbally acknowledged the anger and desires for revenge that their congregants must have felt and worked to quell those urges. Rabbi David Stern warned, "as citizens we need to be wary lest our own justified outrage turn to blanket hatred of any one set of Americans, any one ethnic group, any one nationality... We must confront our own prejudices, battle and conquer them."[123]

Many rabbis held up the mirror to their congregants warning "let us be careful, however, of the prejudice and hatred of our enemies and not become like them."[124] The idea of meeting violence with violence, and hatred with hatred, was deemed hazardous. Rabbis who looked towards Israel could see an example of an ever-escalating conflict of action and retaliation that they hoped to avoid in America. As Rabbi Melanie Aron wrote, "history has been an insistent teacher, reminding us that revenge builds upon revenge and more revenge."[125]

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[122] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 60)
[123] (Stern 2001)
[124] (Cohen 2001)
[125] (Aron 2001)

In the Chapter One discussion of the Ventral Vagal Cortex, we learned the importance of building empathy and social response in moderating the fight-or-flight response.[126] In this way, rabbis worked to draw commonalities between their congregants and the Muslims and Arab-Americans whom they feared could fall victim to unwarranted backlash. Rabbi Barry Block spoke from personal experience to create empathetic bonds of support. "Few of us are blessed, as I am, to touch the hands and listen to the hearts of Moslem-Americans and Arab-Americans in our midst. They are as shattered and bewildered as every other American."[127]

Finally, rabbis returned to their Jewish sources and histories to draw out important messages of support for other groups. Rabbis acknowledged that Jews "know so well the sting of the stereotype and scapegoat," and that they should not afflict the same pain on others.[128] Rabbi David Stern reminded congregants of the repeated commandment "to know the heart of the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt," as a way to add further responsibility for the care of others.[129] And Rabbi Robert Levine went even further, tapping in to the themes of the High Holy Days by aggressively warning that "the judge of the entire earth will judge us too in terms of how we react to this crisis and reach out to our brothers and sisters, fellow Americans who grieve as well."[130]

Inspiration: Look for the Helpers

The constant media coverage from the attacks of September 11th proved to be both a curse and a blessing for the community at large. While some found themselves

[126] (Beauchaine, Gatzke-Kopp and Mead 2007)
[127] (Block 2001)
[128] (Cohen 2001)
[129] (Stern 2001)
[130] (Levine 2001)

overwhelmed with the horrific sights and sounds of the events, there also arose thousands of stories of everyday heroes who courageously found ways to make a difference on the day of the attacks and the week following. Many sermons included messages of hope and inspiration in the form of these accounts of valor. Some acts of bravery were heralded not to be emulated, but more so to memorialize acts of martyrdom. Rabbis recalled the first responders rushing into buildings, and the civilians on the plane in Pennsylvania who fought back against their hijackers, sacrificing their own lives to save the lives of potential targets elsewhere.[131]

Others turned to the response from citizens not directly involved in the attacks but feeling called to respond however they could. Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker captured the moment first through the immediate moments of bravery and love during the evacuation of Lower Manhattan and zoomed out to show the ripple effect spreading across the United States. “From all over New York, shop owners handed out water, tennis shoes, whatever was needed to survivors... The stories go on and on. All around the country, people donated blood, food, money, supplies, housed people stranded at the airports, and performed countless other acts of *hesed*, pure goodness.”[132] Rabbi David Stern’s comments were particularly moving:

> "The refutation of evil has already begun. It began even in the midst of destruction: when the first firefighter ran up the first steps, when the first office worker carried a colleague down. The refutation of evil by the rescue workers at the site-- who as we sit here continue to move one bucket at a time: for the living, for the dead, and most of all - - as assertion of humanity at the epicenter of hell... Our heroes with every exhausted shift, with every bucket of concrete, a world-restoring decision - to choose life."[133]

[131] (Aron 2001)
[132] (Spilker 2001)
[133] (Stern 2001)

Stern preached that the first step is essential, and every step afterwards a reaffirmation of good. Though he speaks in terms of an elevated moment, his message rings true across all aspects of life: start somewhere and keep going.

During any given sermon, many rabbis utilize the homiletic tool of ending a sermon with a *nechemta*, an emotionally positive charge which will hopefully inspire their congregations to thought or action. The need for messages of light, hope, and optimism become even more welcomed during moments of great trauma and tragedy such as the attacks of September 11th. Rabbis from across the country uses of tales of everyday heroics as the reminder that the world is not a totally evil place, and that even in the darkest hours there are people who shine brightly and lead us through to the other side. As Rabbi Deborah Zecher wrote, "these men and women have reminded us that we are capable of greatness, that we can surpass even our greatest expectations of what is possible in moments of crisis."[134] Finding inspiration from these acts of heroism, rabbis lead their congregations in the first steps of moving towards healing.

[134] (Zecher 2001)

Chapter 5: Moving Forward

Based on the discussion of what constitutes trauma from Chapter One, it reasons that the passing of time demands a shift in approach and responses to the attacks of September 11th. With the conclusion of the immediate threat of danger, different evaluations and actions could take place. In terms of brain function, as the medial prefrontal cortex works to identify the body as "safe", the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex takes notice of relationships to the outside world.[135] Like the poet of Lamentations, rabbis now surveyed the rubble after the destruction and worked to rebuild with a mixture of painful recognition and optimistic hope and faith. This is not to say that these rabbis sought to leave the past behind them and move forward, rather many clergy recognized the continual need for triage and support in the aftermath.

Healing Within the Congregation

In his book, *The Gift of Grief*, Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz, then a rabbi at Congregation Rodeph Sholom in New York, shares the story of a mother of three young children who lost her husband in the World Trade Center. Rabbi Gewirtz depicts a beautiful outpouring of support from friends and community which should serve as a model of care which can be adapted and replicated by a caring and connected congregation. The mother's community established food deliveries so she would not have to cook and clean, help getting her children to and from school, and even legal and financial counsel for the complex web of paperwork following her husband's untimely death. Rabbi Gewirtz

[135] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 69)

himself met with the mother regularly over the course of the first year.[136] Rabbi Gewirtz does not cover up the dark truth of the matter. He vividly acknowledges that even with the outpouring of love and support, the loss of a family member caused unimaginable suffering for this mother and her children which punctuated even the most mundane moments.

Rabbi Gewirtz does not share precisely what he and the mother discussed during their time together, but he does expand on his perception of the transformation he noticed in this woman and others going through grief:

> "It makes sense that loss or tragedy would bring people close to their faith community, not least because the community offers the solace of care from others. But what I am referring to is profoundly different. Some individuals find an intense connection to community, to God, and to self that they never lose for the remainder of their lives. This is not to say their entire lives revolve around spirituality, or that any of them wouldn't trade their strength and newfound faith a million times over for their loved one back. But they have managed to access a part of themselves they never knew existed, and it changes them forever."[137]

Rabbi Gewirtz does not theorize why the change takes place in some and not others, nor take credit for the mother's new-found source of strength and purpose. But in reading his words, it does become clear that the congregation provided an environment which helped to facilitate transformation through two avenues. The first came through the caring community aspects of neighborly support. The second came through spiritual and theological exploration provided through regular prayer services and depth-plumbing adult learning opportunities. All these characteristics were regular fixtures of the Rodeph Sholom community, which became valuable life preservers during this time of great need.

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[136] (Gewirtz 2008, 15)
[137] Ibid. 23-24

Speaking with Students

Within any Jewish community, children and teenagers proved some of the most challenging groups to speak to following September 11th. Rabbis shared that many parents reached out to them for advice on age-appropriate answers to have with their children. For the youngest of children, the ability to reassure them of their safety was key. "Tell them that you love them and that you're here that we're all here with them", advised Rabbi Wiener.[138]

Rabbi Levine remembered giving a similar message to the students of the Rodeph Sholom Day School who were gathered together on the day of the attack. He emphasized that they did not share full information about what had happened, believing that the terror and panic it would produce in the students should best be avoided. He also recalled that many young students had little understanding of where their parents worked and lived, which added a challenging element in their attempts to reassure and gain comprehension of the scenario.[139]

A need to process ideas and feelings became much more relevant for older students. In 2001, Rabbi Joshua Gruenberg, then a rabbinic student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, served as a teacher at a Jewish school in Long Island.

> "I just remember being struck by how troubling it was to them, that something like this could happen. For them, the hard thing to figure out was that they were shocked by it. I think the rest of us, you know, as an adult, it confirms your worst nightmares and your worst fears. And intuitively in your bones you do know that people are capable of such evil. Whereas as a teenager, you haven't really had to face that notion."[140]

[138] (Wiener 2018)
[139] (Levine 2018)
[140] (Gruenberg 2018)

Rabbi Gruenberg acknowledged that the fear presented as the most recognizable emotion in the teens he worked with. Gruenberg turned to a more familiar conversation based around fears and overcoming fears as the basis for his discussion with his class about terrorism.[141]

Rabbi Jill Maderer noticed that her confirmation students in Philadelphia were quick to look for the good such as stories of heroes and heroism. Similar to what Rabbi Gruenberg mentioned, and adding her strong ties to the New York/New Jersey region, Rabbi Maderer noticed a disconnect between her feelings and her students. She mentioned feeling almost frustrated that she and her students were not processing the moment in the same way. She found middle ground by focusing around the question, "how does a community comfort each other? How do we stand firm in our values and who we are and not be afraid because there are terrorists out there?"[142] By speaking to a question of personal identity, she found it possible to give her students space to explore their emotions, while also giving her space to feel her own.

Healing in the General Community

Turning outward to support the community at large became one of the most meaningful actions taken by many rabbis. Rabbis shared that their experience as clergy and chaplains led them to volunteer at a number of the response sites established by the Red Cross and other organizations. Rabbi Adelson volunteered at a family relief center

[141] Ibid.
[142] (Maderer 2018)

for months into the winter, and Rabbis Wiener and Rigler both spent time at Ground Zero with first responders who were coming off of their shifts[143][144][145].

When learning these stories through the interview process, my immediate question became "what can you say in that moment?". The rabbis I interviewed taught me that more important than what you can say is how you can listen. Rabbi Benjamin David explained resisting the urge to be a "fixer" before surveying the scene. "I've learned to sort of resist the urge to go marching in with a text, and rather come from a place of, 'I'm here, I'm present, I'm ready to listen and hear you and respond as is appropriate for you'".[146] Indeed listening and providing space for others to share their stories creates space for those people to weave together their experience into an understandable narrative and begin to heal.[147]

Permission for Joy

Rabbi Wiener relayed to me one of the most powerful stories of healing. She told the story of a night she spent with a firefighter at Ground Zero:

> "He said it had been almost a week since I've been home, and he was supposed to be going home for family wedding. And he couldn't imagine being at the wedding after what he had been doing for the week. Like, how can people go on with life? And I got him to talk about what he and the guys he had been in the pit with did at night to unwind and he started talking about those things. And I said, and that you need to be able to have some way to just relax and enjoy and laugh a little bit. And from there we were able to talk about what it was for the family to be able to celebrate a wedding."[148]

[143] (Adelson 2018)
[144] (Wiener 2018)
[145] (Rigler 2018)
[146] (David 2018)
[147] (van der Kolk, How Trauma Lodges in the Body 2017)
[148] (Wiener 2018)

The idea of being able to feel joy again following tragedy is not easily accessible for everyone. One of the most meaningful roles a rabbi can play is as a sort of gatekeeper to joy. Granting permission to celebrate can be a powerful moment to those who feel plagued by guilt or simply numb to the idea of moving forward. Being able to hold pain and joy in the same moment is a raw human experience that can benefit from guidance and witness which a rabbi can provide.

"Jews do not cancel," Rabbi Robert Levine said as he explained the choice to hold Bnei Mitzvah services following the attacks.[149] Several rabbis shared that they saw numerous *divrei torah* concerning the attacks of September 11th as 2001 and 2002 moved forward. The set of circumstances for a 12 or 13 year old are difficult to imagine. It is difficult to imagine the innocent worldview depicted above by Rabbis Maderer and Gruenberg, splintered by a catastrophe such as September 11th. The task of leading a congregation as a newly minted adult and sharing your views and opinions on the lessons of Judaism is difficult enough without the added the complexity of a national crisis. This indeed became a monumental transitional point for many young Jewish adults, who found themselves responding to the crisis in a public setting that they would otherwise not be thrust into. As Rabbi Levine continued, "it was their [young students] reference points to values and who they are".[150]

I spoke with two rabbis who did not face addressing Bnei Mitzvah dilemmas following September 11th, but shared from their experience following the shootings in Pittsburgh on October 27th, 2018. Rabbi Benjamin David, now the senior rabbi at Adath

[149] (Levine 2018)
[150] Ibid.

Emanu-El in Mt. Laurel, New Jersey shared his experience with the family scheduled for the Bat Mitzvah the week following the shooting.

> "The key for me is not to impose my own worldview to a 12 year old. So even though I as a rabbi, and as a dad, I feel all sorts of competing emotions and fear and anxiety about all of this, and pride regarding how the Jewish community has responded, I know that's not where this kid is. She's doing what I think all 12 and 13 year olds are doing the week of their Bat Mitzvah, which is freaking out about their Bar Mitzvah and getting excited about the party and practicing the Torah portion, and, you know, maybe polishing up to *dvar torah* a little bit. But she's also aware of Pittsburgh, and I remember reassuring her sort of like what I did with Monessen all those years ago, saying we're having this bat mitzvah, and it's going to be a bat mitzvah. [151] It's going to be a great celebration and affirmation of who we are. We're not turning it into anything else, you know, it's not going to be somber, and they really appreciated that. And I said, this is how we heal. This is how we grieve, by doing what we Jews do."[152]

Rabbi David understood the importance of creating space for the Bat Mitzvah student to hold her own emotions and concerns during a moment of crisis. What David mentions as the key, not imposing one's own will, actually shows a great deal of restraint. As afigure who is expected to speak publicly in moments of crisis, there is a strong desire to take control of the situation and steer as one sees fit. The idea of affirming the moment as an opportunity to proudly "do what Jews do" speaks to the brain and body's desire to return to a baseline feeling of safety and security.[153]

Rabbi Jill Maderer at Congregation Rodeph Shalom took the same opportunity to acknowledge the difficulty of the moment and to point to the Bat Mitzvah herself as a pathway towards a better world. She told the Bat Mitzvah family:

> "I just said to them this is it this is a really dark This is really dark and your children are the promise of tomorrow and this is what will get us through and there is nothing but joy when we think about your kids reading from Torah today. I didn't want to mar their day, I wanted to give

[151] Monessen refers to Temple Beth Am in Monessen, PA which was Rabbi David's student pulpit in September of 2001.
[152] (David 2018)
[153] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 56)

> the permission to celebrate. I said, 'this is your day to celebrate. Don't let anything stop that'".[154]

Rabbi Maderer knowingly or perhaps subconsciously tapped into the message of *Parashat Nitzavim* which we discussed more extensively in Chapter Two. The Torah portion begins with a message from God to the Israelites saying in Deuteronomy 29:14-14:

יג וְלֹא אִתְּכֶם לְבַדְּכֶם--אָנֹכִי כֹּרֵת אֶת-הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת וְאֶת-הָאָלָה הַזֹּאת	**13** I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone,
יד כִּי אֶת-אֲשֶׁר יֶשְׁנוֹ פֹּה עִמָּנוּ עֹמֵד הַיּוֹם, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ; וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר אֵינֶנּוּ פֹּה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם	**14** but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the LORD our God and with those who are not with us here this day.

The great commentator Rashi interprets "those who are not with us here this day" at end of Verse 14 to refer to the future generations who will also carry the covenant forward.[155] In her reassurance to the family, she managed to place the Bat Mitzvah at the center of the universe and the bridge to a thriving Jewish future. The message no doubt instilled courage in the young woman and her family, and gave them permission to "do what Jews do" by celebrating their embrace of Torah, and ensuring the continuation of a Jewish future.

<u>The Renewal of Body and Spirit: Self-Care in Moments of Crisis</u>

While conducting interviews for this project, I continuously thought of the personal burdens being carried by the rabbis responding to this moment in history. The physical and emotional tolls weighing on clergy seemed at times too much to carry. In thinking about best-practices for responding to tragedy, my studies at Hebrew Union

[154] (Maderer 2018)
[155] Rashi commentary of Deuteronomy 29:14 sourced from www.sefaria.org

College repeatedly emphasize the need to take care of oneself. Rabbis shared a variety of different practices and approaches to self-care during September 11th.

Relying on a pre-existing practice presented as the most helpful element in this time of great stress and toil. The two most common responses to the question of self-care were prayer practice and talk therapy. For rabbis who already had established therapists, being able to rely on that outlet proved to be of incredible value. In times of trauma and great stress the section of the brain known as Broca's area which controls reasonable and coherent speech often becomes damaged.[156] Articulating experiences can become incredible challenging, and the space provided by talk therapy to work through emotions and speak openly and candidly about your experiences becomes an incredible safe haven for many. It is worth noting that during September 11th, students at the Jewish Theological Seminary were part of the Columbia University healthcare system and had access to free or inexpensive therapy from doctoral students in psychology or medical students in psychiatry.[157] Though I fully recognize the complexities and barriers behind providing accessible mental healthcare to rabbis or rabbinic students, the availability in this situation appears to a phenomenal resource worth pursuing if at all possible by seminaries and congregations alike.

Others turned to prayer as routinized meditative experience. While some preferred private prayer and quiet reflection, others found the experience of praying in community greatly beneficial. One of the nuances that arose in was the benefit of having someone else lead prayer. Rabbi Peter Rigler recalled attending services regularly at a congregation on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and also seeking solace with friends

[156] (van der Kolk, How Trauma Lodges in the Body 2017)
[157] (Gruenberg 2018)

and classmates who lead daily services at Hebrew Union College.[158] Rabbi Joshua Gruenberg found himself praying at his hometown congregation and spoke about how meaningful he found it to observe and absorb the prayer experience without the added element of having to lead others. The experience allowed him the personal space in a familiar setting to sit with all his thoughts and emotions and pray without feeling as though he were under scrutiny in any way from congregants and alike.[159]

In these two examples of prayer experience, we see the benefit of connecting with a community of peers and other clergy who can help to shoulder the responsibility of leadership and provide respite for one another to not feel "on" all the time.

As explored in the sermons from the High Holy Days, the responsibility to speak to a congregation can carry with it a different set of expectations than speaking personally from your heart to a therapist or a peer group. Rabbi Benjamin David, shared his experience as the Managing Editor of the Hebrew Union College student journal, *Davar Aher.*[160] Though the term *Davar Aher* is usually translated from the Talmudic mechanism meaning "a different view", David pointed out that term is also used to refer to traif, something that is not kosher. With this undercurrent, David explained that students who wrote for the journal saw this space as an opportunity to express themselves in writing, sharing in a way that they may not be comfortable doing in a congregational setting. The articles included in the journal surrounding September 11th portray students feeling anger with God, frustration with the responses from the community, and uncertainty and hopelessness.[161] The production of the journal promoted self-care in three ways. First, by

[158] (Rigler 2018)
[159] (Gruenberg 2018)
[160] (David 2018)
[161] (B. David Spring 2002)

encouraging students to write down their experiences and feelings as a creative outlet during crisis. Secondly, as a way to thoughtfully prepare and share their thoughts with a peer group, and gain support and ideally comfort through that community. And finally, as a preserved record of the experience, which can now be accessed at any time, providing an opportunity for hindsight and memorialization of the moment which supports reflection and healing.

Most of the rabbis I interviewed shared that self-care was not as crucial an aspect of their rabbinate in 2001 as it is today. One can look to advancements in many fields to find progress in the world of self-care, but the need to emphasize taking care of oneself has grown exponentially in the past two decades. My research surrounding neuroplasticity and the responses I received from rabbis made it clear that cultivating a self-care regimen provides a rabbi with routine and reflection which promote a feeling of security and calm.[162] Even in times of relative peace and quiet self-care practices are beneficial to one's health. And when moments of crisis or tragedy do strike, having a practice to rely on rather than building something from scratch in a moment of need, appears to be a practice that presents greatly beneficial physical and mental health outcomes.

[162] (van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score 2014, 56)

Chapter 6: May Their Memories be for a Blessing: Memorial Practices Surrounding September 11th

Judaism is tied to memory and the passage of time in a myriad of different ways. For many Jews, these two concepts are most strongly felt surrounding the death of a loved one. The practice of observing *yahrzeit*, the yearly anniversary of a death, is widespread in the Jewish community. So too are days of remembrance surrounding tragic losses of life, such as *Tisha B'Av* marking the destruction of the First and Second Temple, *Yom HaZikaron* honoring Israel's fallen soldiers, and *Yom HaShoah* memorializing those who perished in the Holocaust. The phrase "Never Forget" has become attached to preserving the memory of the Holocaust, and also the memory of September 11th. It is no surprise that Jewish communities found ways to mark this tragedy on a yearly basis. By doing so, Jewish communities strive to honor those who lost their lives and continue to learn from the lessons of the day so as not to allow history to repeat.

One of the earliest acts to memorialize September 11th came in December of 2001 at the Reform Movement's Biennial Convention in Boston. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, then president of the UAHC, knew that the recent of memory of September 11th would prevade this large gathering. Almost immediately following the attacks on September 11th, Rabbi Yoffie and his team set to work planning for Biennial. They wanted to be sure to find an appropriate way to address the emotions in the atmosphere in an appropriate liturgical setting, and acknowledge the hard work that had been done in response to the tragedy.[163] The result was a hugely emotional memorial service honoring congregants

[163] (Yoffie 2018)

and first responders. For Rabbi Yoffie the most memorable part of the experience was including a representative for the New York City Fire Department who graciously accepted a sizeable donation gathered through *tzedakah* from across the UAHC.[164] Tzedakah initiatives such as this provided an opportunity for Jews geographically distanced from the epicenters of the attack to feel that they could contribute in the healing process.[165]

Other efforts sought to create a permanent memorial representative of a specific community's loss. Congregation Rodeph Sholom in New York City observes September 11th every year by inviting family members who lost loved ones to light candles, and lighting a special memorial plaque which honors the fallen. The congregation lost a security guard who was also a firefighter at a nearby station, and the two communities continue to gather together for memorial services. Rabbi Levine said of their observances, "we probably never will let up, we do this annually in the same way we do for Kristalnacht."[166]

Rabbi Joshua Gruenberg moved to a congregation in Yardley, Pennsylvania in 2001. Yardley is home to many New York City commuters and suffered a great loss of life in the attacks of September 11th. Upon joining the community, Rabbi Gruenberg met family who lost their eldest son in one of the towers. The family helped to spearhead the building of a memorial garden in Yardley, and hosts a yearly memorial service there on September 11th. Rabbi Gruenberg, who lost two friends in the attacks, had the honor of speaking at the memorial on several occasions. He shared his impressions of the family

[164] Ibid.
[165] (Marder 2018)
[166] (Levine 2018)

and their ability to find comfort in the creation of this memorial. “they’ve taken that sadness, and they've turned it into blessing in a really definitive way. I think they’ve dealt with it in a really healthy way.”[167]

Rabbi Simkha Weintraub consistently created and partook in memorial services on the *yahrzeit* of September 11th. But he shared that his most impactful work occurred with a group of mourners known as the 9/11 Healing Group which met starting six months after September 11th up until the 10th anniversary of the attacks.[168] The group spanned the spectrum of denominational Jewish life in New York, and dealt with issues of spiritual care and also practical responsibilities. The group met with representatives of the Victim’s Compensation Fund; a harrowing challenge wherein the bereaved had to monetize their losses. Being able to do so in a supportive group setting proved incredibly meaningful to the members of the group.[169] The group even travelled to Israel together and met with Israelis and Palestinians who had lost loved ones to violence as a way to further their healing process. Rabbi Weintraub shared that the group size and dynamics shifted over time, until only mothers of victims remained. “Though spouses started to fade, the mothers could have gone on forever.”[170]

Though the eighteen years since September 11th, 2001 may seem like a long time in the grand scheme of life, it is truthfully very short. Though as a nation and as individuals we have done our best to rebuild, move forward, and choose life, the scars from those who suffered loss can last a lifetime. In Chapter One we discussed the topic of neuroplasticity, and how the reactive tendencies of the brain shift over time in a “use-

[167] (Gruenberg 2018)
[168] (Weintraub 2018)
[169] (Weintraub, Repair Hero: Rabbi Simkha Weintraub On Ongoing Healing After 9/11 2012)
[170] (Weintraub 2018)

dependent fashion" based on the messages we receive and the repetition of recalled information.[171] The events of September 11th unquestionably changed the way Americans think and behave in the world. From its inception, Judaism has embraced the importance of memory as a tool for meaning making. Through the remembrance of our history, we ensure that important moments and people become a piece of our identity as individuals and as a religious body. As American Jews continue to honor the dead, and reflect on this national tragedy, September 11th becomes a permanent fixture in the yearly cycle of memory. How rabbis choose to acknowledge this yearly memorial will inevitably change over time, but guided by the experiences and the wisdom of those who lived, served, and healed through this unique moment in time, we will certainly never forget.

[171] (Perry, et al. 1995)

Conclusion

When I embarked on this journey of discovery, I did not know exactly where it would lead me. Over the past five years of rabbinical study, time and time again I witnessed moments which held both joy and pain, like the transition from *Yom HaZikaron* to *Yom Haatzmaut* or the laughter in a shiva house. I knew that by selecting a thesis based around trauma and tragedy that I would certainly find myself immersed in moments of darkness, pain, and suffering. But I also hoped that accompanying those moments of darkness would be moments of light, rebirth, and healing. Indeed there were.

The reality of the world we inhabit is that it can turn violent or tragic in an instant. Be it mass shootings or cancer diagnoses, as a rabbi you are called on to respond in a moment's notice, regardless of how prepared you may or may not feel. So many of the rabbis I spoke to said that no one was prepared for September 11th. But nonetheless they found it within themselves to step forward and, mustering whatever resources they had to make a difference in the lives of their communities. I wanted to know what served them well, so that my future colleagues and I could learn from their examples.

I began by studying the brain because I knew next to nothing about how our response system functioned, and I assumed that many clergy would feel the same way. Though my research only scratched the surface of neuroscience and physiology, the lessons I learned informed the remainder of my studies. I learned that the brain and body more than anything else needs to feel safe. Without safety, the brain cannot begin to explore and develop a sense of wonder, discovery, camaraderie, and all the other positive attributes we clergy seek to build in our communities. We talk so frequently of building

safe and welcoming environments, and that concept has taken on an even stronger significance now that I am equipped with the anatomical background to support it.

I learned the necessity to pause and reflect before acting. The brain responds in waves, and the rational brain needs time to catch up to the faster acting fight-or-flight response. In the midst of my research, the shootings at Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh took place. I immediately turned to social media to see how some of the rabbis I respected would respond – and I noticed something fascinating. The first comments that filled my feed were aggressive and hate-filled or panicked, and none of them came from the sources I wanted to hear from. After a period of time, the rabbis I admired began to post their thoughts, which were universally more thoughtful and collected, inspiring right action and appropriate reaction. These rabbis knew to pause, and allow their full faculties to address the situation.

To a person, every rabbi I spoke with agreed that their experience with September 11th prepared them for Pittsburgh. They mentioned not only the value of the personal experience dealing with such an intense challenge, but also the institutional enhancements which occurred post-September 11th which continue to aid Jewish communities in times of need. Rabbis mentioned a re-emphasis in security which not only protects congregations, but also instills the essential sense of safety mentioned above. Communication plans are now in place so that rabbis or other congregational leadership know immediately who to contact in the event of an emergency. More rabbis participate in Red Cross and similar trainings so that they are prepared for whatever may come their way. These practical details may seem mundane, but as a future community leader I now know the importance of putting these systems in place.

The day after the Pittsburgh shooting, I attended a healing service at my home congregation. The sanctuary overflowed with congregants and community members alike, and the bimah brimmed with speakers from across the city. I found one of the rabbis and asked him how long it took to pull the event together. He began to explain the details of who called whom and what emails went out, but then he stopped himself and said, "six years". He was referring to how essential the congregation's well-established relationships with their community became in their time of crisis. The congregation, along with others in the city had all been a part of many interfaith groups and programs over the years, and grew to love and support one another. Another rabbi from the congregation shared that the first call she received once the news of Pittsburgh broke was from the reverend across town asking how they could help.

The most important lesson that I take away from my thesis research is the importance of preparation. At the outset, this statement appears counter-intuitive: how can you prepare for the unimaginable? Time and time again I saw rabbis relying on pre-existing practices and relationships in their moment of crisis. Whether it be a well-read rabbi knowing where to turn for liturgical guidance, a well-connected rabbi finding communal support, or well-centered rabbi relying on their meditation practice for guidance, September 11th proved that having systems in place creates a layer of protection and direction where chaos otherwise reigns. Listening to rabbis recount their experiences, I began to think of my own personal preparations and question how they would serve me in a moment of crisis. The self-evaluation has been revealing and inspiring as I try to better myself for my own sake, and the sake of those who may turn to me for leadership.

And in those moments of leadership, face-to-face with an individual or standing in front of a large group, I believe that the wisdom I gained from this experience will guide me. I learned from many rabbis the importance of listening and allowing the other to lead. A quote from Rabbi Benjamin David stuck with me where he advised to resist the urge to offer solutions, and rather sit back and learn why someone has sought your council and what they are seeking.[172] Many rabbis, including myself, enter the rabbinate because they have a desire to help others, but we must be careful to acknowledge that there are situations in which we can guide and heal, but we cannot fix or cure. It takes a great deal of humility to enact this understanding when face-to-face with someone who is suffering. Our natural tendency is to remove pain and threat in order return to homeostasis, but the reality is that there are some things we can never return from, only work to carve out new meaning in a new reality. Hand in hand with this humility is the understanding that sometimes, you are not the right person to council someone in need. I credit Rabbi Joshua Gruenberg for reinforcing the importance of creating community relationships with a variety of expert care providers to refer congregants to when you recognize the need for outside assistance.[173]

When given the opportunity to speak, know that the tradition holds great wisdom from an endless array of perspectives and opinions. Through my exploration of traditional texts surrounding trauma, the idea was reinforced that our texts allow for pain and anger, as much as they inspire devotion and hope. The sources that rabbis relied on in the wake of September 11th were familiar to their congregations; accessible prayers and pieces of Torah. Rarely did I see deep dives into esoteric material. And even in limiting

[172] (David 2018)
[173] (Gruenberg 2018)

the material to the more universally recognizable, there are still limitless opportunities from which to teach. In times of tragedy, go with what you know, and what your community will know. Allow Judaism to speak in familiar tones.

Finally, I learned that it is okay to be proud of yourself for hard work in tough moments. At my High Holy Day pulpit in 2015, I delivered a sermon about "*hineni* moments", mirroring the phrase uttered by Abraham and Isaac during the *Akedah.*[174] These are the moments in our lives when everything pauses and allows us to declare, "this is who I am, and this is what I do". These are character building moments, and reinforcements of decisions made across a lifetime. It is my belief that September 11th is an ultimate example of one of these moments for many rabbis. These moments raise challenges and doubts, but in the end offer reassurance and proof that you are in the right place at the right time for the right reasons. In order to respond to the greatest challenges life throws at you, all you can be is yourself.

Rely on your experience and wisdom.

Rely on your presence and patience.

Rely on what you know and who you know.

And answer the call with, "*Hineni"* – this is who I am, and this is what I can do.

[174] *Hineni* - הִנֵּנִי translated as "here I am" in Genesis 22:1 via the JPS Tanakh.

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