

Remembering 9/11 in Our Tefilot

It is hard to believe that 9/11 occurred twenty-five years ago. It is difficult to forget the footage of planes hitting buildings on a bright blue morning full of promise. There was the outcry over the loss of life, the photos of people trying to find loved ones, and the ash and rubble all over New York City Streets. Those of us who lived through it can tell anyone where we were when we heard and saw the news as if it were yesterday.

The solemnity of tefila on those first Days of Awe blanketed every congregation. In tears and with a hushed sense of trepidation, the words were almost impossible to utter: “Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall live out his allotted time, and who shall depart before his time. Who by water, and who by fire?” The flames of the planes replayed in our minds as we thought of the firefighters, police officers, and volunteers who risked everything to rescue a life.

Since then the skyline of the City has changed as has our sense of fragility and security. And we have so much to pray for as Jews a quarter of a century later. On

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this tender anniversary, we might turn to a different, very poignant tefila of this season of *teshuva* and *bakasha*, change and profound supplication, found at the end of the Musaf Avoda on Yom Kippur. It is a prayer recited by the Cohen Gadol, but it often gets eclipsed by our excitement to belt out the song Marei Cohen, where we recite in detail the way the Cohen’s face looked when he completed all of his tasks and achieved atonement for the nation, for his household, and for himself.

In that tefila, the High Priest asked God to provide a year of blessing and success, economic stability, and spiritual prosperity. He asked for happiness, deliverance, and independence. The buoyancy and hopefulness of the words, however, are not matched by its somber ending: “And for the people of Sharon, he would pray: ‘May it be Your will, God, our God, and God of our fathers, that their homes shall not become their graves.’”

The high note suddenly becomes a low note as we wonder what tribulations the people of the Sharon Valley faced. The coastal valley, it seems, was an area of flash floods where water pooled, and the poor residents of the area could not build permanent homes. This was enough of a crisis that at the most holy and dramatic



Dr. Erica Brown

*Vice Provost for Values & Leadership,
Yeshiva University*

of moments, the Cohen Gadol ensured that the whole community focus its attention on one region in peril and ask that their lives be spared.

September 11th is a reminder that no home or office should become a grave and that in times of holiday happiness, we can never forget those most vulnerable to terrorism, natural disasters, and unexpected upheavals. Our own tefilot cannot be complete unless we make room in our hearts from those in crisis, even when they are not close to us in time or space. Ten years after 9/11, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: “The only way to save the world is to begin with ourselves. Our burden after 9/11 is to renew the moral disciplines of freedom. Some say it can’t be done. They are wrong; it can and must. Surely we owe the dead no less.”

