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ON GOD'S MOUNTAIN, THERE IS VISION

He found himself staring into the sky: moments before, blue as a daydream, now thick with smoke and ash. It flooded his nostrils, seared his throat, stung his eyes. He willed his arms to move but found them bound to his side. His body had gone to stone. Every muscle froze except his eyes which darted back and forth in search of a face. His vision blurred in the haze. The sky turned red and black, sheets of fire and soot, floating down, rising up in plumes, smoldering embers scattered on the ground, the glint of metal piercing the air, the ringing in his ears, the fear that pinned him down.

This he knew: if he ever made it out of this alive, nothing would ever be the same.

He heard a voice. It sounded like father muttering to himself, talking himself down the way mother did when father was being headstrong, impatient, impervious to reason. "*Abraham, Abraham.*" The knife clattered to the ground. Father's fists unclenched. Isaac's stayed balled up, a knot of tendon, muscle, and bone.

He remained immobilized, bound in place, eyes closed tight, ears straining to stifle the sound – father's footfalls crunching this way and that, a high shrieking noise, desperate and inhuman, that seemed to go on for hours, and then nothing. Nothing, but a still, small voice, a low murmuring sound. Father breathing, slow and heavy.

Isaac blinked his stinging eyes and squinted to survey the ruin: the broken stones and fuming cinders, the blood soaking into the gravel, the smell of the ram upon the altar, its mangled body turning black as it went up into the sky as a burnt offering, father low to the ground, hunched over, the wreckage of a man.

They would not walk on together after this. How could they?

They stood together for a moment, father and son, atop Mount Moriah. Before turning his back and trudging off, Abraham would give this place a new name, this ground zero where, in a few terrible hours, everything changed.

וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ | יִרְאֶה אֱשֶׁר יֹאמַר הַיּוֹם בְּהָר
יְהוָה יִרְאֶה:

Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh – the place where God sees – of which it is said, even today, "On God's mountain there is vision" (Gen. 22:14).

Adonai yireh, the place where God sees.

Today, on this Shabbat that marks the 25th yahrzeit of 9/11, and nearly three years since October 7th, we try to see, looking back with Jewish eyes.

Today we undertake a "spiritual eye exam": not to test our eyesight, but to examine what we've chosen to look at, and what we've closed our eyes to. What, since 9/11, have we failed to see? And what, since October 7th, might we choose to envision differently? How, especially now, might we move from Moriah – the mountain of trauma – to

Adonai-yireh, the vista of vision? How can we transform suffering to seeing, wound to witness?

Three days after 9/11, at Friday night services, a hundred members of our WRT community came up to the bimah to *bensch gomei*, the tradition of reciting a prayer for those who've survived a brush with death. Some of you were there, had seen it all and lived to tell: the fire and the ash; the towers disintegrating into heaps of twisted metal and shards of glass; the bodies, broken and plummeting. Paralysis was momentary. Unbound from Ground Zero, that unholy altar, survivors picked themselves up and began to run, block after block, through smoke and debris.

And we witnessed along with them, on our TV screens, these images none of us can ever unsee. We saw this as well: the feet of first responders surging into the flames, hands sifting through the rubble; the posters of the missing; the strangers turned supporters; the flags and banners on the balconies, the city that refused to surrender to fear. On 9/11 we saw the worst of humanity; in the hours and days that followed we saw the very best.

And yet much, still, we did not see, not clearly, not at the time. We may have heard reports of cheers erupting from East Jerusalem and the West Bank, of candy strewn across the streets of Gaza City and Nablus, presaging the gleeful scenes immediately following the butchery and kidnappings of October 7th. But we failed to see how the masterminds of 9/11 rooted their rationale in a seething, unquenchable hatred of the Jews.

The fires at Ground Zero were still burning when antisemitic conspiracy theories began to spread like wildfire, recycling old tropes circulated across centuries of European history, repackaged by the Nazis and the Soviets: that Jews control governments, finance, and media; that Israel manipulates world events.

In Bin Laden's 2002 "Letter to America" justifying 9/11, the word "Israel" appears nineteen times and "Jews" another ten. The antisemitism is not incidental; it's structural. He rails against *"the Jews, who control your policies, media and economy."* He calls the Jewish claim to our ancestral homeland *"one of the most... widely-circulated fabrications*

in history." He and his followers would repeat these lies again and again, in the years following 9/11.

They echo throughout the 1988 chartering document of Hamas, which provides the connective tissue between 9/11 and 10/7. Its preamble quotes the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood: *"Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it."* It goes on to cite the notorious Russian forgery the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* – published in 1903 as "proof" of a Zionist plot to control the world. On October 7th, Hamas acted on what its charter promised, murdering and maiming Jews and launching a war not only against the State of Israel as a political entity, but against the Jews as a People.

These documents – the ideologies they espouse and the attacks they have inspired and rationalized – are not ancillary, but rather, fundamental to present-day antisemitism. They speak in identical registers: Jews control money, media, and governments; the destruction of Israel is a divine imperative. The language did not evolve

between 9/11 and 10/7 because it didn't have to. The same conspiracy theories, the same theological claims, have been there all along.

But our eyes did not clearly see the antisemitism at the heart of jihadism: an ideology that is neither synonymous with Islam nor shared by the overwhelming majority of the world's Muslims, but that is deadly when wielded by well-funded, armed, and organized fundamentalists.

And we did not teach our children to recognize it.

Thunderstruck by 9/11, most of us who lived through it inadvertently did what trauma survivors tend to do: avoid bringing up memories that re-inflict pain and anxiety, and, especially, avoid inflicting what we felt on our children and grandchildren. Nevertheless we failed to teach a generation to recognize the ideological vocabulary of jihadism and its inherent strain of antisemitism – and were consequently shocked when that vocabulary, that virus, reappeared, seemingly everywhere, in forms we should have recognized.

Like those of you who came up to the *bimah* after 9/11, Isaac himself survived a near brush with death. He may have come down from Mount Moriah to tell the tale; the ram may have gone to its sacrificial death in his place; but Isaac would never again be the same.

Torah depicts the grown-up Isaac as quiet, passive, aloof. How could anyone have the words for such an unspeakable trauma? After the *Akedah*, his binding and near-sacrifice, Isaac lives a life estranged from his father and family of origin. In older age, Isaac goes blind. A perceptive midrash proposes that when Abraham raised the knife above his throat, the angels wept, and their burning tears fell into Isaac's eyes, precipitating his eventual blindness (*Bereshit Rabbah* 65:10).

We too have fallen victim to post-traumatic blindness. There are the things we did not see about our enemies. But there are also the things we did not see about *ourselves*: failures not so much of *seeing*, then, but of *vision*.

9/11 shattered Americans' trust in the basic promise of safety and invincibility from foreign terror, much the same way that October 7th shattered Israelis' – and world Jewry's – confidence that *never again* was, more or less, a *fait accompli*. Here in the States, sixty years after Pearl Harbor, we took it as an article of faith that a large-scale attack on American soil was a thing of the past.

Pre-October 7th Israel surely understood better the threat of foreign attack, and yet found itself totally unprepared for a mass-scale invasion from Gaza.

With trust gone, both our societies engaged in trade-offs to regain a sense of security. Just forty-five days after 9/11, Congress approved vastly expanded government surveillance powers. Following October 7th, the Knesset approved similar emergency provisions. These measures promised protection while exacting steep costs in personal liberty and privacy. This in turn has emboldened those with ulterior motives to exploit those measures for antidemocratic ends.

The world we live in today – from the procedures we willingly, if uncomfortably, accept at airports and, yes, especially, synagogues, to the capture of our online activity that we routinely shrug off as a feature of living in the age of "big data" – is fully a post-9/11, post-October-7th reality. We made our choices, mind you, not blindly, but simply doing the best with what we had at the time.

Our return to war in the Middle East – the historic effort by Israel and the US to degrade Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Islamic Regime in Iran – speaks to a collective clearheadedness about our enemies. Their willingness to carry out more 9/11s and more October 7ths is sufficient rationale to declare jihadism a persistent and intolerable threat to the West.

But there's a difference between *seeing* and *vision*. You can see a problem clearly, name the harm it causes, and still lack the *vision* to deal with it effectively. One long-term response to 9/11 – 20 years of US military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan – was premised on the idea that we

could remake the Middle East through overwhelming use of force and a relative paucity of political planning and engagement. Israel and the US may well be living a version of the same lesson in Gaza and Iran right now.

Rosh Ha-Shanah, the new year, invites us to grapple with substantive questions. In what, and in whom, do we put our faith? What are the limits of firepower and surveillance in dealing with our adversaries? When will we earnestly reckon with the limits of strength and the necessity of imagination?

We see more clearly today that wars may be won or lost on the field of combat, but the much harder task of winning the peace – of imagining, building, and sustaining a durable peace – is one that happens only through the work of negotiation and compromise, sacrifice and mutual accountability.

A century ago, well before the establishment of the State of Israel, Religious Zionists debated exactly this matter: how to achieve enduring Jewish sovereignty in our ancestral homeland – seeing that military force would be

necessary to subdue our enemies – while also acknowledging that military force *alone* could never sustain Jewish statehood, long-term.

Rabbi Moshe Avigdor Amiel, who would later become Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, wrote an essay way back in 1929, when violent skirmishes between Arabs and Jews erupted in the Holy Land. It is called "The Sword and the Book."

"Truly," he wrote, "the Holy One never likes wars. On the contrary, SHALOM is God's name.... [T]he war against the sword is fought by the book.... The book of paper and parchment will endure longer than all the swords made from many kinds of metal;... all will be beaten and scattered to the wind, and the book shall reign alone" (Amiel, "The Sword and the Book," *Derashot El Ami* volume 3, *Ha-Ivri*, Jerusalem, 1929).

The exercise of raw power does not constitute a vision for lasting peace and prosperity. War is, at best, a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Encouragingly, political imagination and moral vision are ingrained in our heritage, both as Jews and as Americans. 250 years ago, the Framers of American independence appealed to "unalienable rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," insisting that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." 78 years ago, the Israeli Declaration of Independence affirmed that the Jewish spirit found first expression in "the eternal Book of Books," and that the newborn State of Israel would "be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants...."

We stand now on a precipice, *seeing* the way in which the traumas of 9/11 and 10/7 have molded our present reality, but still impaired when it comes to a *vision* of American and Jewish destiny about which we can feel both physically secure and morally proud.

What would this vision require of us?

What security arrangements would be necessary?

What political arrangements?

What obligations on the part of Palestinians?

What on the part of Israelis?

What accountability should be expected, and how would it be enforced?

This Rosh Ha-Shanah – twenty-five years after 9/11, three years after October 7th, 7 ½ months after the last hostage came home from Gaza – let's come down from the mountain of trauma, turn away from our blindness, toward seeing, and, ultimately, to vision. Turn from the sword, and pick up the Book. Or, if we must – given the painful reality of this moment in Jewish history – hold the sword in one hand and the book in the other.

There is, it turns out, a message still waiting for us in our Book of Books. For if you want to know whether healing is possible after Moriah, don't take my word for it: Torah tells us where Isaac went.

He never did return to the mountain. Shaken and alone, estranged from father and family, Isaac eventually made his way somewhere else.

We next meet Isaac two full chapters and many years after the *Akedah*. He has relocated to an oasis in the Negev called *Be'er Lahai Ro'i*, meaning, *The Well of the Living One Who Sees Me* (Gen. 24:62).

This is Hagar's well. The well named by the Egyptian maidservant who lived in Isaac's childhood home, the mother of his estranged brother Ishmael, the woman whose progeny would give rise — both sacred Jewish and sacred Muslim traditions hold — to the Arab peoples of the land, the woman who fled that same household in her own anguish, the woman who became the only person in the entire Torah to give God a name of her own: *El Ro'i*, the God Who Sees Me (Gen. 16:13-14).

The mountain of trauma bears Abraham's name for God. The well of healing bears the name given by Hagar.

And Isaac — bound, scarred, bewildered — left the mountain and chose the well.

It was there, lifting his eyes, that Isaac saw a caravan approaching, bearing Rebecca; there, that she lifted her eyes and saw him; there that he loved, and there that he was comforted (Gen. 24:64-67). The survivor of the altar made his home at the living well of being seen.

We need to find our way home to that same well. The well of healing and strength that we Americans found in one another after 9/11. That we Jews, that we as a WRT family, found in one another after October 7th. That we feel when we hold and are held in our times of loss and grief, when we experience human connection and the blessing of community.

I earnestly hope we can find our way to the kind of *seeing* we managed in those terrible and beautiful days after 9/11, when we, in our collective hurt, our collective need to hold and be held, were able to see past every difference, in color or creed, political party or point of view, and simply see one another.

And I earnestly hope that we can, some day, find a way to that *vision*, where the traumatized children of Abraham and Sarah, and the traumatized children of Abraham and Hagar – the Jewish children of Isaac, and the Muslim children of Ishmael – will see one another in our shared humanity, our shared hurt, our shared hope, and live side by side, at long last, by the Well of the Living One Who Sees.

I do not know if we can see that far.

But, by God, we can lift our eyes, and try.

Shanah Tovah.