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Congregation Shir Shalom
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“Fulfilling Our Promises: The Heroic Story of Rick Rescorla on 9/11”

Shanah Tovah!

Wherever they went, our Biblical ancestors carried three items to get the attention of all the people:

1. A shofar to announce the New Year.
2. A tambourine to dance in celebrations.
3. And, silver trumpets, blown only on occasion of extreme emergency.

These first two are well known to all of us. All synagogues have shofars, and most have tambourines. Silver trumpets, on the other hand, are absent from the Jewish community altogether. The only record we have of them is from the tenth chapter of the Book of Numbers where Aaron and his sons are told, “when you are at war in your land against an aggressor who attacks you, you shall sound short blasts on the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the ETERNAL your God and be delivered from your enemies.” In case of emergency, break the glass, sound the trumpets.

Twenty five years ago this morning, a giant blast of a silver trumpet could be heard from docks of lower Manhattan to the Mojave desert in Arizona, from the Beaches of Miami to the Peak of Mount Rainer. Loud piercing, and without end. There are few events in history that instantaneously change everything. Their impact is so great on all of our lives it imprints itself like a time stamp. 9/11 was one of those days.

Nod your head if you remember exactly where you were when you heard the news. If you remember exactly what you were doing? What you were wearing? Who you were talking to? Even after a quarter century, the memory is still fresh and raw in all of our minds, and in our hearts.

I remember watching the second plane hit on my 13 inch television. It looked so small on the screen it hardly felt real. I remember trying to call my sister in New York City back. She had called me after the first plane hit. It was her birthday. I remember going to attend classes at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical School in a daze. I remember heading home after classes that day when they were canceled. The day was so spectacularly beautiful it felt surreal that something so devastating had just occurred. I remember wondering when - if ever - would life return to normal. September 11th, 2001 left an indelible mark on all of our lives.

It was a day of immense human suffering, of emotional trauma, of surprise and shock, of pure terror. But, it was also a day filled with deep human connection, of bravery and comradery, of compassion and caring. It was a day when strangers on the street met and consoled one another, where the whole world felt impossibly big, but also beautifully small.

In honor of the latter, I would like to share the story of one act of heroism so great to this day it brings me chills. The story is a reminder of how light can shine through even in the darkest of days, and that an act of true evil and hatred, can be matched equally by an act of pure love and devotion.

At 8:46 Eastern Standard Time on September 11, 2001 American Airlines Flight 11 struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center, none of us were the least bit prepared. The 400,000 pound Boeing 767 traveling 430 miles per hour, filled with 92 passengers, seemed to come out of nowhere. Outside of the terrorists themselves, no one could have foreseen what was about to happen, that is with the exception of one man: Rick Cyril Rescorla.

A Vietnam vet, who had earned a Purple Heart for his bravery in the Battle of Ia Drang, a fierce fight in which the heavily undermanned American forces had been able to hold off the North Vietnamese forces for over three days, Rick was no stranger to the battlefield. In addition to the American army, he had also fought for the British. Nicknamed the "Cornish Hawk" because of his heavy Welsh accent and tendency to sing traditional

Cornish folk songs in times of crisis, he was in his office on the 44th Floor of the South Tower at the time of the attack. As the chief security officer at Morgan Stanley, the largest single renter at the World Trade Center complex, he oversaw a company that occupied twenty two floors of the Twin Towers and had thousands of employees.

Rick Rescorla knew about the dangers he faced long before that Tuesday morning. A decade and a half before, several years before the 1993 World Trade Center attack, Rick Rescorla had correctly identified the soft spot in the basement of the towers that terrorists would attack.

Later he would predict that airplanes would likely be used in a future attack, begging the leadership of Morgan Stanley to relocate its operations. He was the one who had written the company's safety plan and regularly conducted evacuation drills for all of its staffing. So, when 9/11 came around, he was certainly the most prepared person in the entire complex, and perhaps the entire planet.

Grabbing his bull horn, his walkie talkie, and cell phone - his version of our shofar, tambourine, and silver horns - he immediately set out to evacuate. The bullhorn was to communicate to the people in front of him. The walkie talkie was to communicate to the larger security force. And the cell phone was to contact the outside world. All three were lined up on his desk just like they were every morning he was at work.

While the building's PA system had instructed everyone to remain in place, Rick Rescorla knew otherwise. He could see the smoke billowing from the opposite tower and had an inkling what was about to happen. He had to get his people out. Now. No delay.

By the time United Flight 175 hit the South Tower seventeen minutes later, all of Morgan Stanley was already on the move from the 44th floor. Down, down, down they went, not on the elevators, but on the stairs. Elevators were vulnerable, and while there were a lot of people and a lot of stairs, it was the only way to get out of the building.

Can you imagine the fear, terror, confusion on everyone's faces, their lives flashing before their eyes? While they had been well versed in safety drill after safety drill by Rick Rescorla, it was different experiencing an actual emergency situation. Navigating so many stairs with people of all ages and physical abilities was not easy. It was easy to lose hope.

But every time they did, they heard the voice of Rick Rescorla shouting out through his trusted white bullhorn words of encouragement. And just like in Vietnam, they heard his deep Welsh voice, crooning Cornish folk songs like Men of Cornwall at the top of his lungs. It went something like this:

Men of Cornwall stop your dreaming; Can't you see their spearpoints gleaming? See their warriors' pennants streaming To this battlefield. Men of Cornwall stand ye steady; It cannot be ever said ye for the battle were not ready; Stand and never yield!

With so many people, so many stairs, it required constant vigilance. Think about it, most buildings are 10 to 12 floors at most. While they were only a quarter up the tower, they had to navigate down a space four times as tall as most other buildings. Along the way, Rick Rescorla let others know what was happening using his walkie talkie and he used his cell phone to call his wife. Already aware of the situation, Susan was a mess with worry. "Stop your crying," he told her gently. "I have to get these people out safely." Pausing, he added, "If something should happen to me, I want you to know I've never been happier. You made my life."

In between her tears, she burst out in response, "You made my life, too."

Afterward the line went dead.

Making his way to the bottom foyer, stair after stair after stair in the 110 story building, where one of his colleagues implored him to evacuate. "Just as soon as I make sure everyone else is out," he called back to them, already on his way back up the tower. Stair after stair after stair.

Unfortunately, he never made it back down. He was last seen on the tenth floor. Of the approximately 2,700 Morgan Stanley employees who were working at Morgan Stanley that morning, almost all of them survived, each and every one of them crediting Rick Rescorla with saving their lives.

2,753 people, not including terrorists, lost their lives in the shadow of the collapsing Twin Towers, including 27 from Western New York. An additional 204 died in the other attacks in Pennsylvania and Washington DC. The casualties would have been far greater without the heroism and vigilance of Rick Rescorla.

Judaism teaches that if you save one life it's as if you have saved the entire world. Thanks to the bravery and foresight of one man, generations of families and communities are still alive.

While Rick Rescorla was far from the only hero on that fateful day - people like then 24-year-old Welles Crowther, the man in the Red Bandana, who traveled up and down the South Tower leading people to safety. And, 31-year-old Israeli Defence Forces vet Daniel Lewin who confronted the terrorists on American Airlines Flight 11, the first act of resistance on that morning. Or, New Jersey native and proud Jew, Jeremy Glick, who rushed the hijackers of United Airlines Flight 93, forcing its crash landing in Somerset, Pennsylvania. - he, perhaps, has the most to teach us here on High Holy Days. While, as far as I know, Rick Rescorla was not Jewish, the values he lived his life by are exactly what we are meant to come away with on Rosh Hashanah.

Values like always being prepared.

Preparations for disaster and crisis cannot be relegated to the periphery of our lives. It needs to be at their center. Rick Rescorla started preparing for 9/11 from before the buildings were even built. Throughout his life he stayed vigilant and steadfast, never wavering, creating ritual and routine that made his eventual rescue operation possible.

Likewise, our preparation for this Jewish New Year began long before this Tishrei, or even last Tishrei. It is an every second, every hour, every day exercise, a lifetime pursuit. It is taught to us in the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, of Ruth and David.

Our faith teaches us to create a regular routine. A routine that includes a seven day week which culminates on Shabbat, and dozens of holidays and memorial days throughout the year. A routine that includes fixed prayers, and rituals both in the home and in the synagogue. A routine that includes readiness preparedness drills like Sukkot, where we literally build an outdoor shelter. On Passover, where we thoroughly clean our homes and learn to live on a completely different diet. And, on Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av, where we fast as if there was a food shortage. Having endured so many hardships over so many years, our ancestors understood we needed to live our lives as if disaster was just around the corner. We may not be able to predict what we will face in the future, but, by building an emergency protocol into the fabric of our culture we can predict that when the time comes, we will be ready.

Values like keeping your promises.

No matter what the circumstance, including a building crashing in on him, Rick Rescorla was going to keep his promises. A promise he made was as good as gold. Even if he had never verbalized it, he internalized it. Before 9/11 he had made a promise to his company. He had made a promise to his fellow employees. He had made a promise to his wife and family. And, he had made a promise to the world.

Born in Cornwall, he was a Brit, from Britain, who made a Brit (breet), a covenant, a promise. The concept of Brit is central to Judaism. We are a covenantal religion. From Biblical days until today, we have been encouraged to see through with our commitments. Promises fulfilled strengthen the bonds we have with our community and with one another. They give us the confidence to try new things, and to fix the things we already have.

Some of our promises are big, like commitments to parents and children, to caring for communities like Shir Shalom, to being contributing citizens in society. And, some of our promises are small, like weekly gatherings with friends, calling parents or children before Shabbat, or periodic volunteer opportunities. When Rick Rescorla headed back up to the top of the towers to rescue people he was fulfilling his Brit. Here on our High Holy Days we fulfill our own.

And, lastly, values like living life without regrets.

When Rick Rescorla called his wife to say goodbye he did not just say, “I love you.” He said, “If something should happen to me, I want you to know I’ve never been happier. You made my life.” To which, his wife Susan replied, “You made my life, too.” Even in that terrible moment, he had only gratitude in his heart. Having lived his life in the way he felt called to do. Having communicated with those close to him all that he needed to say. Having experienced all the things in life he wanted to experience, he left this world with no regrets. He left this world at peace.

Our goal in the next ten days is to be at peace with all that we have, to make amends to all those we have wronged, and to communicate gratitude and appreciation to all whom we love. Every time any of the Lazarus-Kleins leave the house, we always say, “I love you.”

No matter what happens we want to make sure that love is the last thing we say. Many of you are with friends or relatives. Turn to the person next to you and tell them you love them.

At the beginning of this talk tonight, I shared a little of my 9/11 story. Here at the end, I’d like to share my wife Ashirah’s. Like my sister Mara, her birthday is also on September 11th. Today in fact she is turning 50. On 9/11 she was living in Boston, looking forward to receiving the one call she looked forward to every year from our maternal grandfather, Papa Jack.

You may remember Papa Jack from my sermon last year. He was a Holocaust survivor who at the time was living with his wife, Grandma Rosie, in the Bronx. On the morning of September 11, 2001, he had a doctor's appointment in lower Manhattan. Before leaving that day, Grandma Rosie had packed him two bagel and lox sandwiches, one for him and the other for his doctor. At 91-years-old, he was full of strength and vigor, walking a mile down the steep slopes of the Bronx to the elevated train toward Manhattan. After meeting with his doctor at 9:30 that morning, giving him his bagel and lox, he came out to a world in chaos. All the subways and buses were shut down. It was clear he would have to walk. As Ashirah and her family feared the worst, having lost all contact with him at noon that day, he made the over seven mile journey back home.

When he arrived at 8:30 PM, 13 hours after he had left, he had one mission and one mission alone, to call Ashirah, which he did as if nothing had happened at all.

Later a reporter would ask him how he had the strength to complete this journey at the age of almost ninety-two?"

To which he replied, "I survived the Holocaust... What was so special about walking home on a single day from Manhattan? This is America."

Just like Rick Rescorla when he made a promise to himself or the world, he was going to complete it. No matter what.

Twenty five years ago, the silver trumpets sounded across the world. It was a call to wake up. To remember what was important. To keep our promises. If people like Rick Rescorla and Papa Jack can, we can too.

Events like 9/11, the crash of flight 3407, October 7th will always come unexpectedly and out of the blue. The only thing we can do, as Rick Rescorla knew well, is prepare our hearts and minds to face whatever will come our way. To tell those we love, we love them. To live our lives without regret. To build communities of resilience. To face our challenges.

To not delay for a second in fulfilling our commitments to one another and to the larger world. As it says in Pirkei Avot, 2:16:

הוא הִיהָ אוֹמֵר, לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְלָאכָה לְגִמּוֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבָטֵל מִמְּנָה.

He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it

In honor of the thousands who lost their lives a quarter century ago. In honor of all that we lost on that day. A loud and sustained shofar blast!

TIKIAH GEDOLAH

May their lives always be for a blessing.

A Shanah Tovah U'Metukah, a sweet and joyful New Year!