There Are No Trains Through the Valley

Temple Israel, Yom Kippur 2021

Rabbi David J Fine, PhD

Lance Corporal David L. Espinoza, United States Marine Corps. 20.

Sergeant Nicole Gee, United States Marine Corps. 23.

Staff Sergeant Darin T. Hoover, United States Marine Corps. 31.

Staff Sergeant Ryan C. Knauss, United States Army. 23.

Corporal Hunter Lopez, United States Marine Corps. 22.

Lance Corporal Rylee J. McCollum, United States Marine Corps. 20.

Lance Corporal Dylan R. Merola, United States Marine Corps. 20.

Lance Corporal Kareem M. Nikoui, United State Marine Corps. 20.

Corporal Daegan W. Page, United States Marine Corps. 23.

Sergeant Johanny Rosario Pichardo, United States Marine Corps. 25.

Corporal Humberto A. Sanchez, United States Marine Corps. 22.

Lance Corporal Jared M. Schmitz, United States Marine Corps. 20.

Hospitalman Maxton W. Soviak, United States Navy. 22.

These thirteen American heroes, killed at the Kabul airport on August 26th, three weeks ago today, were the final casualties of September 11, 2001. The last American boots on the ground to fall on the field of honor in what became America's longest war. The average age of these fallen soldiers was 22, meaning that they were two years old on that terrible September morning twenty years ago. Some of you remember in the days when we had regular casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq that I would read the names each week that were reported by the Pentagon. One Yom Kippur I read the list of the fallen from the year past, and that took quite some time. But these last, final, thirteen seem the most tragic.

A full generation has passed since September 11th. We have heard over and over again this past week how every one of us currently over the age of twenty-five remembers exactly where we were on that morning. It is a moment frozen in time because we experienced time change. Alla and I were living and working in Manhattan then. She had left for work and I had a 9am appointment with a prospective bride and groom. I was to meet them at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where I worked, next door to our apartment. I had the television tuned to NY1 news, as I did every morning, and somehow managed to pull myself away from the horror on the screen taking place just nine miles south of where I was. I met the bride and groom and we talked briefly, sitting outside in the Seminary courtyard on that beautiful and clear September morning. That courtyard was one of the rare green escapes from the hustle and bustle of the city, a kind of sacred place for me, and there we talked about sanctifying a new union, but it was difficult as people started running around the corridors and we could hear shouts and screams as more and more people tuned in to what was happening downtown. We wrapped up our appointment quickly, knowing as we first greeted each other that the second tower was hit. While it can be intimidating for young couples to plan a whole life together, this was exponentially more so with our world seemingly collapsing around us. I was back in my apartment before the towers collapsed, waiting there nervously for Alla to get home from work. She worked uptown so she should be okay, but we were not able to reach each other as the phone lines were overloaded. Eventually she got home and we watched the news together. When I was finally able to pull myself away from the television again, I went outside to find both Broadway and Amsterdam, the two avenues between my apartment building, flooded with people, a grim parade walking north, trying to get home as the city had closed all bridges and

tunnels except for pedestrian traffic. I walked the few blocks to the nearest hospital, then called Roosevelt-St. Luke's, now Mount Sinai Morningside, to donate blood, but turned away when I saw that there was a line of about two hundred people doing just that. That was before we knew that no blood was required.

There was nothing we could do, except remember to close the windows before the wind changed direction the next day, carrying the dust with it, as the angel of death passed us over.

September 11th marked a turning point in American history, a time of shared vulnerability and loss of innocence, or at least for my generation that came of age through the optimism of the Reagan years and was spared the trauma of Vietnam. But as Jews we have tended to be used to vulnerability through the ages. I learned about that twenty years before 9/11. When I was eight years old my parents took us to Israel for the summer and we spent a beautiful day on the beach enjoying the Mediterranean in the northern town of Nahariya, which happens to be the sister city of our Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey. The following day we learned that the PLO had fired missiles from Lebanon into northern Israel, with some exploding on the beach in Nahariya. Twenty years later I was in Manhattan on 9/11.

Nahariya is the northernmost Israeli town on the coast, less than six miles from the Lebanese border. The border itself is worth visiting to see Rosh Hanikra, a striking rock cliff continuously battered by the sea which over time has cut grottos into the rock. A cable car takes you down to the level of the grottos. While I have visited again, with Alla and our boys when they were younger, I still remember experiencing that place through the eyes of an eight-year-old myself, wondering how the land can withstand the onslaught of the sea. There is another haunting site to see there beside the grottos, but something that made a bigger impression on

me when I returned to Rosh Hanikra as an adult. In addition to the sea-carved grottos there is a man-made tunnel with train tracks running across its base, that stops abruptly into a wall of fallen boulders. What were these train tracks to nowhere, I wondered? That tunnel was carved by British engineers in 1948. One can still take a train north along the coast from Tel Aviv. But Nahariya is the last stop. The old British tracks continue to Rosh Hanikra, and on the other side of the border they stretch north to Beirut. Shortly after the tunnel was opened and the rail-line from Cairo to Beirut completed, Israel was independent and attacked by its Arab neighbors, and Israeli forces destroyed the new tunnel at Rosh Hanikra to prevent its use by invading armies. Since then, there are no trains from Egypt to Israel to Lebanon. The tracks stop at Rosh Hanikra, tracks to nowhere. There is a small sign there with a short Hebrew meditation that translates as: "The management of the Cairo-Jaffa-Haifa-Beirut railway apologizes to passengers. The clock is broken, the track worn down, the locomotive tired, the weeds high, the fuel expensive, the engineer asleep, the tunnel at Rosh Hanikra blocked. And one more little detail — peace is running late. But don't give up: The train is coming. It'll be just a few more minutes." In a beautiful essay entitled, "Ghost Rails of the Holy Land" published in the New York Times about a year-and-a-half ago, Israeli author Matti Friedman writes that "every time I read that [sign] I just want to sit down and wait."

Friedman's essay, which you can find on Google, explores the many rail lines to nowhere throughout Israel, ghosts of empires that once sought to unite the Middle East. "The country's most storied ghost line," he writes, "is the Valley Railroad, built in 1905 by order of the Ottoman sultan as part of the grand Hijaz Railway project, meant as a leap into modernity for the Turkish Empire. The Valley Railroad made a connection, entirely logical and yet now inconceivable,

between the port of Haifa in modern-day Israel and the city of Damascus, now in Syria. (The train got its name from the Jezreel Valley, which contained much of the route.)…Israel and Syria became enemies 72 years ago, but when the railroad was built, neither existed. According to a rail schedule…from 1934, you could steam out of the Haifa station at 10 a.m. and reach Damascus that evening at 8:02."

Thinking about train tracks that go to nowhere triggers for me the Track 17 Memorial at the Grünewald train station in Berlin. Some of you remember visiting that site with me on our synagogue tour a dozen years ago. Marking the point where the deportees from Berlin were sent to "the East"—and we know what "deportation to the East" means when we talk about the Holocaust—the sleeper beams, or railroad ties, are inscribed with the names of Berlin Jews who were sent off, and then the tracks disappear into the grass and forest. And we know that those tracks eventually ended up at places like Auschwitz. If you have been there or to other camps you remember the train tracks entering the main square and then abruptly stopping. Sometimes tracks lead ominously to nowhere. Other times they are devoid of trains, like the subway and rail lines out of lower Manhattan on September 11, 2001. Most people left the island by foot that day. Some never returned to the train stations they left from earlier that morning.

Railroads are meant to connect people and goods from point A to point B. If empty tracks to nowhere are the ghosts of empire, then running tracks are the arteries of modern civilization. Railroads built this country, connecting us from coast to coast. And in Europe, is there any better symbol of the hope of European Union than the Eurail pass? (Okay, maybe also the Euro that you can buy the pass with.) The loss of connections are linked with our disappointed hopes for the future. Five years ago I gave a high holy day sermon bemoaning Brexit, as the UK's impending

divorce from the Continent marked yet again the collapse of the dream of the ancient Romans for European unity. And then there is Covid-19. We have experienced so much loss throughout this pandemic, but among the lists of things we miss, or at least I miss, is air travel, our version of the miracle that intercontinental railroads promised in the nineteenth century. We went from living in a small, interconnected world where oceans could be crossed in our sleep, to a postmodern dystopia where travel has been dormant, and where Zoom business conferences and "staycations" are the new normal. If "loss of empire" refers to a lost dream of order and peace—the Middle East that the railroad engineers dreamed of under the Ottomans and then the British—then we felt that sense of loss, as Americans, watching our soldiers evacuate Afghanistan. Long known as "the graveyard of empires," the forces of the United States over twenty years were not able to do any better than the Soviets, the British, the Mongols, the Persians, or the Macedonians under Alexander the Great. Was it a pointless dream, to think we could unite the world under a star-spangled banner of peace?

I have, over the past twenty years, imagined our brave soldiers in Afghanistan reciting the Twenty-Third Psalm on their lips as they patrolled the valleys between imposing and foreboding Afghan mountains. *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for Thou art with me.* Those words have passed my lips many times over the past year-and-a-half as I have officiated at funeral services for victims of Covid-19. When I think of that verse I sometimes remember Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic* yelling at a priest reciting the psalm as the ship is sinking while he is rushing with Kate Winslet to higher ground: "Can you walk through that valley a little faster?" The author of the psalm did not know about railroads or jet engine airplanes, but he, or

she, certainly knew about horses and donkeys and camels. Why, then, must we walk through a valley under the shadow of death?

Remember that the 1905 Ottoman railroad connecting Haifa with Damascus was called the Valley Railroad. The Sultan's engineers imagined and built a means of crossing the valley with speed and luxury. What are our "valleys of the shadow of death" that we must walk across, with no railroad or airplane, or horse or donkey, to carry us over? Matti Friedman explains in his essay, "Ghost Rails of the Holy Land," that while contemporary maps of the Middle East are marked by the border and armistice lines, the old maps were marked by railroad lines, when the valleys were easily crossed, fearing no evil. What are our valleys that we must walk across in the shadow of death? Afghanistan? The Death Marches along the Baltic Sea coast in 1945 as World War II drew to a close? The space of a pandemic? The travails of life? The loss of loved ones?

The psalmist teaches us to *fear no evil for Thou art with me.* לא אירא רע כי אתה עמדי. We will make it through those valleys, even though there are now no trains to carry us easily across. We will make it through this time of pandemic. We will reconnect with those whom we seek to draw near again. We will build anew those rails to carry us across the valleys that lay before us. The Valley Railroad will run again.

שמע קולנו, Hear our Voice! we sing out before the open Ark on Yom Kippur. אל תשליכנו לעת זקנה, do not cast us away to the time that has passed. Do not allow our dreams to die as we tread across the valleys that lay before us and lay ahead. חדש ימינו בקדם, renew our days, our dreams, as of old. Even if there are no trains across the valley we will still fear no evil, for You will not let us forget our dreams. You will not let us let go of our hopes. And the memories of

those we lost, the losses we still feel and will always feel, will live on for us as a blessing. You will help us remember, as we remember together.

We turn to Yizkor.