



HIGH HOLIDAYS

Rosh Hashana 2

September 11th 17 Years Later:

The Twin Towers and a Tightrope Walker

September 11, 2018

SEPTEMBER 11TH 17 YEARS LATER: THE TWIN TOWERS AND A TIGHTROPE WALKER

ABSTRACT

On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four passenger airplanes and changed us all. Two of those planes were flown into the World Trade Center, one smashed into the Pentagon, and one crashed in Pennsylvania.

17 years ago the world was shaken to its core. Today, Rosh Hashana, the world is created at its core. What lessons can the Twin Towers and September 11 teach us about our personal and communal lives today?

On August 7, 1974, 41 days before Rosh Hashana, Philippe Petit strung a tightrope from one of the Twin Towers to the other a quarter mile above the ground.

Reb Mendel Futerfas was imprisoned in Siberia with a tightrope walker who taught him the secret to find balance when faced with uncertainty, to discover peace and sweetness within a chaotic and harsh world.

What have we learned in the past 17 years? How much has changed? What will 5779 bring?

Rosh Hashana we learn to walk's life tightrope, with extraordinary balance and focus, and ultimately tipping the scales for good.

1. Remembering September 11

Shana tova!

Today, the second day of Rosh Hashana, corresponds with the 17th anniversary of September 11.

Who doesn't remember where they were seventeen years ago when terrorists flew hijacked airplanes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon, impacting us all?

As we mourn the precious souls that passed on that day, we also honor them by intensifying

our commitment to build a better world – a world of peace, harmony and freedom, countering the forces of hate and terrorism with even greater light and love.

And, on Rosh Hashana, we commit and recommit to living a year and life that will bring into the world only light and peace, only joy and sweetness, removing anything that is the opposite of that.

What have we learned in the past 17 years? How much has changed? What will 5779 bring?

2. A Tightrope Between The Twin Towers

The rise and fall of the Twin Towers offers us some insight into the message of Rosh Hashana for our times.

One small, almost unnoticed event that happened just a few years after the Towers were built, can shed light on this message. Events that may seem trivial often teach us powerful lessons.

In March of 1966 construction commenced of The World Trade Center. Four years later, on December 23, the North Tower was finished, topping off at 1,368 feet. And a year and a half later, on July 19, 1971 the South Tower topped off at 1,362 feet. The World Trade Center was dedicated on April 4, 1973.

These majestic towers rising above the already famed New York skyline were, at the time, the talk of the town – people everywhere marveled at this new sight.

The 107th floor of the World Trade Center featured Windows on the World, one of the greatest restaurants New York City has ever seen. It offered guests soaring views of not only Manhattan, but also Brooklyn and New Jersey.

Just as a prescient aside: At the time, the World Trade Center ran an ad showing a photo of a bird's eye view of the observation deck. Above the picture were the words: "The closest some of us will ever get to heaven."

Then on August 7, 1974, six weeks before Rosh Hashana, tightrope artist Philippe Petit performed an unauthorized and illegal walk between the Twin Towers. He strung a tightrope from one of the Twin Towers to the other a quarter mile above the ground, and then took the precarious walk on the tightrope from one tower to the next.

Fast forward to 2001: 30 years from the time the towers went up, on the infamous Tuesday morning of September 11, 2001, exactly one week before Rosh Hashana, two planes hijacked by terrorists crashed into the Twin Towers, destroying the entire complex, killing 2,996 people,

injuring over 6,000 others, and causing at least \$10 billion in infrastructure and property damage. One World Trade Center was struck at 8:46 a.m.; Two World Trade Center at 9:03 a.m.

Today, September 11, 2018 Jews all over the world celebrate Rosh Hashana and beseech our Creator to inscribe us in the Book of Life. On Rosh Hashana the world is created and we pray for a year of sweetness, happiness, and goodness.

This confluence of events is so aptly captured in the Rosh Hashana prayer we recite today: *Hayom haras olam*. Today the world trembles. Today the world is born. (*Haras* in Hebrew means both tremble and birth).

Today, 17 years ago, the world trembled with the crumbling of the Twin Towers. But today the world is born and reborn as well – promising us hope and renewal in all aspects of our lives.

What does September 11 teach us about the Rosh Hashana, and vice versa?

Following the principle that everything happens by divine providence, perhaps we may learn a lesson from the tightrope that was strung between the Twin Towers 44 years ago, teaching us the secret to find balance in an uncertain and chaotic world.

3. A Tight Rope

What was behind Philippe Petit’s tightrope stunt?

Petit conceived his “coup” when he was 18, when he first read about the proposed construction of the Twin Towers and saw drawings of the project in a magazine, which he read while sitting at a dentist’s office in 1968. Petit was seized by the idea of performing there, and began collecting articles on the Towers whenever he could.

What was dubbed the “artistic crime of the century” took Petit six years of planning, during which he learned everything he could about the buildings and their construction.

In planning for the Twin Towers walk, Petit had to learn how to accommodate such issues as the swaying of the high towers due to wind, which was part of their design; effects of wind and weather on the wire at that height, how to rig a 200-foot steel cable across the 138-foot gap between the towers (at a height of 1,368 ft (417 m), and how to gain entry with his collaborators, first to scope out the conditions and lastly, to stage the project. They had to get heavy equipment to the rooftops. He traveled to New York on numerous occasions to make first-hand observations.

Since the towers were still under construction, Petit and one of his collaborators, rented a helicopter to take aerial photographs of the buildings. He practiced extensively in fields in France to prepare.

Petit and his crew gained entry into the towers several times and hid in upper floors and on the roofs of the unfinished buildings in order to study security measures, analyze the construction and identify places to anchor the wire. Using his own observations, drawings and photographs, Petit constructed a scale model of the towers in order to design the needed rigging to prepare for the wire walk.

Using an ID of an American who worked in the building, Petit made fake identification cards for himself and his collaborators (claiming that they were contractors who were installing an electrified fence on the roof) to gain access to the buildings. Prior to this, Petit had carefully observed the clothes worn by construction workers and the kinds of tools they carried. He also took note of the clothing of office workers so that some of his collaborators could pose as white-collar workers. He observed what time the workers arrived and left, so he could determine when he would have roof access.

As the target date approached, he claimed to be a journalist with *Metropolis*, a French architecture magazine, so that he could gain permission to interview the workers on the roof. The Port Authority allowed Petit to conduct the interviews, which he used as a pretext to make more observations. He was once caught by a police officer on the roof, and his hopes to do the high-wire walk were dampened. He eventually regained the confidence to proceed.

On the night of Tuesday, August 6, 1974, Petit and his crew had a lucky break and got a ride in a freight elevator to the 110th floor with their equipment. They stored it just 19 steps below the roof. In order to pass the cable across the void, Petit and his crew had settled on using a bow and arrow attached to a rope. They had to practice this many times to perfect their technique. They first shot across a fishing line, which was attached to larger ropes, and finally to the 450-pound steel cable. The team was delayed when the heavy cable sank too fast, and had to be pulled up manually for hours. Petit had already identified points at which to anchor two lines to other points to stabilize the cable and keep the swaying of the wire to a minimum.

Shortly after 7AM local time, Petit stepped out on the wire and started to perform. He was 1350 feet, a quarter mile, above the ground. He performed for 45 minutes, making eight passes along the wire, during which he walked, danced, lay down on the wire, and knelt to salute watchers. Crowds gathered on the streets below, and he said later he could hear their murmuring and cheers.

There was extensive news coverage and public appreciation of Petit's high-wire walk; the district attorney dropped all formal charges of trespassing and other items relating to his walk. In exchange, he was required to give a free aerial show for children in Central Park.¹

Beyond the craziness of pulling off such an elaborate stunt, what possible lesson can we learn from this? Is there something deeper in this tightrope story?

And above all: What is the connection Is there a connection between a tightrope, September 11 and Rosh Hashana?

4. A Chassidic Tight Rope

In the days of communism's fierce grip on the Soviet Union, there lived a chassidic Jew named Reb Mendel Futerfas. Reb Mendel repeatedly put his life at risk with his efforts to promote Jewish education behind the Iron Curtain, and for some 14 years was incarcerated in prisons and labor camps for his "crime" of teaching Torah. While in the Siberian gulag, he spent most of his free time studying and praying, but he also interacted and conversed with other prisoners—some Jewish, some not. Among these prisoners was a circus performer whose claim to fame was his incredible skill as a tightrope walker.

Reb Mendel would often engage this man in conversation. Having never been to a circus, Reb Mendel was totally baffled by the man's profession. How could a person risk his life walking on a rope several stories above ground? (This was in the days before safety nets were standard practice.)

"To just go out there and walk on a rope?" Reb Mendel challenged incredulously.

The performer explained that due to his training and skill he did not need to be held up by any cables, and that for him it was no longer all that dangerous. Reb Mendel remained skeptical and intrigued.

After Stalin died, the prison authorities relaxed their rules somewhat, and the guards told the prisoners that they would be allowed to stage a makeshift circus on May Day. There was no doubt that the famous tightrope walker's act would be the highlight of the show. The tightrope walker made sure that his friend, Reb Mendel, was in the audience.

Everyone watched with bated breath as the tightrope walker climbed the tall pole to the suspended rope. His first steps were timid and tentative (after all, it had been several years), but within a few seconds it all came back to him. With his hands twirling about, he virtually glided

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philippe_Petit

across the rope to the pole at the other end, and then, in a flash, made a fast turn, reversed his direction and proceeded back to the other side. Along the way, he performed several stunts. The crowd went wild.

When he was done, he slid down off the pole, took a bow and went running straight to Reb Mendel.

“So?” he said. “Did you see that I was not held up by any cables?”

A very impressed Reb Mendel replied, “Yes. You’re right. No cables.”

“Okay. You’re a smart man. Tell me, how did I do it? Was it my hands? Was it my feet?” the man asked.

Reb Mendel paused for a moment, closed his eyes and replayed the entire act back on his mind. Finally he said, “It’s all in your eyes. During the entire time, your eyes were completely focused and riveted on the opposite pole.”

“Exactly!” said the performer. “When you see your destination in front of you and you don’t take your eyes off of it, then your feet go where they need to go, and you don’t fall.”

The tightrope walker had one more question for Reb Mendel. “What would you say is the most difficult part of the act?”

Again Reb Mendel thought for a moment. “Most difficult was the turn, when you had to change direction.”

“Correct again!” said the acrobat. “During that split second, when you lose sight of that first pole, and the other pole has not yet come into view, there is some real danger there. But . . . if you don’t allow yourself to get confused and distracted during that transition, your eyes will find that pole, and your balance will be there.”

5. The Secret of Balance

The secret of tightrope walking teaches us an essential lesson in life.

Intuitively most of us would think that the key to mastering tightrope walking is learning to balance your feet and body on the narrow cable. The primary art, one would think, is to keep your feet perfectly steady and aligned as you make your way across the line. And the most difficult part of the act is when you are in middle of the tightrope, with nothing to hold on to, too far from either end to fall back on.

In truth however, the secret to balance is not keeping your feet firm (which is important), but to keep your eyes focused on a destination, and that assures that your feet and body will remain steady and fixed, aligned toward your destination. In other words, balance is not a result of technical balance, but a result of focused direction.

In life too, we will be faced with many ups and downs, twists and turns, which can unnerve us and throw us off course. Finding balance in life, living and maintaining a centered life can be quite challenging. The journey of life can appear at times to be like walking a narrow tightrope, precariously tottering and fighting not to fall off the tracks.

It can even seem to be a tightrope walk between “twin towers” – the choices we make between the tower of good and the tower of evil. As we traverse the tightrope of life we are constantly challenged to make moral choices between doing what is right or what is wrong, to be selfish or selfless, self-absorbed or serve others.

We learn how to navigate the vicissitudes not only by learning how to maneuver, but above all – by identifying our focused mission in life. Your mission serves as your focal point, your hub and destination, which connects all the details and fragments in your life and directs them toward one, unified purpose and destination.

6. Rosh Hashana: The Focal Point

Rosh Hashana – the head of the year – establishes the focal point of the year. Like a head – and the eyes in the head – which focuses, directs and guides the entire body, Rosh Hashana focuses, sets the tone and directs and guides all our activities throughout all the days of the year.

Today we declare our mission statement, the purpose of our existence – both the *raison d’être* of the collective human race, and of each one of us individually: To refine and elevate our corner of the world and transform it into a divine home.

When we have this focus, we can then navigate even the narrowest and most challenging tightrope. When we have our eyes on the goal, our entire being, our entire psyche, all our actions and decisions, are guided and balanced as it travels unwaveringly through the different cycles of life, aligned toward its destination and finish line.

September 11th shook that focal point. The world trembled. But Rosh Hashana comes to re-align us. The world is born and renewed.

7. One Good Act Tips the Scales for Good

On Rosh Hashana we are given the power to find balance between the “twin towers” of our moral choices. G-d balances the scales on this day. In His infinite kindness, He forgives iniquity and demerit, ensuring that they never outweigh our merits – effectively balancing the scales for us and thus creating a platform where even one good deed of ours could tip them for the positive.²

As Maimonides writes: “A person must see himself and the world as equally balanced on two ends of the scale; by doing one good deed, he tips the scale and brings for himself and the entire world redemption and salvation.”³

Every single moment of life should be perceived as a scale that is perfectly balanced. Every positive act we do tips the scales toward goodness.

We often wrongly think that our mistakes weigh us down and what good could but one good deed accomplish. On Rosh Hashana, G-d balances the scales for our benefit, declaring that yes, one good deed could tip everything for the better, bringing for himself and the entire world redemption and salvation.

The biggest challenge to maintain balance is keeping focused. When we take our eye off the ball, when an event shakes our world, compelling us to change direction – that’s when maintaining steady balance is difficult.

The biggest challenge to tipping the scales for the better is losing sight of the larger goal and believing that the cards are so overwhelmingly stacked against us that it’s impossible that one good deed could change everything.

The world trembled on September 11. It shook us up and took us off course.

But there is a timeless Jewish ideal which teaches us that “the cure precedes the illness”: Every challenge brings along with it a solution. Philippe Petit’s 1974 audacious Twin Towers tightrope walk provided us with a “remedy preceding the challenge” approach to the secret of finding balance and focus in an unbalanced world.

His tightrope walk reflects the timeless message of Rosh Hashana: To bring life into focus in fulfilling our calling and mission in this world.

² Rosh Hashana 17a with Rashi ad loc.

³ Maimonides, Laws of Repentance, 3:4.

Philippe Petit spent six years preparing for his tightrope walk a quarter mile high, finding the perfect balance in his walking on air through the clouds. Petit knew that in this world, especially when flying that high, a wind could blow you off course, the winds of life can shake you (as they did on 9/11 2001) to the point of holding on for dear life. But he trained for years to keep his eye on the destination.

September 11 changed the world. We as Jews do not get deterred when the world's direction changes. We get determined. And we intensify our focus and resolve.

On Rosh Hashana we maintain our balance in this tightrope walk of life, finally tipping it for the positive with but one more good act, one more Mitzvah, and the coming of the ultimate destination – the Redemption!

Kesiva v'Chasima Tova and a Happy and Sweet New Year!

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