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Avoiding the Suffering of “Chevlei Mashiach”
Words of inspiration, delivered before Rosh Hashanah 5762
(Several days after the Sept. 11 terror attacks in New York)

People all over the world are talking about the perfect timing of the terrorists who managed to hijack a number of planes simultaneously, and to effect precise almost simultaneous hits to the two tallest – and most populous – buildings in New York. But we, as believing Jews, take note of a different sort of precise timing in these events. We see that the attacks took place precisely one week before Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment. This gives us occasion to reflect upon several ideas.

Upon contemplating the details of the horrific events of the last few days, any thinking individual cannot help but find that several of the basic principles of our faith have become reinforced in his mind. In the technological, material – and cynical – world in which we live today, it is often quite difficult to imagine the possibility that the situation described by Isaiah in chapter 11:9 could ever arise: “The entire world will be full of knowledge [of God] as the water covers the sea.” The world, after all, appears to be drifting ever further from spirituality, towards a crass, and completely materialistic approach to life. It is also difficult for us to picture the advent of our long-awaited Mashiach. Immediately upon his arrival he will no doubt be interviewed on CNN, and the correspondent will take pains to remind all the listeners and viewers that many important and influential people do not accept that this is the real Messiah! In previous generations, when the world was so much simpler and unsophisticated, the belief in the coming of Mashiach was much more perceivable and believable. Today, these basic beliefs seem farfetched and irrelevant. As a result, people tend to subscribe to the understanding that all the events associated with the Messianic era will suddenly “fall down upon us from heaven,” as Rashi writes (Rosh Hashanah 30a, Sukkah 41a) regarding the rebuilding of the Third Temple. Yet such sudden, radical change in the world order is even more fantastic to imagine realistically. Therefore, the belief in these basic principles, and in other related matters discussed in the books of the Prophets and Sages, is weakened among us.

Now, however, we have witnessed the shocking and terrifying events of the last few days – events that are so contrary to our understanding of the way the world normally functions. We have witnessed events that are so bizarre that they are almost beyond human comprehension. These incidents demonstrate, in a horribly unsettling manner, just how puny society’s physical and intellectual strength – in which we have developed such unwavering confidence – really are. We are suddenly and mercilessly reminded of the awesome power of God whose “strength and might fill the world,” and how He is able, in a few short moments, to reduce mankind to a state of primeval chaos. Now we can begin to imagine how such incidents can bring the entire human race to the recognition of the existence and Oneness of God. Indeed, this theme plays a central role in the prayers for the High Holy Days: “And thus, place Your fear upon all Your creations... and let all creations fear You, and let them all form a united group to do Your will with a full heart.” Only God, through the awesome and terrifying display of His strength, can bring people to a recognition of the truth. Similarly, in the Kedushah of Musaf we say “He will cause us to hear once more,

before the eyes of all the living, ‘I am Hashem, your God.’” This implies that God will once again perform miracles like the Splitting of the Sea that will fill all human beings, from one end of the world to the other, with His awe. (I have read that since September 11, the idea of prayer to the Creator has become more widespread and emphasized even among non-Jews.)

I have heard in the name of R. Elchanan Wasserman ה"ד זצ"ל, who said in the name of the Chafetz Chaim זצ"ל (who, as is well known, dealt extensively with the topic of the “footsteps of Mashiach” period in his later years) that towards the end of the pre-Messianic period the pace of world affairs would become accelerated far beyond the norm of the past. Matters that once took several generations to accomplish will be achieved in a short time. The Chafetz Chaim lived to witness for himself the beginnings of the age of modern technology. The swiftness of developments in our own day make this even more apparent. Applying the Chafetz Chaim’s idea, we gain a deeper understanding of the verse (Isaiah 60:22) in which the prophet describes the projected dawn of the Messianic era: “In its time I will hasten it.” The Sages (Sanhedrin 98a) already note the seemingly self-contradictory nature of this statement: If the redemption will come “in its [prescribed] time” then it cannot be hastened, and vice versa! According to the Chafetz Chaim, however, the verse is easily understood. The Messianic era is indeed scheduled for a particular time. However, as that time approaches, the pace of world events will accelerate to a dizzying speed. This is what is meant by the words, “I will hasten it.” (I have heard some attribute this interpretation to the Chafetz Chaim himself.) We have seen with our own eyes how two tall towers, which represented the pride and glory of the world’s superpower before whom all other countries cower in obeisance, and which on a normal day boasted a workforce of 40-50 thousand people, collapsed into a pile of twisted rubble in a matter of minutes. It is mind-boggling to attempt to grasp the terrible swiftness of this change. According to the pre September 11 world order, logic dictated that such a radical change would take at least several months or even years. These events also lend substantiation to our belief that “the salvation of God comes in the blink of an eye.” Now we can better understand the view of the Sages that the decisive period in the pre-Messianic “War of Gog and Magog” (Ezekiel 38-39) will be very short – a matter of hours (or, as some say in the name of the Vilna Gaon, several minutes). We are also now able to appreciate that a few terrible, earth-shattering events can change the strategic and security-related outlook of the entire world overnight. We can now perceive, more than ever, how such upheavals can lead to a widespread acceptance of the concept of Mashiach.

As is known, the advent of Mashiach will be preceded by exceedingly difficult hardships, known as “the pains of Mashiach”. It was due to these hardships that R. Yochanan, Ulla and Rabba all wished, “Let him come, but let me not see it!” (Sanhedrin 98b). They were willing to forgo the opportunity to greet Mashiach, due to their great fear of the terrible afflictions that will accompany his advent. The *Yad Rama* explains that the choice of words to describe these pains – הבלי משיח – alludes to the pangs of labor (הבלי לידה) that precede the birth of a baby. (Indeed, the discussion immediately preceding this Talmudic passage compares the period preceding Mashiach's coming to the process of gestation and birth.) Now, one might wonder: Why is there a need to precede the advent of the glorious, blissful Messianic era with such terrible trials and tragedies? The answer is that if the world would earn the right to redemption on its own, through producing “a generation that is completely

worthy,” through keeping two Sabbaths, or similar situations which, our Sages state can lead to immediate redemption, perhaps it would indeed not be necessary to undergo such traumatic events. However, this is not the case, and mankind is turning ever further away from the state of “and the world will be full of knowledge of [God]” and “God will be King over all the land”. It is therefore necessary for God to forcefully instill within man’s heart the awesome truth!

I recently told my family, “I am no longer concerned about terrorists, an outbreak of war in the Middle East, the mighty army of the United States, or even about the start of World War III (God forbid). Now I am filled with the dread of the awesome power of the Almighty!” Where can we all run to now? Shall we search for a peaceful island in a remote corner of the world where there is no sign of Islamic fundamentalism, and no trace of the armies of America and its allies? What can we do to be saved from the awesome pangs of Mashiach?

In Sanhedrin (ibid.) we are told that the students of R. Elazar asked him, “What should a man do to be saved from the pangs of the Mashiach?” His reply was: “He should involve himself with Torah study and acts of kindness.” This passage is somewhat difficult to understand. Every person, at all times, is supposed to involve himself with Torah and acts of kindness! Why, then, is this specific course of action considered to be a means to avoid the pangs of Mashiach?

According to the idea presented above, we can provide an answer for this question. As we explained, the role of the “pains of Mashiach” is to rectify the world through mankind’s recognition and acceptance of God. Clearly, any person who has already achieved this state of recognition and fully comprehends these matters, has no need for such traumatic shocks. Anyone who disdains the foolish, fleeting pleasures of this world, and devotes himself totally to Torah study and kindness towards others, declares openly that his entire existence is based on the spiritual world. This person is already part of the world in which “Hashem, our God is one,” and “the whole world is full of His glory.” It is obvious, then, that our task at this time and our “scheme” to be saved from the “pains of Mashiach” is to instill in ourselves the clarity of His Oneness, and a fear of the Almighty. We must strive to avoid becoming infatuated with the futile pursuits of vain physical comforts and pleasures, and rather dedicate ourselves wholly to Torah and kindness.

Rav Chaim Volozhiner זצ"ל writes in Nefesh Hachaim (Shaar 1, Chap. 8), that when people devote time to their physical necessities – as everyone does, in order to survive – they should still focus their thoughts upon Torah and the fear of God. In this manner even one's working hours are acts of sanctification of God’s name. If, however, a person’s thoughts are channeled solely toward his own livelihood, he has lost a precious opportunity to serve God and sanctify His name.

Only by following this path will we be lead to a proper recognition and fear of God. The higher the intensity of one's fear of God, the more one acquires protection from trials and tribulations, and the “pains of Mashiach.” The Nefesh Hachaim writes further (Shaar 3, Chap. 12) that if one concentrates his thoughts on the concept that “there is nothing but [God]” (אין עוד מלבדו), he will not be subject at all to the whims of others.

Our greatest enemy at this time is an attitude of indifference and complacency. I recently heard an interesting insight from a Talmid Chacham in New York, in connection with the verse, “This nation approaches Me, and honors Me with their mouth and their lips, but their heart is far from Me; their fear of Me is like a habitual following of orders” (Isaiah 29:13). Would it not be more appropriate, he asked, for the verse to complain that the people’s deeds are carried out through dry routine and habit? How can it be said of fear of God that it is practiced through rote? The answer, he cited in the name of his rabbis, is that it is actually possible to train a person to superficially fear God. This artificially instilled fear is nothing but “an habitual following of orders.” It is as if instructions would be written in the Siddur in a particular place in the prayers, “At this point one must fear!” It is a profound and startling concept that it is possible to refer even to fear of God as “mere rote” if that fear does not emanate from the deepest wellsprings of the heart.

This idea is apparently the thought that lies behind the statement, “A person must always fear God, in private as well as in public” (morning liturgy). How is it possible to distinguish between private and public feelings when it comes to fear of God? One's fear of God is not contingent upon his surroundings! We must therefore conclude that there is a type of fear of God that is expressed only in public. This is the superficial fear that can develop through training, rather than arising from the depths of the soul. Fear of heaven in private, however, comes from a deep feeling of awe that lies within, one that has been implanted there through a constant, heartfelt awareness of God’s awesome greatness.

We must draw a conclusion from this discussion in this difficult hour, especially during the High Holy Days, when one of the main themes is God’s kingship. We must realise that it is imperative that we awaken to these truths. We must internalise our newfound fear of the omnipotent God, and translate that fear into an inner awe of His power and exaltedness. This will hopefully cause us to dedicate every aspect of our lives to the sanctification of God’s name through Torah and acts of kindness. Through this we show God’s kingship upon ourselves as the One and only Master of all that exists. May God grant that we merit to sanctify His name in the eyes of the world and accept His kingship over ourselves. Through this we will merit that the coming year will bring only good, that we will be protected from the “pains of Mashiach,” and be able to greet him quickly in our time – Amen.