

Rupture and Responsibility: Jewish Moral Obligations After 9/11

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September 11 was a rupture in American life. Between the before-time and a new age.

We would never be the same again.

All of us here have some personal connection to that day. At the annual memorial service on the bridge, some of you have told me your stories.

We have teachers who were in the classroom when they found out some of their students had lost their parents.

Some of you, or people you know, worked in the World Trade Center and barely escaped. Others didn't make it out.

Some were first responders who saved lives but lost their own—that day, or even years later due to long-term effects of smoke inhalation and exposure to toxins.

New York and Washington, DC are unique among American communities because it was our friends, our family, our neighbors who died.

We see some of their names on parks and expressways.

Most of them are still unknown to us, but when we visit the 9/11 museum, we see their faces in the news footage. Theirs are the names engraved on the memorials at the site where the Towers once stood.

And how many in our community live quietly, day-in and day-out, with pain most of us can never understand?

The 25th anniversary of 9/11 is a very personal and emotional moment for New Yorkers.

It's the day that changed everything. And we have never been the same since.

In some ways, we have become a more courageous and compassionate people.

Who could have imagined so many Americans, from first responders to ordinary civilians, risking their lives to save others?

Who could have imagined so many stepping up to donate blood, to nurse the wounded, and comfort the bereaved?

We saw God in the compassion we showed to our fellow Americans, whether we knew them or not.

At the same time, I think we have also become a more fearful people.

Our concern about preventing another terrorist attack has made us more aware of potential threats, and we have become more vigilant.

Knowing the horrific cost of being unprepared, we have even been willing to sacrifice some of our freedom for more security.

But our understandable fear for our own safety has its darker side, too.

As it has many times in American history, our fear led to a spike in xenophobia.

It started with skepticism of Muslim-Americans, but it quickly mushroomed into hostility toward illegal immigrants.

In 2005, President George W. Bush, who had been re-elected on the strength of his response to 9/11, provoked fierce opposition when he wanted to give temporary work permits to undocumented immigrants who were already in the country.

I remember feeling uncomfortable by that backlash. But I could not have imagined what it would eventually become.

In time, polls began to show significant percentages of our fellow citizens saying that only people who are born here, have American ancestry, and speak English are “true Americans.”¹

Refugees and immigrants who enter the country illegally came to be seen as “potential terrorists”² and “carri[ers] of all kinds of diseases.”³ The pandemic only intensified these sentiments.

In response to criticism by the pope, one of America’s highest elected officials declared that it’s perfectly fine to use harsh tactics to enforce immigration law because the government is not bound by the biblical commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.”⁴

Our nativism hit its apex with the deployment of the National Guard and quasi-militarized ICE and CPB agents in American cities, the disappearance of undocumented residents to brutal detention centers, and the murder of two American citizens by immigration officers on the streets of Minneapolis.

Courage and compassion, fear and violence.

The legacy of 9/11 is a complicated one.

A few months ago, I emailed one of my favorite Jewish podcasters to say that I wish he would speak out against the dehumanizing cruelty and abuses of power.

In response he said: “I do not believe Jews as a group possess a special moral obligation, any greater than anyone else’s in America, to do so.”

I think he’s wrong about that.

What is it we say in the “Aleinu” prayer? “*She-lo asanu k’goyei ha-aratzot*”—God did not make us like the other nations of the world and gave us a unique destiny.

This is what “chosenness” is all about.

We, the Jewish people, *exist* to stand apart from the crowd—not to go along with it.

Silence in the face of abject moral failure is not an option for us.

As Maimonides says, "Anyone who *is able to* protest sin and does not is considered *responsible* for that sin."⁵

Advocating for the vulnerable is a mitzvah we Reform Jews take seriously.

On several occasions this year, members of our congregation stood up publicly to protest the inhumanity of ICE.

My son Zachary came, too. I'm proud of him.

We were ridiculed by some people in Great Neck, but that's okay.

We didn't do it because it's popular. We did it because it's *right*.

Because protesting oppression of the stranger is a Jewish moral imperative—even when you think no one's listening.

As Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum asked, "How is it possible to know for sure what will come from it? ... [What if] even one person...comes to see the light and embraces the truth [of the Torah]?"⁶

After the rupture of 9/11, we can never go back to before.

But we do have to step up and meet the demands of the present:

To act courageously when the physical and social risks are high.

To show compassion to the immigrant and the refugee.

To resist the darker impulses of fear.

And to stand up for what's right.

Even, and especially, when no one else around us will.

¹ See Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 99.

² *Ibid.*, 117.

³ Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory*, 151.

⁴ See Christian Post, "Mike Johnson says 'borders are biblical,' responds to Pope Leo's criticism of Trump policies," Feb. 4, 2026, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/mike-johnson-says-borders-are-biblical-responds-to-pope-leo.html>. Johnson made the same points in greater detail in an essay posted on social media.

⁵ *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot De'ot* 6:7.

⁶ *Vayoel Moshe*, "Introduction," sections 13-14.