

Keeping the future within arm's length

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Neal Ross Atkinson

Congregation Shir Shalom

A week ago, my wife's employer tried to explain our strange new reality to his young son Lucas.

"Somebody blew up the tallest building in the world," he told the boy. "A lot of people died and were hurt, and even though we don't know who did it or why, we're going to find out."

Lucas asked, "Where's the second-biggest building in the world?"

"Chicago," replied his father with a puzzled look.

"Well, maybe the people in Chicago did it," said Lucas, "so *they* could have the biggest building."

When I heard that story, I laughed – for the first time in four days – and some of my numbness began to thaw. But I didn't start to feel really alive again until Sunday, when I taught my first religious-school class of the semester.

The bimonthly sessions I conduct at our synagogue have a heavy emphasis on "no-heresies-barred" discussion, and follow a curriculum suggested last semester by the students themselves. They're a bright, curious and involved group of sixth- through ninth-graders whom I treat as adults. So I wasn't surprised when they opted out of discussing the High Holy Days (which began this week) to talk about scary world events.

I didn't mince words. "The world you knew is gone," I told them. "We're living in a different one now, and nobody quite knows what to make of it yet – adults and young people alike – except that we're all in it together."

For about an hour, we shared our concerns, fears and hopes. Afterward, I imparted a Jewish mystical teaching which has parallels in many other traditions: "Great evil contains within it the seeds of greater good," I said. "Our job now is to find those seeds, wherever they are, and help them grow.

"Torah teaches that at the burning bush, Moses asked God what God's name was," I added. "God replied, 'Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh.' That's usually translated as 'I am that I am,' which makes God sound like Popeye. But another translation is, 'I will be what tomorrow demands.'" And my students nodded in agreement.

In a sense, everyone we know was standing at Ground Zero. We all saw what happened. We all know what it means. There's very little we can say about it. But there's a lot we

can do – seeds we must nurture so that the rest of our world doesn't disconnect and crumble.

For me, one of those seeds is in retelling the Lucas story. Some were in Sunday's classroom discussion. I found another by telephoning two local Islamic Centers to say that I, a Jew, understood that last Tuesday wasn't an expression of mainstream Islam – and that I would speak out against anti-Muslim bigotry. Giving blood will be another seed. Treating strangers and friends more gently and patiently will be yet another. And so it goes. We can't do everything, so we do what we can.

A friend of mine puts it this way: "If I want to affect the world," he says, "I have to bring it within arm's length. But it's amazing how far I can reach by touching other people."