

September 11<sup>th</sup>: A Tragedy in Search of Meaning  
By  
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For five years now everyone has been searching for deeper meaning to the events of 9/11/2001. Where does one go each year to find new insights? Is it a mistake to search for newness in what is a very old and common practice: man's inhumanity to man. The things that should occupy our minds are not the methods of killing, which are becoming more creative, nor the reasons, which are the old familiar justifications of "they killed our people first." Instead it should be the act of killing and the very state of war that we should concentrate on. Even the terrorist have reasons and the reasons are always good enough for those willing to commit the act. Only when the act becomes unthinkable can all the reasons become unjustifiable. Where death is concerned, reasons need not be morally equivalent as long as the outcomes are equivalent.

In 2001, September 11th occurred as it does this year, in a sacred period before Rosh Hashanah when Jews are suppose to be contemplative, reflective, and forgiving. It should not take 9/11 to put us in this frame of mind. Yet, even as I tried to focus on the approaching High Holydays, 9/11 forced its way into my consciousness in an interesting way. I was sitting at my computer punching the birth and death dates of Israelite sages into a program called *Zmanim* (time) which I use to generate the calendar for the Israelite Board of Rabbis. Normally we are most concerned with the schedule of Torah and Haftorah readings that this provides, but this year I wanted the calendar to remind us of the dates on which we should say prayers and light candles of remembrance for those who laid the foundation of our community.

After entering the dates, the computer calculated what the anniversaries are in the lunar Hebrew calendar and what those dates correspond to in the common solar calendar that we use everyday. Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford, the first black rabbi in America, died on 16 September 1935 (he was born on 23 April 1877). In 1935 that date corresponded to the 18 Elul 6595. This year 9/11 falls on the 18 Elul, Rabbi Ford's Yartzit.<sup>1</sup> Like my late father, Chief Rabbi Levy, my learned colleague, Rabbi Cappers Funnye, is constantly looking for the kabbalistic meaning of things using a numeric system called gamatria, but that was not my intent; I was not looking for a 9/11 connection. I did not intend to write a 9/11 essay; I set out to commemorate a black rabbi who died on this date, who coincidentally was born on the same day as my son, Levi. Attempting to figure out how all these things are related and how they are all connected to me is how I, too, found myself in the 9/11 boat this year.

Scripturally, his name Josiah (יְרֵמְיָהוּ) was the name of the sixteenth king of Judah, the son of the wicked King Amon. Despite his father's idolatry, at a young age the boy king began to "seek the God of David."<sup>2</sup> Under his reign the people began to

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<sup>1</sup> According to Orthodox rabbinic practice, the Hebrew date should always be used to determine Yartzit, the anniversary of ones death. Because the Hebrew and Common calendars are not in sync, 9/11 and the 18 Elul do not often fall on the same day.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Chronicles 34:3.

return(תשובה) to their heritage and when they did God revealed things to this generation in the form of a “scroll of the Lord’s Teaching given by Moses” that had somehow been lost. Because of this they kept the Law and celebrated the Passover like it had not been observed since the days of Samuel.<sup>3</sup> Josiah died trying to preserve almost thirty years of peace and righteousness.

Like his namesake, Rabbi Josiah Ford spent most his life trying to bring his people back to their God. Although he was unable to persuade Marcus Garvey to adopt Judaism as his true religion, he used his influence as the musical director of the Universal Negro Improvement Association to teach religion and Hebrew in Liberty Hall until he opened a synagogue call Beth B’nai Abraham in 1924. Through our Josiah, Rabbi W.A. Matthew discovered many of the secrets of the Torah and ultimately received ordination. In 1930 he and a small group of Black Jews went to Ethiopia where they participated in the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie, created a school, and acquired 800 acres of land for the purpose of uniting Black Jews of the Diaspora with their brothers already in Ethiopia.<sup>4</sup> He died on this land during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia—a prelude to World War II—on the 18 of Elul 71 years ago.

This year amidst all the head scratching, hand wringing, and teeth gnashing of those who respectively analyze the past, worry about the future, and seethe with anger for their enemies, let us take comfort from our Josiahs and let us fight for peace. My study of history and scripture teaches me that the struggle for peace is greater and in many ways harder than any war. A few people can plunge the world into war, but peace, if it is to be achieved, requires lots of people to be committed, united, persistent, public, and courageous over a long period of time. It is easy to start wars, making peace is the hardest thing man has not done. It is precisely because working for peace is so frustrating, so discouraging, and so exhausting that the Bible says “The Lord will give *strength* unto his people; the Lord will bless his people with peace” Psalm 29:11. We need the strength not to think about it, but to do it. The “meek shall inherit the earth and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace” Psalm 37:11 but not by quietly waiting and praying. On the contrary, the Bible says “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.” Psalm 34:14. Notice that departing from evil and doing good are described here as single acts, whereas peace is something that must be doubly sought and pursued. Those verbs are active, implying that peace is not something that can be passively waited upon.

It is axiomatic that those who desire true peace must seek real justice. Without justice what often passes for peace is merely quietness, temporary submission, or what appears to be the total defeat of one’s enemies until it is shown to be only a pause between continued violence. Proverbs says, “When a man’s ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to live at peace with him.” Proverbs 16:7. If we are right and on the Lord’s side, as we believe we are, then why are we making war instead of peace?

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Chronicles 34:14; 33; 35:1-19

<sup>4</sup> For a published biography of Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford see *African American Lives*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds., s.v. “Ford, Arnold Josiah.”

This 9/11 I would like for us to focus and truly comprehend the meaning of two words in that often quoted passage from Isaiah who envisioned a day when all people shall “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Isaiah 2:4. The operative words are *beating* and *learn*. The blacksmiths of peace who can transform swords into plows and guns into spoons are people who can bring creative heat and power to steel until it bends the metal of the real world into the image in our hearts. Only when people of peace chose to exert this kind of power can they *learn* to say no to war any more without fear, weakness, or vulnerability. As long as we are under the delusion that war can make us secure, we will be fighting and we will be afraid.

One day we shall come to understand that peace is not gained by defeating one’s enemies, it comes when one has no enemies to defeat. We live in a world that believes that the best way to eliminate ones enemies to kill one’s enemies. After five years of killing our enemies seem to be multiplying even as the number of our soldiers killed in this war start to approach the number of people killed on 9/11. At this rate, next year the number of our soldiers killed in the “War on Terror” will exceed the number of people killed by Al Qaeda on 9/11. War is not producing peace, its creating more death. We are in a state of moral and spiritual confusion where war is seen as the road to peace and silence against war is seen as an expression of patriotism. War is, has always been, and will forever be the opposite of peace. Citizens hoping for a peaceful world have a patriotic duty to oppose all wars, every where, as they themselves fight nonviolently for justice.