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EXPLOSION

Sunday, July 5

INDEPENDENCE DAY WEEKEND, 2020 WAS filled with simple pleasures.

July 4th was on a Saturday. Leah and I spent a quiet *Shabbos* at home. That night, with the cool air washing over us, we sat for a while in our backyard, looking out across the bay at the huge fireworks show on Sandy Beach.

Sunday morning, Leah worked in the garden. Then we rode our bikes through the winding streets of the neighborhood. In the afternoon shade, Leah read and I studied outdoors, both sipping cool lemonade.

Having some time ago quit my Wall Street career, I was enjoying life as an author and speaker, writing books and speaking about our religious transformation. People were interested; there was a huge religious revival going on in the Jewish community. We were proud of our five children and our grandchildren, all of them productive and happy. It was amazing that such wonderful children had come from us. Our life had meaning and purpose.

It was late Sunday afternoon, July 5th. The sun was sinking toward the horizon as I sat in front of the computer working on a new book. Leah was at her desk. I thought about the richness of our lives and our many blessings. The President, in his holiday message, had talked about the ideals of the Founding Fathers: free thought, free speech and the right to worship. Over the past fifteen years, our country — in fact, the entire world — had struggled with terrorism, several wars, a divided electorate and environmental disasters, yet somehow on this weekend it all seemed so far in the past as America basked happily in the warmth of its 244th birthday.

There was a time when I couldn't imagine such contentment. Raised in affluent surroundings on New York's Upper East Side, I was privileged to have every material advantage imaginable, including a fine education, cultural enrichments and sophisticated pursuits. Still, as an adolescent and then as a young man, I couldn't shake the feeling that something crucial was missing from my life. But then I had no idea what it was.

By age thirty one, I had explored Buddhism, Hinduism and Catholicism, along with folk music, wilderness hiking and social activism in an effort to find "it." I was married to a brilliant and generous-hearted woman, and we had been blessed with two daughters. I owned the local weekly newspaper in a leafy Hudson Valley town and life seemed full. Yet inside I was empty and miserable.

One day, a friend invited me to a nearby synagogue to hear a speech by Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, a rabbi's wife who had been widely described as "the Jewish answer to Billy Graham." Although born Jewish, I had never even been in a synagogue. But as I listened, it felt as if her words were marching straight into my heart.

Suddenly my wife and I knew what had been missing.

We began to attend classes and together we eagerly embraced the Torah, the Five Books of Moses and its commentary. Within months, we had completely changed our lives: I sold my business and we moved to a religious Jewish neighborhood, enrolling our daughters in a Jewish religious school. Even our names changed. Linda became Leah and Roy became Yisroel.

Our lives had changed dramatically. In America, no one could prevent us from returning to the ways of our ancestors. That deepened our appreciation for Independence Day.

The sun slipped beneath the horizon and the world darkened. As I switched on the desk lamp, Leah entered the room. An e-mail had arrived from our daughter Tehilla in Israel. We talked and laughed for a few minutes about the exploits of our grandchildren.

Suddenly, the screen flickered and faded to a single dot that slowly disappeared. The house went dark. Before I could get up, the world outside the window turned white, so bright that I had to turn away.

“Yisroel, What’s happening?”

I had no idea, no time to think, but my skin became very cold and a flash of fear shot through me like an electric shock. The house shook violently; a crystal vase toppled from a shelf, crashing to the floor. Suddenly the air was punctuated with deep sounds. BOOM!! BOOM!! BOOM!!

For a long moment, we didn’t move or speak. Then we groped our way through the darkness, searching for a flashlight. We found the box that held our *Shabbos* candles and a supply of matches. I lit a candle, stuffing the matches and two extra candles in my shirt pocket.

I reached for the phone. Dead.

We found the portable radio. No stations were broadcasting. There was only a faint, scratchy hiss.

BOOM!! BOOM!!

Now the sounds were coming from another direction. We walked to the window and looked towards New York City. Flickering light flashed off the clouds in the darkened sky toward Brooklyn and Staten Island. We could hear faraway sirens. People were gathering in the street.

My insides began to tighten up.

I'm at camp in Vermont, ten years old. I'm wordlessly panicking. What frightens me? The "bad language" of the kids? Their "coolness" and my awkwardness? I'm homesick. Is that it? But when I get home I'm still homesick! Something must really be wrong with me!

My fear is beyond words, beyond explanation. I'm scared of tough kids, violence, cursing. I'm scared of successful kids. I'm scared of drugs. I'm scared of people who aren't scared. I can't put my finger on it. It grips my stomach, my mind. I'm afraid of the dark, but why? It doesn't matter why. Fear is beyond logic, beyond understanding. I'm just afraid! My mind is paralyzed. A lump forms in my throat. I try to swallow, but I can't.

That was then, but now I believe in G-d. I'm not supposed to be afraid any longer. But your basic personality remains with you. What you were when you were a child, you are when you're an adult. Maybe you have different weapons now, but you're still in the same fight. I KNOW that G-d is in charge, but I'm still afraid, the childhood panic seizes me. I can't convince myself to be calm. The world is out of control, and I'm out of control with it. There are no rules. The world is falling apart, and I'm falling apart. I can't deal with it!

9/11/01: white fear grips me. What is "white fear"? Somehow the world goes white; all color is drained. I'm shivering. The world has become cold.

I'm afraid of dying. I'm afraid of being hurt. I'm afraid of seeing people dying. I'm afraid of being alone. I'm afraid of my world disintegrating.

I try to fight the panic, but I don't know how.

Yisroel, control yourself! Bring your mind under control.

Wordlessly, Leah and I walked outside toward Bentzi Stein's driveway. A group of people stood there huddled together, flashlights in hand. No one spoke. As we got closer, we could hear an electronic crackling. Bentzi was a member of the *Hatzolah* volunteer rescue service and had an emergency radio. As we listened to the reports, I felt my heart pounding.

"....multiple explosions in the New York area. Bridges, tunnels, power plants, police stations and military facilities have been hit. We have reports, not yet confirmed, of explosions in other cities....billowing smoke and flames reported at Grand Central and Patrick Moynihan Stations. We've just heard, and this is not confirmed, that some of these explosions may be nuclear. Repeat, we have unconfirmed reports that there may have been a number of nuclear explosions."

Mrs. Kasman, a widow who lived across the street from us, screamed and began to cry. Leah put her arm around her and whispered something. The radio now began to crackle loudly; we could hardly understand the words.

"....traffic lights are inoperative and there is near total gridlock throughout Brooklyn, Queens and Long Island. Our generator is fading; we may not be able to broadcast much longer....CRACKLE.... Good luck and may G-d..."

There was a final, muffled crackle from the radio. For a moment, all of us stood together, motionless. No one spoke. The silence was thick and stifling.

Suddenly, a light burst behind us, high in the sky to the

west. It was so bright that we instinctively shut our eyes tight as the world suddenly went white.

An instant later, a shock wave hit us like a battering ram. There was screaming and moaning and quiet sobbing all around me. Parts of the radio were scattered everywhere. I pulled myself up and looked for Leah, who was across the street, struggling to her feet. We were both a little dizzy and bruised but alive. I am sure that, had we been much closer to the light burst, all of us would have been dead.

Although I didn't understand how it worked, I had read once that an electromagnetic bomb detonated high above the earth's surface could destroy communications for thousands of miles. I was sure that the attacks had been designed to do just that. There was every indication that the terrorists were trying to wreck the emergency communication system. With no telephones, no electricity, no radio and no electronic communications, America's military and civilian defense systems would be crippled.

"Leah, are you all right?"

"I think so, but...where is Mrs. Kasman?" Before I could reply, Mrs. Kasman walked by us slowly, gripping Bentzi's arm tightly. Leah smiled with relief, then immediately started coughing and covering her mouth. Soon I knew why. Dust and grit swirled around us and flew into our noses and mouths; something metallic left a burning sensation in my throat.

Joey and Dina Stein, Larry Kantor, and Harry and Beverly Klaus were standing on the street with us. We were all in a daze. Bentzi came back from Mrs. Kasman's house, his footsteps kind of shaky.

We all just stood there. No one said anything for a while.

Then Larry Kantor said, "Those Moslems. It's unbelievable. We've all known this was coming. We're the stupid

ones! We all knew that those livery drivers, those candy store owners, the newspaper kiosk guys, we all knew who they were. They were all just waiting and planning and planning and waiting. And then they became doctors and professors and real estate agents. They were 'just like us.' They were typical Americans, even members of Congress, except they took their oath of office on a Koran instead of a Bible. Just like us.

"I remember the science fiction story our counselor told us in camp around forty years ago. I was just a little kid, but I am still scared from that story! He told it to us at bedtime and I didn't sleep at all that night, or the next... or the next. The Martians were invading earth, and the scary thing was that they looked just like humans. There was only one way to tell that they were Martians: they had a third eye in the back of their head!

"There was only one person on earth who knew the secret, and he was racing around to alert the world. He got to the FBI and then the CIA and then the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and they were beginning to believe him. They had to mobilize the entire security apparatus. But they needed the approval of the President. So finally he gets to the White House. After elaborate security checks he's admitted to the Oval Office. The President walks in.

"'Mr. President,' he begins, 'I want to tell you about this incredible threat to the security of the United States.' He proceeds to describe the entire situation. The President listens with rapt attention.

"'If this is true,' the President says, 'the Nation owes you a huge debt of gratitude. I'm going to call my Chief of Staff into the Oval Office.'

"The President swivels around in his chair to reach for the yellow phone, and that's when the visitor sees the third eye in the back of the President's head!"

Larry looked at us.

“That’s what’s going on here. They’re all around. We let them take over, and now they are destroying America. They’re destroying the greatest nation in the history of the world, and, by the way, the kindest to the Jews! Listen, biblically, Ishmael, the father of the Arabs, is called “*pe’re adam*,” a wild-man, and that’s their nature. And now they’re running the world! G-d Almighty! How will we survive?”

Beverly Klaus was shifting back and forth on her feet.

“Larry, you know we love you. We’ve been your neighbors for twenty five years, but you’re a bigot! I can’t stand your politics! You’re really a bigot! The Moslems are no different from the Chinese or the Irish or any other group. Dr. Chen, who lives over there, is a radiologist. Dr. Ibn Kalil is my radiologist, and he happens to be a lovely man. What’s the difference? Stop being such a hateful right winger! You don’t know who did this, and the fact is that, if it’s Moslems or Iranians or Arabs or whatever you want to call them, you know perfectly well that the crazies, the terrorists are not the majority, and they don’t represent the typical Moslem or his religious viewpoint. To say that Moslems are by nature terrorists is like saying black people are by nature thieves. It’s not fair and it’s not true. You don’t know what happened and you don’t know who did it.”

Bentzi was listening quietly.

“Listen guys,” he said, “I don’t think we have the luxury to stand here and debate this right now. We’d better concentrate on saving ourselves, whether that means trying to flee Long Island or battening down in our basements. But I’ll just tell you both one thing, and I’ve studied this a little. The Koran is full of hatred, not just against Jews but against Christians and anyone they call a ‘Kafir’ or infidel. The Koran preaches that Islam is the only religion and that the duty of a good Mos-

lem is to fight what they call 'idolatry' until there is nothing left in the world but Moslems. Period. So no one should be surprised at a Moslem attempt to take over America and the world. It's all there for anyone who wants to see it.

"But now, let's try to save ourselves. We're piling everyone in the boat and heading for New Jersey. I would love to take you, but we don't have an inch of room. May G-d watch over you and all of us, and may we all meet in peace soon again. I hope it will be in Israel. But for now, anywhere there is peace will be a welcome sight.

"Good luck to you, neighbors! May G-d watch over all of us!"

Bentzi turned around and walked quickly to his house.

The rest of us had little appetite for words. We shook hands and exchanged blessings. Leah and I walked slowly toward our house. We were both groping for a way to deal with this rationally.

"Yisroel, now that we've heard everyone else's opinion, what do *you* think is happening?"

"I think we know, Leah. We've been expecting this for years."

She gave me a serious, straight look. No expression; we just looked at each other.

We had known this was coming. Later on, of course, the world found out that the events of July 5, 2020 made 9/11 look like child's play. The terrorists didn't have huge atomic or nuclear weapons. Instead, they had detonated hundreds, maybe thousands, of small, powerful tactical nuclear devices almost simultaneously at targets across the country.

The events of July 5 were the work of skilled and patient zealots, disciplined soldiers who had lived in the U.S. for years. Posing as ordinary civilians who shopped at the supermarket, drove American cars and tended their lawns, they

acted just like their neighbors. Organized into individual cells, each cell with a single mission, they had rehearsed for more than a decade, traveling each year to mock facilities set up in places like Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Tajikistan and the Sinai Peninsula. When asked, they would say that the trips were religious pilgrimages.

Somewhere high over the middle of the U.S. they had managed to set off a powerful electromagnetic explosion. This knocked out radio transmissions throughout the entire country, virtually paralyzing police and military communication, and enabling small groups of insurgents to isolate and attack key government facilities, military posts, utilities and transportation systems, pretty much shutting down the federal and local governments.

Before 9/11, America had felt itself to be a fortress, strong and safe from its enemies. We knew there were powerful government agencies, some more secret than others, that dealt with intelligence and counter-intelligence. We didn't really worry about these things until the day that the Twin Towers came down.

In the glow of hindsight, it was clear that a lot had been missed. It's like the world under a rock. One walks by the rock every day, but who thinks about looking underneath? When you lift it, you are always surprised to find that everything under there is moving! It's ugly. Maybe that's why most of us don't look under rocks!

Leah and I used to talk about the changes in our everyday lives after 9/11. We understood why we had to go through airport searches, walk around barricades and show photo ID to security guards. But was it enough? Some people thought there was too much checking and screening, that 9/11 could never happen again. America may have been caught unprepared once, but it couldn't happen twice.

Still, I wondered why only trucks were searched at the tunnels. Couldn't a car trunk carry a powerful bomb? Of course, the answer was simple. Checking every car would have brought America to a halt. We wouldn't have tolerated it. An extra hour at the airport perhaps, but every day?

As it turned out, the tunnels were easy to destroy. It took only four cars for four tunnels. The bridges were not as easy. Six months earlier, a new firm had submitted the lowest bid on a bridge maintenance contract to the New York Department of Transportation. Weeks later, explosive charges were hidden in service channels within the spans. On July 5, two-man suicide subs packed with explosives struck the suspension towers, ramming the bases and blowing themselves up, weakening the structures. In a matter of minutes several huge and vital bridges toppled into the waters. First the Brooklyn Bridge, then the 59th Street, Hell's Gate and MetroNorth bridges, even the mighty George Washington. The Williamsburg, the Manhattan, and the main span of the Triborough were not so easy and the destruction was incomplete. Nevertheless, within a few minutes Manhattan was basically isolated.

Of course, in some ways we had made it easy for them. We had created a society that was dependent on computers. The same computers that made it possible to buy movie tickets online, order groceries, balance one's checking account and talk with strangers, also controlled traffic lights, electricity, elevators, telephones, airports, water and gasoline pumps. Even the police and fire departments were crippled without computers. All systems were paralyzed in less than five minutes.

As Leah and I reentered our home that evening, there was much we didn't understand. But we knew one thing: everyone was on his own. Without communications, there would

be no police, no military structures...no government at all. When America realized this, there would be chaos.

How would we function? When Hurricane Katrina had submerged New Orleans back in 2005, the aftermath was more frightening than the storm itself. The police simply disappeared. The most powerful military force in the world went AWOL. Armed gangs looted and terrorized. And that had been when America was fully operational, long before 2020.

As Leah and I walked into our house, we could hear wailing and weeping in the darkness. Then the sound of an agonized, desperate voice, "What am I supposed to do?"

No one answered.

Once inside the house, I closed the door and took a deep breath. Already my eyes were getting used to the darkness, and when Leah drew back the drapes, there was just enough light from the moon to see each other.

I was fighting panic. It would rise up, and then I would try to push it back down. It was an internal as well as an external war. The internal war was to remain sane.

We knew we had to get out. Intuitively, I knew this was a well-planned attack, the product of years of preparation. I assumed it wasn't confined to the Metropolitan Area, nor even to the United States, but rather that it was part of an attempt to establish worldwide Moslem supremacy. After all, the Moslem population had been growing on a spectacular basis, most noticeably in Europe, but also in the U. S. We had seen it coming; all you had to do was look. Anyone could understand who had the courage to see and to think,

So how would we deal with it? We had to be able to run to some place where we could survive until the cataclysm passed. Here on Long Island, connected to the mainland only by crowded, fragile bridges and tunnels, we were especially vulnerable. Long Island had never felt like an island because

we had never been attacked before, but suddenly we were trapped. We had to get off the Island.

But where would we go?

And what about our children? We had to find them, or at least try, and they were in New Jersey. So it was clear where we were headed.

There was one small problem: how to get there!

Amidst my mental paralysis, I was doing things. I was moving like a robot. Someone else, it seemed, was grabbing and organizing necessities. It wasn't I, but I was doing it. I felt like an actor in an epic film, acting out our life against the backdrop of a crumbling civilization.

I looked at Leah. I saw her as she had looked when we first met in high school, two teenagers on the threshold of life. Then it was our wedding day. She was never common. She saw beyond the sham. She looked into the distance.

She is a noble person, I thought to myself.

Rumbling in the distance snapped me back to the present.

"Leah, how will we survive?"

"We will survive, Yisroel. G-d will save us. You will see."

I didn't know why, but I believed her.