We are STRONG

Jeanne Wray

It happened on a Tuesday morning.
I got to lead the Pledge of Allegiance that day at school.
I made a 100 on my spelling paper, and we were reading
a story about the circus.
My teacher, Mrs. Wray, was smiling.

Then we had a visitor, the teacher from across the hall,
Ms. Miller.
Mrs. Wray left the room for a few minutes. Shawn and
Michelle got into an argument over a
Happy Birthday Pencil while she was gone.

When Mrs. Wray came back in, she looked different.
She wasn't smiling anymore.
Her eyes looked sad, and she spoke softly.

She told us that four airplanes had crashed. Three of them had crashed into buildings in New York City and Washington, D.C. The other one had crashed into the ground in Pennsylvania. Many, many people had been killed.

The grade I made on my spelling paper
didn't matter anymore.
The story about the circus wasn't fun anymore.
The Happy Birthday pencil wasn't important anymore.
But I'm happy I got to lead the Pledge of Allegiance
that day.

I didn't understand.
Why would someone do that?
Why were they mad at the United States?
What had we done that made them so mad?
Why would someone crash an airplane into a building
when they would be killed, also?
My teacher didn't have very good answers.

We didn't have very much fun at school that day.
Everyone seemed sad. Even though the sun was shining,
it seemed a gray day.
The P.E. teacher was sad. In music class,
we sang all four verses
Of the Star Spangled Banner, and the teacher cried.
At lunch the custodian didn't joke around with us
like he usually does.

Lots of American flags showed up, though. We got a new one to hang outside our door. When the bell rang and I started home, the flag in front of the school looked sad, too. It was only halfway up the pole.

My mom was watching TV when I got home.
It was all about the attack.
The TV showed scary pictures of the planes hitting
the World Trade Center.
They showed them a lot. It looked like a horror movie.
Mom was worried, I could tell. When Dad got home,
he was trying to be calm, but it wasn't easy.

That night my favorite TV shows weren't on. There weren't any baseball games being played. Nothing was normal. But President Bush was on TV. He said we would find out who did this, and they would be punished. He sounded determined and strong.

I'm really mad at those people for doing this bad thing.
But, I'm really scared of war.
The President said a verse from the Bible. He said, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me."
It makes me feel better to know that God is with me.

The next day at school was weird.
Everybody was talking about the attack.
Mrs. Wray tried to be cheerful, but I could tell
she really didn't feel very cheerful.

We got to draw that day and make a book. Our class made a list of all the ways our country is still strong. We said that:

Our government is still strong.
Our military is still strong.
Our doctors and hospitals are still strong.
Our firefighters are still strong.
Our families are still strong.
Our schools are still strong.
Our belief in God is still strong.
Our American spirit is still strong.

We each got to draw a picture or two showing how strong our country is. Then we put them together to make a book. I'm proud of my book. I'm proud of my country, too.

Many people have been sad and scared since the attack. But there are also many more flags flown now. In fact some stores have run out of flags. Mrs. Bush said in a message to schoolchildren that we are safe, and that we should be kind to each other. All people all over America and even in places far away are praying for our country.
That's a good thing.

We are mighty. We are strong.
God Bless America.

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We are vulnerable

Arthur Waskow

A *sukkah* is a little hut made of sticks and leaves, held together by a bit of twine. *Sukkah* is a Hebrew term. During the Jewish harvest festival, families build a sukkah beside their houses or in the yard where it stands for just one week. Families say their evening prayers within the sukkah, and they may eat meals or even sleep under its frail, leafy canopy. It reminds them of the time when the Jewish tribe was wandering in the wilderness, as described in the Hebrew Scriptures.

A line from the Jewish evening prayers reads, "Spread over all of us Your sukkah of shalom." *Shalom* means peace. Why does the prayer plead to God for a "sukkah of shalom" rather than God's "tent" or "house" or "palace" of peace? Because the sukkah is just a hut, the most vulnerable of houses. Vulnerable in time, where it lasts for only a week each year. Vulnerable in space, where its roof must be not only leafy but leaky — letting in the starlight and gusts of wind and rain.

For much of our lives, we try to achieve peace and safety by building with steel and concrete and toughness. Pyramids, air raid shelters, Pentagons, World Trade Centers. Hardening what might be targets and, like Pharaoh, hardening our hearts against what is foreign to us. But the sukkah comes to remind us: We are in truth all vulnerable. If "a hard rain's a-gonna fall," it will fall on all of us.

Americans have felt invulnerable. The oceans, our wealth, our military power have made up what seemed an invulnerable shield. We may have begun feeling uncomfortable in the nuclear age, but no harm came to us. Yet on September 11 the ancient truth came home: We all live in a sukkah:

Even the greatest oceans do not shield us;
Even the mightiest buildings do not shield us;
Even the wealthiest balance sheets
And the most powerful weapons do not shield us.

There are only wispy walls and leaky roofs between us. The planet is in fact one interwoven web of life. The teaching that I must love my neighbor as I do myself is not a teaching to be "nice," it is more like the law of gravity. My neighbor and myself are interwoven. If I hate my neighbor, the hatred will recoil upon me.

What is the lesson, when we learn that we all of us live in a sukkah? How do we make such a vulnerable house into a place of shalom, of peace and security and harmony and wholeness? The lesson is that only a world where we all recognize our vulnerability can become a world where all communities feel responsible to all other communities. And only such a world can prevent such acts of rage and murder.

If I treat my neighbor's pain and grief as foreign, I will end up suffering when my neighbor's pain and grief curdle into rage. But if I realize that the walls between us are full of holes, I can reach through them in compassion and connection.

Suspicion about the perpetrators of this act of infamy has fallen upon some groups that espouse a tortured version of Islam. Even if this had not turned out to be so, America needed – and still needs – to open its heart and mind to the pain and grief of those in the Arab and Muslim worlds who feel excluded, denied, unheard, disempowered, defeated.

This does not mean ignoring or forgiving whoever wrought such bloodiness. Their violence must be halted, and they must be brought to justice, without imitating them by harming other innocent people. But real justice demands more. Their rage must be calmed and the pain behind their rage must be heard and addressed. Instead of entering upon a "war of civilizations," we must pursue a planetary peace.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow is director of The Shalom Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Online at www.shalomctr.org). This essay is dedicated to the memory of two extraordinary social-studies teachers of the last generation: Henry B. Waskow and Hannah Waskow.

Courtesy of B'nai B'rith International

Two members of the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO) working on a sukkah.