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Rabbi's rebuilt temple is inspiration

Fifty or so blocks to the south, the terrible scenes and anguished, desperate hunt for survivors overwhelmed Rabbi Peter Rubenstein, and he wrestled with what to say.

It was supposed to be easy — his congregation, historic Central Synagogue in midtown, was celebrating its first High Holy Days at home in three years. A devastating fire had driven worshippers to armories and community halls but now, after more than \$40 million in restoration work, his flock was back.

A rededication, with Mayor Giuliani, Edward Cardinal Egan and other notables, and the blowing of the ritual ram's horn, had been held Sept. 9.

"Sometimes, you suffer trauma and tragedy and you wonder," Rubenstein said at the rededication, "and then you return home. That's what we've done."

Two days later, when terror-

ists leveled the twin towers, breaking New Year's heart but not its spirit, those words came back to him.

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He tore up his original Rosh Hashanah sermon and started over.

Deeply felt words

At sundown this past Tuesday, the first night of the 10-day holiday celebrating the New Year 5762, with its intense, prayerful reflection and forgiveness, Rubenstein took his place and talked from his heart.

"We are," he said, "people with a long and holy tradition of walking through the valley of

the shadow of death, then rising to the mountains, warmed by the sun, to set our eyes on the horizon."

As he spoke, he was struck by a sudden, vivid metaphor.

"Those of us who ride the subway," he said, departing from his text, "hold onto poles when they're crowded. We see other hands holding the poles — all the colors, all the nationalities. That's the city."

"You rumble along, swaying, and there are sudden stops," Rubenstein continued. "You're all holding tighter now, to keep from falling. We're all holding tight now, together, because that pole is our foundation."

Afterward, the congregation, which counts cosmetics heir Ronald Lauder, Public Advocate (and mayoral candidate) Mark Green and former Securities and Exchange Commission chief Arthur Levitt as members, gave him a standing ovation.

"That was a surprise," said

Rubenstein, who was born and grew up in Bronx and became rabbi of the landmarked Reform synagogue 11 years ago.

Saved sacred scrolls

He was preparing for Friday night services Aug. 28, 1998, when fire broke out. Later, it was blamed on a spark from a blowtorch being used to repair a roof air conditioning unit.

Rubenstein raced through the smoke and rescued two Torahs, one of them pieced together from scrolls hidden by European Jews during the Holocaust.

The fire collapsed the roof and several beams collapsed. One fell on the organ, others crashed onto the floor. Many members wept when they saw the damage.

Rubenstein pledged to rebuild and asked members to give generously. They did, to the tune of nearly \$40 million.

In his sermon, Rubenstein made pointed reference to the re-

building project, with its resolve and vision, and its metaphoric meaning.

"We have embraced the faith of Nehemiah, who looked upon the destroyed city and proclaimed, 'You see the bad state we are in, our city lying in ruins.' " Rubenstein recounted in retelling the Old Testament story of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. "And they said, 'Let us rise up and rebuild.' "

His listeners did not know until Rubenstein told them, but Central Synagogue already stood as a much larger example.

Giuliani cited the synagogue's rising from the ashes when President Bush inspected the smoldering remains of the two World Trade Center towers.

"He [the mayor] and Gov. Pataki told the President that just as this congregation had rebuilt, so the city itself will rebuild," Rubenstein said.

And with that, more applause rolled through the sanctuary

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