Above Tragedy: Thoughts for Simhat Torah

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By

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(This is the first sermon I delivered from the pulpit of Congregation Shearith Israel, Simhat Torah 1969. Forty-five years have passed since that first sermon, and yet the ideas within it continue to ring true.) We have spent many months reading about the life of Moses. Today, in one of the most dramatic episodes of the Torah, we read about his death—a very agonizing scene. Moses, the great leader, teacher, and prophet, climbs to the summit of Mount Nebo and looks out over the horizon at the Promised Land. As he stands silent and alone, God tells him: “You are beholding the land that I have promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob saying, ‘I shall give it to your descendants.’ See it with your eyes. You shall not cross into the land.” What thoughts must then have tortured Moses! What anguish must have filled his soul! To dream, to work a whole lifetime for something and then to be told in final terms that your hopes would never be realized…Is this not the heart of tragedy? Most commentators seek a reason for such a tragic ending to Moses’ life. They look for a sin committed by Moses to explain his punishment. Some say it was the breaking the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Others suggest that it was his striking the stone with his staff, rather than speaking to it. I could never understand these commentators. Certainly, Moses sinned; but which human being has never sinned? Moreover, his sins were really not serious. He had good reason to be enraged when he found his people worshipping the golden calf. And the difference between striking the stone and speaking to it is, after all, insignificant. The event was still miraculous. Certainly, Moses did so many great things for which he deserved reward. He was the only human being to see God “face to face.” He was the greatest prophet, the greatest teacher, the most dedicated leader. Certainly, he was worthy of entering the Promised Land. Moses was not being punished for a sin. Rather, the Torah is describing in a very vivid way something about the human predicament. Death is a built-in part of human existence. Though we may have noble ideals, though we may work hard, we cannot expect to fulfill all of our ambitions. Moses, perhaps the most ideal character in the Bible, was plagued by being mortal; and great mortals simply cannot realize all of their hopes. This is a profound truth of the nature of humankind. Today, we are also introduced to another biblical character, Adam. I think it is very ironic that the birth of Adam and the death of Moses are

juxtaposed in today's Torah readings. Adam was given paradise. He was a man who had no dreams or ambitions, for he had everything he wanted. He was complacent, satisfied, and untroubled by ideals. Existing in such a state, though, is problematic, because there is no motivation for living. If there is no place for one to advance, he must fall back. And so, Adam fell. But whereas Moses was a tragic hero, Adam was just plain tragic. Whereas Moses had lived his life working toward a dream so that when death came it tragically cut off a living force, Adam never knew the value of life, and hence his fall from paradise is far less climactic. Ultimately, being mortals, we each have the choice of being either tragic heroes or simply tragic. In which category do we belong? Unfortunately, many of us are satisfied with ourselves, with our wealth, with our social position. We are especially complacent in the realm of our religious attainments. We think that we understand the truths of Judaism, the profundities of the Torah. We think we practice our religion properly and do enough mitzvoth. For the most part, we are stagnant. Today, on Simhat Torah, we completed the reading of the Torah. We could have said that we have finished our study, we are content. But we did not do these things. We began immediately to read Bereishith. We started the Torah all over again. We know that we will never fully comprehend the Torah or fully realize its sacred dreams—but we move forward and onward. We cannot rest from the Torah, for to rest is to become tragic. As Jews, therefore, we are part of a tradition that not only thrives on noble ideals, but which loves noble actions. Like Moses, we should seek to keep our religious ideals and practices on fire within us, so that they give light not only to ourselves but to all who come near us. We should devote our lives to attaining religious perfection for ourselves and for our society; and though we may never enter the Promised Land, we will be able to stand on a summit and see our dreams realized in the future through our children. We may never walk into the land, but we will have led an entire generation to the point where they can enter.

Angel for Shabbat