

THE DEATH OF A LEADER (Facing Life's Tragedies)

A High Holiday Sermon by
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The murder of Anwar Sadat in Egypt yesterday reminds me of a moment of great sadness during World War II. I was then a soldier returning from furlough to my camp base in Mississippi. As was my habit, I got off the train at every station and walked up and down the platform trying to stretch my legs. I remember that it was about midnight when I got off at a little station somewhere in Alabama, and I heard a portion of a news broadcast announcing the death of President Roosevelt.

I was shocked and moved to tears. Roosevelt in those days was a true hero to most Americans. He had led us out of a great economic depression; he had rallied us to fight against Hitler; and now his eloquent voice was to be heard no more. At first I thought, "How sad for our country that such a good man should die while still in office." We didn't have T.V. in those days, but I had listened to Roosevelt's "fireside chats" on the radio, and I felt as if I had suddenly lost an older friend and protector. I asked myself, "Who will lead us now that our great leader is dead?" Finally, I experienced anger. How terrible it was that the man who had sacrificed so much leading America to the point that it was now winning the war would never see the successful conclusion of that war.

Most Americans felt a great sense of loss at the death of President Roosevelt, but his successor did well enough. Harry Truman brought the war to a successful conclusion. During his term of office, Truman was not rated as strong a leader as Roosevelt had been, but historians have since stated that Truman may have accomplished more than any President in modern times, including Roosevelt. The death of President Roosevelt was truly a sad moment, but life went on, and America prospered.

More of you will remember the tragic death of President John Kennedy. Kennedy was young for a President. He had vitality, a warm smile. He was well educated and articulate. The hopes of America's younger generation rode with him; yet this most beloved of Presidents was cut down in his prime by an assassin's bullets. Many of us cried openly. All of us attended his funeral as it was televised, and each of us felt as if a member of the family had died. Special services were held in churches and synagogues, and at a large service held on sudden notice at Beth Am in South Miami, the Rabbi ended his eulogy with the words, "Good night, sweet prince, we shall not see your like soon again."

We were all hit hard by Kennedy's death, yet his successor did well enough. Lyndon Johnson was older than Kennedy, and he had a different style, yet Johnson succeeded in getting broad civil rights legislation passed that set a new precedent for America in the area of human rights. Perhaps none of us will completely forget the tragedy of Kennedy's death, but we are grateful that the strength of our country continued unabated.

Now we learn that Anwar Sadat has been assassinated, apparently by some of his own soldiers. Sadat was a man with a warm personality. Jews came to admire the courage which brought him to Jerusalem to seek a settlement between Israel and Egypt. Of course, Egypt obtained a great deal in this settlement, but the process that Sadat helped to set in motion provided the basis for what was hoped would be a broader Middle-East settlement. We are grieved to see Sadat go as a human being. We are sorry that Israel has lost a friend. We feel a sense of loss and abandonment. What, we wonder, will happen now to the fragile Middle-East peace? What will happen to Egypt? What will happen to Israel? To America?

I am sure that you have been listening to your T.V. and radio broadcasts. It is interesting to me that the so-called experts are predicting consequences that range from A to Z. My guess is that events in Egypt will follow the line of what happened when Sadat's predecessor died. When Nasser died, he was Egypt's strong man par excellence. Sadat was an unknown. Sadat was thought to be too quiet, too reserved. It was said that he would never make a popular president, yet Sadat fooled them all. Mubarak also seems to be quiet, but he has a following in the armed forces. He has broad diplomatic experience. He has been at Sadat's side through many crises. Some say he was Sadat's hatchet man. He may well prove to be a very strong successor.

But if Mubarak doesn't make it, then we will have to deal with that alternative. Iran was captured by hard line Muslims, yet they have proved themselves incapable of ruling. Although Iran is now strongly anti-Israel, it can't even control its internal enemies. I am confident that Israel will survive whether Mubarak is able to follow Sadat's policies or not. If American Jews give all the help to Israel which it is in their power to give, then Israel will be able to meet any threat from its teeming Arab neighbors.

To be a Jew is to live with a sense of history. Our people is almost four thousand years old. We have lived through many revolutions and catastrophes. We have learned to look at present events in the perspective of the past and the future. We know that no single leader or event can make for prosperity forever. We know that every demagogue or scourge will pass away in time. We have learned to take what factors are given to us and to make the most of them. Jews have survived by preparing for bad times, even in the midst of good times, and we have survived by working for improvement in the midst of times that seemed to be hopeless.

There are parallels in the game of football. Bob Griese, we all know, was a great quarterback. He led us to the Superbowl on several occasions. Many memories of great victories are associated with Griese, yet Griese was hurt last year and he had to be replaced. How could such a great leader be replaced, we thought? Yet, Griese's successor hasn't done so badly. Woodley is not as experienced as Griese, but he can throw a longer ball. Woodley doesn't have Griese's savvy, yet Woodley can run faster than Griese. In time, we suspect Woodley will be another great quarterback and memories of Griese's greatness will fade.

We can learn other things from Don Shula which can help us in the game of life. If the running game doesn't work, you have to improve your passing. If the offense can't get going, the defense has got to intercept a few passes and block a punt. The game of life, like the game of football, must be played with the talent you have. The trick is to squeeze the best out of your talent. The ball bounces many ways in the game of life. Sometimes it bounces right into the hand of your enemies. No matter. You still have to do the best you can. You don't win the championship every season, and sometimes you lose badly, but life goes on. The secret is not to give up hope and to stay in the game.

It happens by sheer coincidence that this week's Torah portion has to do with the death of the great leader of the ancient Hebrews. You all know the story. The Hebrew people had been enslaved for many years, when suddenly a man appears on the scene who challenges them to follow him to freedom! Moses confronted the powerful King of Egypt, audaciously inflicted the plagues on the mighty Egyptians, led his people through the "Red" Sea, and taught them how to survive forty years in the desert. Now, the Hebrew people stands on the edge of the Jordan River and is about to enter the land of Canaan, which is defended by kings of renowned military prowess, when Moses, its charismatic leader, dies.

As one reads of this event in the Torah, one has to feel, "How terrible that Moses could not have participated in the fulfillment of his great dream. How sad that he should do all the heroic work and not taste the fruit of victory." Yet, if we look down the road of history we see that the experience of Moses in this respect was not unusual at all. The truth is that it is rare indeed for humans to see the fullest realization of that for which they labor. The meaning of life apparently does not lie in the experience of victory. It lies in facing each day's task with courage and doing what one can to find meaning and pleasure in that little task. Perhaps this story from the Talmud can be applied here. An old man was seen planting a tree. An observer noticed that the tree would take ten years to bear fruit. "Old man," said the observer, "Why are you wasting your time planting a tree, when you will never eat its fruit?" The old man answered, "I may not eat its fruit, but my children and grandchildren will." Sometimes what we do does not pay off in our own life span, but with our effort we can help future generations, and our happiness can be in that knowledge. The truth is that we benefit from the labors of generations past, just as we help generations yet to be. What is civilization but a repository of past sacrifices and contributions? It is especially obvious in the scientific and medical fields that most of what we know today is due to the research and discoveries of those who labored and sacrificed in the past. Some people think of themselves as being isolated from the group and standing apart from the continuing effort of humankind. Judaism teaches that we are all part of the grand human effort that began with Adam and Eve and reaches to the Messianic Day. In the stretch of time there will be victories and losses for humankind, but if the goal is worthwhile, then the effort is rewarding, even in the face of short term frustration and denial.

As a Rabbi, I have had many occasions to discuss the meaning of life with a family as it mourned the loss of a loved one. Invariably, the family will start talking about happy events that took place in the life of the deceased in the past. Invariably, even in the midst of painful mourning, this discussion brings smiles and even laughter. Looking back on a life, we can frequently see that it was happier and more positive than we were able to imagine in the rush of things. So often, we look back on what was a tough time in its moment and we say, "Gee, those were the good old days." Time gives us a new perspective, and recalling the past somehow gives us the courage to face a current tragedy. Yes, the death of a loved one can be excruciatingly painful, but the present pain is not the whole of it. Memories of the past have their place in evaluating the meaning of the present.

I have learned another thing in the midst of death situations. The presence of a baby in the house always makes facing the death of an older person easier. How often have I seen a widow stop crying to pick up her grandchild from the floor and to cuddle it. The grandchild is evidence that life still has its duties, its pleasure, its purpose. The grandchild is evidence that the deceased grandparent still lives.

We do not stop living just because a loved one in the family dies, and a nation does not cease to function just because a beloved leader dies. As long as babies are born, death cannot be the ultimate answer.

The Torah reading for this week tells us that just before his death, Moses presented his successor, Joshua, to the people. "This is your leader now," Moses told the people. "He will take you across the Jordan River into the promised land. He will lead you in your fight against the Canaanites." Having introduced their new leader, Moses then turned to the people and said, "Hezku v'imtzu, be strong and of good courage. Don't be afraid to go forward in the task we began in Egypt. Crossing the Jordan River may be formidable, but remember you will not be alone. When you try to cross it, God will be with you."

Our religion teaches that no matter how dark times may be, no matter how difficult the task before us seems to be, we need not despair, for God is always there to help us. God, our teachers have said, is that power in the world that makes for creation and righteousness. That power is always present, but not all of us are able to recognize its presence. Not all of us are able to gain strength from its presence, for to know that God is with us takes faith, and not all of us are capable of faith.

I have always been struck by a part of the story of the Burning Bush which the commentators seem to have passed by. When God appeared to Moses in the desert of Median out of the Burning Bush, God told Moses about the suffering of the enslaved Hebrews. After challenging Moses to serve as His messenger and mediator before Pharaoh, God says something to Moses which at first seems strange. God says, "Lech v'eshl'chah, If you go to Egypt, I will be with you!" For me this is a very profound part of the story. God did not say to Moses, "I will lead you to Egypt, follow Me." On the contrary, God said to Moses, "If you have the courage to go to Egypt, to face up to this famous king, then I will be with you."

The story teaches that human beings inclined towards righteousness can tap resources they do not dream they have, if only they have the courage to face up to their problems. Moses had to have that courage when there was no one else to lead the people out of slavery, and when Moses died, the freed people had to find that courage in themselves; and they had to have the faith to follow a new leader.

Immediately after the death of Moses, the Torah ends, and it is part of our tradition to say at the end of the book, "Hazak, Hazak, v'nitchazek: Be strong, be strong, and you will be strengthened." The death of Sadat is a tragedy. It is also a reminder that the fate of a given society, the fate of the world, cannot depend on any one person or on any few people. We who want to build a stable society and a peaceful world must look for greatness within ourselves. We must learn to trust more in our own potential, and we must learn to have faith in that wellspring of our own strength that we call God.