

A Shabbat message from Rabbi Rheins
Shabbat Shemini Atzeret Simchat Torah 5781

To See but Not to Touch

This Erev Shabbat ushers in the day after the seven days of Sukkot. This eighth day is *Shemini Atzeret*, a separate and special sacred day (Num 29:35).

In time, *Shemini Atzeret* was enhanced with *Simchat Torah*, a celebration of Torah at which we conclude the reading of the final verses of the Book of Deuteronomy and then bring out a second *Sefer Torah* (Torah scroll) and read the beginning of the Book of Genesis.

One of the highlights of *Simchat Torah* is when we bring out all the *Sifrei Torah* (Torah scrolls) and all are given a chance to hold or march or even dance with the Torahs. All who have participated in this celebration will recall the absolute joy and pride of carrying around a Torah. Indeed, at just about every service there are some who tell me, with tears in their eyes, that this is the first time that they have ever held a Torah. Of course, I know how they are feeling because I will always remember my first time holding a Torah. Together, we smile and with eyes glistening, share an awesome feeling and experience.

And then . . . there is this year, a year when we will not have a huge crowd holding and dancing with Torahs. Rather, this year we will have a maximum of 50 people in person while hundreds of others will only get to watch on LiveStream and Facebook.

The sadness and disappointment of this pandemic keep piling up. Too often we are reduced to simply seeing what goes on at a wedding or funeral, at services and sacred gatherings. As we read the verses from the concluding chapter of Torah, that same restriction was experienced by Moses. It is written:

Deuteronomy 34:1 Moses went up from the steppes of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the summit of Pisgah, opposite Jericho, and Adonai **showed** him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan; ² all Naphtali; the land of Ephraim and Manasseh; the whole land of Judah as far as the Western Sea; ³ the Negeb; and the Plain -- the Valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees -- as far as Zoar. ⁴ And Adonai said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, 'I will assign it to your offspring.' **I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross there.**" ⁵ So Moses the servant of Adonai died there, in the land of Moab, at the command of Adonai. ⁶ Moses was buried in the valley in the land of Moab, near Beth-peor; but no one knows his burial place to this day.

Moses was permitted to see the Promised Land but was not privileged to go there and touch it. We can all commiserate with Moses. We know how limiting it is to see but to keep our distance. Still, we also know that Moses was able to feel the pride of accomplishment and hope. He was able to see Joshua, his successor, prepare the Israelites for their crossing of the Jordan River. He was able to feel the eagerness and faith of his people who were ready to write new chapters of our ancestral journey.

Nothing can replace the sensation of personally realizing a great success. Nothing can replicate the extraordinary privilege of holding a *Sefer Torah*. This year, like Moses, we will see but not touch. And yet, we can also gain tremendous satisfaction from knowing that we are a part of a community that is committed to learning, teaching and honoring the Torah. We are a community that embraces the openness of the egalitarian spirit of Reform Judaism along with the love of tradition and Jewish pride. Though COVID-19 keeps us apart this year, God-willing, next year we will be able to return in mass to our Temple Sinai home and touch, hold, and dance with the Torahs!

Shabbat Shalom and Simchat Torah Sameiach!

Rick

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