

NORMAN LAMM

EULOGY FOR

IVAN TILLEM

August 24, 1989

Ivan's death on a mission of mercy, a shelihut shel mitzvah, leaves us bereaved, aghast, perplexed, and victimized by unanswerable questions about fate and destiny and fairness and justice. There are no whole sentences followed by periods in contemplating Ivan's untimely end. There are only question marks and exclamation points swirling about each other in head-splitting and heart-breaking confusion.

I loved Ivan. Although he was never formally enrolled as a student in my classes, he considered me a teacher. Our relationship consisted of a resonance of similar ideas and perceptions, a sympathy of goals, a convergence of directions. He solicited my advice occasionally, and listened very carefully. His attentiveness placed upon me an additional burden of responsibility for whatever counsel I offered.

I loved him not only because of his goodness and his sweetness, his generosity and his gentleness, but primarily because he was a rare case of arrested development: he was a young adult, in his mid-thirties, successful, ambitious--a time of life when most of us have outgrown our idealistic phase of adolescence and early post-adolescence. At a stage of their development when almost all others have stopped writing poetry, have lost romantic notions, have felt their ideals evaporate and

their principles vacillate--Ivan was still in his idealistic phase and showed every sign of remaining there forever. The so-called "real world," which he had manipulated brilliantly to rise meteorically from abject poverty to financial success, was not at all the ultimate reality for Ivan Tillem. Ideals were real to him, not money. Mitzvot and good deeds counted, not dollars and status. Loyalty and love and faith were the bedrocks of his life, and all else merely a means of strengthening them. He made a fortune and gave away a fortune, while he continued to live in a modest apartment and drove an old car and did without an ornate office. He regarded lavishness and ostentation and status-seeking as pretentious and bizarre; compared with his values, they faded into self-mocking insignificance. Ivan remained a romantic, an idealist, a man of faith, when all the rest of us have begun to jade and fade. He was never childish; he was always child-like. He was, in the truest sense of the word, adorable.

It was more than fortuitous that his name was "Tillem"--from Tehillim, the Psalms. King David was a king, a warrior, a religious leader--but above all a poet, a musician, a Psalmist, the man of Tehillim. Ivan was an investment banker, a leader, a lawyer, a teacher--but above all a romantic, a poet, an idealist, a Tillem.

We shall read this week the words of the Torah: Ki taaseh et ha-tov ve'ha-yasher, "You shall do what is good and right in the

eyes of the Lord your God" (Deut. 12:28). The Sifra cites the opinion of R. Ishmael who says that the verse means exactly what it says: You must do what is good and right in the eyes of God--and in doing "the good and the right" you must ignore the opinions of mere mortals and strive to satisfy only your most sacred ideals. This is a radical view which teaches that there can be no accommodation between abstract principles and the practical, empirical necessity of being concerned with the "opinions of decent mankind." It is the exact reverse of those who are so other-directed that they fashion their views and values solely the basis of what their neighbors think.

R. Akiva, however, was of a different mind: "You shall what is good be'einei shamayim, in the eyes of Heaven, and what is right be'einei bnei adam, in the eyes of man." Certainly, sacred principles must prevail--but one must also implement them in a manner that takes into consideration the sensitivities and fears and aspirations of his society. R. Akiva wants us to strive for a reconciliation of shamayim and bnei adam, of G-d and man, of heaven and earth.

Rashi quotes only R. Akiva's opinion, and that indeed seems to be the judgment of Jewish history and the Jewish tradition. Ivan Tillem embodied the teaching of R. Akiva. A man of firm and unshakable principle "in the eyes of Heaven," he was equally sensitive to the feelings of his fellow man. His sincerity was not overbearing, his honesty was not a tool of aggression. He



was, as the Yiddish expression goes, "tzu Gott un tzu leit."

Consider how remarkably unusual was this very simple and yet very complex young man. He had an unhappy early childhood which, for most others, often leads to a life of bitterness and resentment. When such people succeed, they often turn heartless and insufferably arrogant; self-made men sometimes worship their creators. Not so Ivan. Early misery mellowed into sweetness, and quick success into modesty and compassion and goodness and respect and courtesy and thoughtfulness.

Ivan was a sincere, devout committed Jew--observant, a yerei shamayim who dedicated his life to mitzvot. He studied in various yeshivot in his youth; he studied at Yeshiva University; he was a graduate student at Bernard Revel Graduate School and an alumnus of Yeshiva University's Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law. He was on the faculty of Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women--where he was an exceedingly popular and beloved teacher--and the youngest member of our Board of Trustees as well as on the governing boards of Stern College and Cardozo School of Law. Judaism, Torah, Yeshiva, the Jewish people--these were his loves.

Yet here again Ivan marched to the beat of his own drum. Love often tends to be exclusive, it is narrow in its focus. But what is true for most people is not true for all people. Historians have pointed out that amongst the Tannaim, the greater the emphasis in Israel as a Chosen People, the greater was the



emphasis on universalism and the love of all people. That was a key to Ivan's personality. He loved Judaism--the Judaism of Torah and Halakhah, not the Judaism of rhetoric and imitation--and from this emerged a love large enough, capacious enough, to embrace all mankind, all peoples, all races, all nations. His Jewishness was intense, genuine, deep; but instead of making him parochial, it broadened him and stretched his vistas and expanded his horizons. His ahavat Yisrael led directly to ahavat ha-beriyot.

Ivan spoke often of his great ideal of tikkun ha-olam, of repairing the world, of leaving it a better and kinder and safer and more hospitable place than he found it. But this universalism was not a function of a disembodied humanism or a secularized liberalism. It issued from the deepest recesses of the religious convictions of his spiritual personality. His ambition was, as we say in our Alenu prayer, le'taken olam be'malkhut Sh-ddai, "to repair the world in the Kingdom of G-d." He sought tikkun ha-olam not only as but by means of his vision of "the Kingdom of G-d." The Torah's vision of a redeemed humanity is what made of him a Jewish humanitarian. He devoted his life to it. And his death, too.

Ivan's hopes and ambitions and loves came to a sudden, jarring cruel, crushing end as the plane that carried him crashed into the side of an uninhabited mountain in remote

Ethiopia, where he had gone with Congressman Leland and others to offer help to the hungry and the hopeless who were of a different color, a strange language, an unfamiliar culture, and an alien nation. But they were children of the One Creator, and therefore the brothers and sisters of this young, white, Orthodox Jew from Far Rockaway, New York.

We shall reflect on Ivan and his fateful trip--on his unrequited loves and unfulfilled ambitions and dashed hopes and his young life cut short--as we chant the words of the prophet Isaiah (55:3.5) for this Saturday's Haftorah:

יִהְיֶה אֲזִנְכֶם וְלִכּוֹ אֵלַי שְׁמָעוּ וְתָתִי בְּפִשְׁכֶּם  
וְאֶכְרַתָּה לָכֶם בְּרִית עוֹלָם חֶסְדִּי דָךְ  
הַנֶּאֱמָנִים: הֵן עַד לְאוֹמִים נִתְּתִיו נִגִּיד  
וּמִצְוָה לְאֻמִּים: הֵן גֹּי לֹא־תִדְעַל תִּקְרָא וְגֹי  
לֹא־יִדְעִיד אֶלֶיךָ יִרְצֻוּ לְמַעַן ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
וְלִקְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל בִּי פֶאֶרְךָ:

Incline your ear and come to me;  
Hearken and you shall be revived.  
And I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
The enduring loyalty promised to David.  
As I made him a leader of peoples,  
A prince and commander of peoples,  
So you shall call upon a nation you did not know,  
And a nation that did not know you  
Shall come running to you,  
For the sake of the Lord your G-d,  
The Holy One of Israel who has glorified you.

Farewell, dear Ivan. We do not understand why you were taken from us so young, so unfulfilled. We shall always be dumbfounded with grief. But we shall try to learn from you--to turn grief to compassion, confusion to clarity, fate to destiny.

Your teachers, your colleagues, your students, your friends will try to build on your beginnings and continue le'taken olam be'malkhut Sh-addai.

And we shall never forget you. Our love for you will be, in the words of Isaiah, "an everlasting covenant, the enduring love promised to David," the author of Tehillim.