

## *“Life from the Mountain Top”*

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The sign in Harvard Square hasn't changed in years.....It says: “Go away.....Often.” Appropriately enough, the sign hangs outside the American Express Travel office in the heart of the square – a kind of beacon for “taking a break” amidst all of the traffic and tumult of downtown Cambridge. Living here as a student at Brandeis – and then later as a rabbinic student, for me, ‘taking a break’ meant going home. Now, while I did grow up in nearby Malden...just before I started college my parents decided that they would fulfill a life-long dream: they sold the Boston-based business, packed up the house, headed north to the mountains of central New Hampshire, and opened their very own bed and breakfast.

My mom, of course, was the ‘hostess of the house’ – writing out reservations while also offering guests information on the many area attractions. My dad, on the other hand, every morning could be found in the kitchen preparing the daily breakfast buffet of eggs, toast, pancakes, muffins, oatmeal, juice, and coffee. ---- Naturally, we always reassured our guests that “calories and cholesterol” were “not included.” ---- On vacation, they never are.

Still, what probably made the inn most famous was its incredible view. In fact, I keep a picture of it in my study at home. “The Highlander of Newfound Lake” – as its name implies – stood on a high summit overlooking a set of rolling mountain ranges to the west and the clear waters of Newfound Lake just below. As you might imagine, standing outside on the deck at sunset was simply breathtaking. Calming. Without exaggeration, I could literally sit there for hours looking out at the mountains in the distance as the sunset sky became a pallet of pastel: oranges and yellows -- blues and purples. - Thinking.....Breathing...Being. For me, “going away” – “going home” – meant going to the mountains.

And as I sat on that deck, taking a deep breath, and looking out at that sky – somehow the deadlines and difficulties, stresses and strains that had been so important just hours before always looked different from up there.

But why? What is it about looking out from the top of a mountain that moves us so? Why is it that we can stare out endlessly upon sunsets and sea-scapes, yet man-made objects – be they artwork or architecture – capture our attention for only so long?

The famous photographer Ansel Adams once remarked: “I (was able to realize) my destiny when I first experienced Yosemite...No matter how sophisticated (we) may be,...(the power of) mountain(s) cannot be denied. (They) speak in silence to the very core of our being.” Similarly, the modern Jewish philosopher, Abraham Joshua Heschel has noted that: “Sublime grandeur evokes unhesitating, unflinching awe...Standing between earth and sky, we (can't help but be) silenced by the sight.”

In many ways, then, it's not at all surprising to learn that mountains have even made an impact on our pop culture. For months, Jon Krakauer's novel, *Into Thin Air* remained a regular on the "New York Times" best seller's list. And, similarly, across the country, the IMAX sensation "Everest" continues to draw crowds.

Indeed, in speaking to our fascination with reaching the heights, one mountain climbing brochure even offers the following: "Perhaps you dream of standing on top of a tall mountain...For those who (choose) to (fulfill) their dreams, the experience offers something special beyond the power of words to describe. We invite you to climb your mountain with us".

Somehow – for some reason – looking out from 'on high' speaks to us.

*“VaYomer.....Lech l'cha el Eretz Moriah v'ha'aleihu sham l'olah al achad he'harim asher omar ei'lecha.”* (22:2) “And G-d said (to Abraham), ‘Go to the land of Moriah and sacrifice your son there on the top of one of the mountains that I shall show you.’”

Once again, the oft-told tale of Abraham and Isaac stands before us. Abraham – the simple son of an idol maker – chosen by G-d to be the very first Jew. Already, Abraham had started what appeared to be a most promising career as G-d's "CEO" – G-d's "Covenant Executive Officer." With his beautiful wife Sarah and his beloved son, Isaac, by his side, things for the first Jewish family, seemingly couldn't have been better. Until, that is, the day that G-d spoke those words.

As we all know, one of the traditional interpretations of this text is that our story is meant to teach us about Abraham's total faith in G-d.

And while, of course, there are those who are willing to celebrate this "faith-full" portrait of our patriarch, the truth of the matter is that for most of us, this is actually more-than-a-disturbing story --- one that, actually, raises more questions than answers. After all, what kind of a father was Abraham that he could even consider doing such an unspeakable thing? At the same time, we are, of course confronted with the question of what kind of a G-d would demand such a sacrifice?

Still, what is probably most puzzling of all, is that with all of our mixed feelings about this story in the first place, why on earth would the rabbis choose it to be read here – now – at the very start of our holiest days?

For generations, rabbis and other readers of our Torah text have remarked that one of the most striking aspects of this story is how concise it is. So much happens – in so few sentences. From "call" to conclusion – it takes only nineteen verses to read the story from start to finish. No word wasted. No gesture unimportant. Given that, the rabbis tell us that somehow – in some way – every element of our story is absolutely essential.

So, if, in fact, this is the case, I would add yet one more question to our already lengthy list. A question that actually has less to do with personalities than it does with place.

Why was it so important for G-d to send Abraham to the MOUNTAIN in order for him to sacrifice his son?! From the very first moment Abraham heard G-d's voice, he had been building altars and offering sacrifices. But never before had G-d been so specific about where a sacrifice was to be offered. What made this time so different? What made this place so different?

Thousands of years ago, ancient peoples thought that it was the mountains that were responsible for holding up the sky. Later, in Greek, Roman, Norse, and other mythologies – mountains were looked upon as the homes of the gods.

In Judaism, however, we have always seen the mountains differently. Rather than believing the mountain to be the actual dwelling place of G-d, we have tended to see the summit as a place where, somehow, G-d offers us guidance – a place where, in some way, G-d helps us to gain a greater measure of understanding and insight into our lives.

In our liturgy we read: “Esa Einai, El HeHarim...” “I lift up my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come?” In fact, both the first and the second Temples in Jerusalem were eventually built atop the very same Mount Moriah that we read about this morning. And even the Torah – our text laden with the very lessons of life – is said to have been given to Moses atop the mountain, at Sinai.

But, we are told, merely ascending to the top and appreciating the view are not enough. In order to meet G-d, one more thing is required. In the pages of the Book of Kings, we discover an incredible encounter between G-d and Elijah the prophet.....Let's listen to the text:

‘And so it was that - at the very moment of their meeting - G-d called upon Elijah: ‘Come and stand on the mountain before G-d.’ And behold, the Lord passed by. There came a mighty wind – so strong that it...broke the rocks. But G-d was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake. But G-d was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire. But G-d was not in the fire. And after the fire, there came the sound of,” what the text calls, a ‘*d'mama dakah*’ – literally, a ‘delicate silence.’ And upon hearing this, Elijah covered his face with his cloak’ (from *IKings 19:11-13*).

Whereas in secular terms, appreciating such a moment of quiet calm might be called simply “thinking” – in Jewish terms, what we are actually doing is listening for something more – the ‘*d'mama dakah*’ – the delicate silence that is said to echo within us all. During such moments, like Elijah, in a way, we too are seeking to feel G-d's presence.

Our tradition tells us that the mountain top has always been a place where Jews have received guidance and understanding – peace and perspective. This, I believe, is why G-d actually sent Abraham to the mountain. Somehow, it happened that Abraham had gotten so caught up in his covenantal calling – so busy building G-d's people – that he had become a man who was willing to literally sacrifice his family....and his future.

In the midst of it all, Abraham had completely lost sight of what he had been working for in the first place.

Realizing this, G-d sent Abraham **away** – not so much as a test of faith, but rather as a lesson in life! Abraham was sent to the top of the mountain not so that he would sacrifice his son, but so that he might he might literally, stand on high – stop for a moment – look out and take the time to regain that perspective on his life that had somehow been lost.

This renewed understanding, I think, was what actually stopped Abraham from harming his son. This was the angel that called out to him. For Abraham – that moment on the mountain changed his life.

At this sacred season, like Abraham before us, we too are summoned by G-d to the top of the mountain – a mountain not of “space” but of “spirit.” As we gather here today for these Holy Days on High, we are called to do nothing less than pause and look out upon the very landscape of our lives – to consider where we are, where we’ve been, where we are going. We are asked to literally pull ourselves away from the rhythm of our daily decision making so that we might refocus and regain that perspective on our lives that is so easily lost.

Over the past few years, the term “multi-tasking” – the juggling of two, three, or sometimes even more tasks at one time – has become part of our society’s everyday vocabulary. Interestingly, though, sociologists point out that the word actually originated as a term reserved to describe not people, but computers - and their ability to keep several programs running at the same time.

Indeed, with more-and-more advances in technology – from our Blackberrys, Palms and portable PC’s... to cell phones and cyberspace, voice mail and e-mail – experts agree that the desire to squeeze more productive minutes out of every day is becoming a way of life for many Americans.

For most of us, in fact, increasingly, our lives seem to be a constant juggling act. With electronic calendars and day planners neatly divided into as little as five minute intervals – at almost every moment we seem to find ourselves either running to be some place or to do something.

Like Abraham, we too run the risk of getting so caught up in the details of our day to day that we lose sight of the bigger picture.

In fact, not even these Holy Days are immune from this tendency to lose perspective. Honestly, over the years, there are some who have confessed to me: “Rabbi, I have to tell you that as much as I love the temple, I have a really hard time with the High Holidays. The only thing more difficult than finding a parking space is finding a seat. There are so many people. The traffic around the temple is unreal. It all just seems like

one big hassle. Rabbi, to tell you the truth, I'm seriously considering not coming and just going in to work."

Now, even as a rabbi, I can certainly understand these sentiments. For all of us, the Holy Days tend to be more than a little "meshug." But at the same time, I can't help but feel a bit sad. To somehow reduce these services to spaces and seats, it seems to me, is to miss the point. If we stop and think about it, deep down we know that we come to this place for a higher purpose. We come not simply so that we can "be here" – we come here so that we can just be ---- pausing, perhaps praying – truly taking the time that we need to consider the very meaning of our lives. Can there be anything more important than this?

Still, for some reason, moments of silence do not necessarily come easily for many of us. Perhaps some of our discomfort has to do with the fact that we seem to be much more at ease when we are actually "doing" something, rather than simply sitting still and "listening." Even here, during the synagogue service – a moment of silence is rarely silent – and it never seems to be long before our prayer is interrupted by the regular flow of the service. Heschel once wrote that "it is much easier (for us) to go to work and to deal with things (than it is for us to grapple) with the intangible silence of our souls."

So it is, that in a world that is constantly telling us to run and do, it is Judaism that is regularly reminding us that we absolutely need to pause – to take a deep breath – and to listen for the '*d'mama dakah*' – the delicate silence of G-d. It's what Shabbat is really all about. Or time spent alone in the sanctuary.

It is why I always recommend to wedding couples that they include a few moments of "*yichud*" – alone time – immediately after their ceremony before they make their way into the rush of reception. It is why, at the very heart of our liturgy is Shma – telling us to "Listen" – "Hear." Even the sound of it calls us to "Shhhhhh." It is why we are here today.

Judaism reminds us of our need to pause and reflect....to breath and "to be" – because to do so means to come away refreshed, relaxed....renewed. Better able to continue with the rhythm of life.....It is perhaps the most precious gift Judaism gives to us.

During these Holy Days on High we are called upon to ascend our own spiritual mountain – to look upon our lives from a higher, clearer vantage – and, hopefully, in the year ahead, to try to keep that perspective more fully in mind.

From the pen of the poet we read:

Dear G-d –

Ease the pounding of my heart, by quieting my mind.

Steady my hurried pace.

Give me calmness amidst the confusion of my day.

Break the tension of my nerves with soothing music that lives in my memory.

Let me look upward toward the branches of the towering Oak.  
And remember that it grew great and strong because it grew slowly.  
Slow me down Lord.....Slow me down.

May these High Holy Days be for us...and those that we love...a time of renewed  
perspective and peace.

Amen.