

SPIRITUAL POLLUTION

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's Torah reading seems to emphasize that the granting of the Torah to Moshe, and through him to Israel generally, took place at the Mountain of Sinai. Since the Torah does not deal with incidental geographic details, this emphasis regarding the mountain bears study and analysis. Mountain climbing is a sport for the hardy of spirit and the physically fit. However most of us are perfectly content with our lives without attempting to scale cliffs. Yet, in a spiritual sense, the Torah seems to indicate that living a moral and observant Jewish lifestyle requires spiritual mountain climbing.

The Talmud teaches us that Mount Sinai was a rather modest mountain in height, as mountains go. It was chosen, so to speak, because it represented humility amongst its greater companions, such as the Alps and the Himalayas. Yet, it required effort, energy and purpose to be able to ascend it. In that respect it represents the Torah itself, which was given to Moshe on its summit.

Life is never smooth or easy – a flat plain, simple to traverse. Rather, it is always an uphill climb that many times leaves us short of breath and doubtful of hope. We all know this to be true of our physical lives and it is doubly so regarding the spiritual component of our existence. There is a phrase in Yiddish that says: "It is hard and difficult to be a Jew." Well, like most Yiddish aphorisms, this one is certainly accurate and telling. The only problem is that, over the long run of history, it is obvious that it is much more difficult and harmful for us not to live proper Jewish lives.

The prophets always speak of Jewish redemption as being a formidable mountain that somehow will be flattened and made into a smooth and level plain. What appears to be formidable and forbidding, almost impossible to overcome, a gigantic mountain which blocks our view of the horizon, will somehow eventually be transformed and made accessible and comfortable. I think that that is a proper metaphor for Jewish life generally and for Torah life and values particularly.

It is a mountain to climb but once ascended it leads to smooth going and a level journey through life. The Talmud records for us that the temptations of life appear to the righteous as mountains, and that they stare in amazement at their ability to somehow overcome each obstacle. The wicked, evil temptation appears to be as thin as a single hair that can be easily dismissed.

However once engaged with that hair, one runs the danger of being inextricably shackled by it. So the Torah bids us all to be mountain climbers. We are to steel ourselves against the difficulties that living a Jewish life presents and realize that according to the effort will be the reward. There is no

easy way or smooth path to a concentrated Jewish life. The example of Moshe climbing Mount Sinai remains the metaphor for all of us and for all Jewish life till eternity.

Shabbat shalom

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