

Mountains of Halacha (Kol Nidre)

The last two weeks in August I, like many Jewish professionals, was a little frazzled getting ready for the high holidays. With the help of many volunteers, I was preparing for a high holiday experience like no other, and it was overwhelming! It was my great joy but also great confusion to gather all the videos of our torah readers, write my sermons, and edit all our service outlines. As much as I always strive to embrace the month of Elul as a time for deep spiritual reflection, it often becomes a month of utter chaos.

This year I was fortunate to take some time for myself and my family at the end of August and we traveled to the White Mountains of New Hampshire. I grew up hiking in these mountains, and they have always been a spiritual retreat for me. I love the wild colors of the mountains, the freshness of the air, and the challenge of plunging headfirst into the wilderness. I enjoyed an especially poignant moment on this particular trip, early one morning I took a few minutes to drink my tea and watch the sun come up over the ridgeline of Lafayette and Canon mountain. Looking up from the valley, and watching the morning mist roll off of the mountains in tremendous clouds, I felt so small. But I also felt an overwhelming gratitude to be part of such a beautiful world.

The day before, I had hiked up Canon Mountain, carrying my daughter on my back. I was so proud to have brought her into the woods, proud that I was strong enough to carry her, keep her safe on this adventure, and teach her the love I feel for this place. Now, sitting at a

distance from this mountain, I was once again taken with the enormity of the task I had accomplished. This is what I love about the mountains: their ability to make me feel big and small at the same time. In their shadow, I know that I am just one small dot, but when I get to the top I feel pretty proud that I carry a lot of strength in this tiny body.

This image of inspiration atop a mountain is probably not new to any of you. If anything, it's overused. But it's overused for a reason. Moshe met God on Mount Sinai. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King famously referenced his visit to the mountaintop, Mount Everest is even worshipped as a deity in some local religions. I would not be surprised if any of you told me that you have also experienced moments of clarity, peace, security, or divine communion on top of a mountain. These are true and profound experiences. It takes hard work to climb a mountain, and when you reach the top you are proud of your body's physical accomplishment. You look out over the landscape and see a broad swath of creation, much more than you can see from the ground. You look up and you're closer to heaven. It's no wonder that we feel close to God, and many of these moments inspire us to take action, or make changes, or find peace in our sea-level-lives.

These mountaintop moments are profound, but they aren't enough to sustain us. We can't climb a mountain to visit with God or experience our own spiritual awakening every day, and we need more frequent reminders and connections. So what do we do about that? My teacher, Rabbi Art Green, thinks that this is what daily observance of mitzvot is for. He explains,

Many of us have great insights. We have been to the top of the mountain, to use an overused metaphor. The question is what to do with that top of the mountain on a boring Tuesday afternoon when you're distracted and busy and just don't feel like it.

Rabbi Green suggests that this is when discipline of halacha, practicing the details of religious life, becomes valuable. We use the word halacha to refer to the traditional Jewish observance of mitzvot, but it is important to remember that halacha comes from the word “holech,” to walk. Halacha is the path we walk in our daily lives, the way we behave each day, that can ultimately lead us up the mountain.

Let's take the mountain metaphor a little bit further. Let's say that climbing Mount Everest is the ultimate experience. But you can't just wake up one day and climb Mount Everest, you have to train for it. You have to learn mountaineering skills. You have to prepare your body. Even once you arrive, you have to spend lots of time at base camp acclimating to the thinner air. Getting up the mountain takes a lot of work. The same is true of our relationship with God. Divine connection is attainable, but it doesn't often happen out of nowhere. We have to be paying attention, we have to develop the skills and awareness to achieve this connection. And spirituality **is** a skill!

The Jewish framework for building this skillset is halacha. Halacha interrupts every activity of our day, from waking up to eating to going to the bathroom. It surrounds these mundane activities with regular patterns of spiritual awareness that prepare us to ascend to the mountaintop and keep us in touch with that experience when we descend again. By design, at least

some of these rituals are supposed to stick out and be disruptive. If ceasing everything to pray three times a day or refraining from certain seemingly random foods was convenient, it wouldn't be as noticeable and it wouldn't have as great an impact on our daily lives. We are supposed to allow the demands of ritual observance to disrupt our routines, so that we pay more attention to what we are doing and follow a deliberate disciplined practice.

One of the most disruptive and, I believe, valuable elements of our tradition is Jewish time. I'm not talking about how we always start events 10 minutes late. I'm talking about the other kind of Jewish time, our sacred time. Our tradition is profoundly attuned to the cycles of months and seasons and builds almost our entire liturgical calendar around them. In addition to those natural rhythms, Judaism made its own tremendous contribution to time, that of the seven day week and the day of rest. Days, months, and years are all natural units of time based upon the movement of the planets. Plants and animals are aware of daylight turning to night, of the cycles of moons and tides, and the passing of seasons. But the seven day week is a purely human invention taken from the creation story. Although people around the world follow a seven day cycle, this unit of time originally comes from our sacred text, and to this day we preserve the holy rest and spiritual refreshment of shabbat in a way that runs deeply counter to our current social norms.

On shabbat, we do not work or shop or exert any kind of creative energy. Judaism rejects the invitation to be constantly consuming or producing. For one day each week, one seventh of our time, we refuse to engage in the race for more, more, more. This runs directly against the

current of consumer capitalism that drives us to work more, make more, achieve more, and buy more during the other days of the week. Being counter cultural in this way is not value neutral. By setting aside one day of the week when we refuse to engage in commerce, we are saying there is something missing from the consumerist lifestyle. We say we need more, we need a day when we put different priorities first because we believe they are more important. This is tremendously disruptive, but ultimately that interruption every seventh day brings our focus to things that we probably don't spend enough time thinking about on the other six days of the week.

Maybe Jewish time isn't the mitzvah for you, and that's ok. Not every commandment sits perfectly with every person, and while a traditional approach would suggest that we all do all the mitzvot whether we like them or not, that's not what I'm suggesting today. I just think that, given the fact that there are 613 commandments, there must be at least one that speaks to you. Maybe it's kibbud av v'eim, honoring your elders. Maybe it's tzaar baalei chayyim, loving care of animals. Maybe it's the practice of saying brachot, blessings, before and after you eat. These are lovely nice things to do, but they are also very serious commandments that we as Jews are obligated to act on even when they are inconvenient. What would it be like for you to take on one commandment, that speaks to you and your values, and treat it seriously as something that is allowed to interrupt and disrupt your day? Would that change your focus and awareness? Would that help you stay committed to values that you sometimes forget to make time for?

I hope you know me well enough now that you understand I am not scolding or instructing anyone to adjust their shabbat practices, or to

immediately take on all the mitzvot in the traditional sense. We all embrace the parts of tradition that are right for us and our families, and there is truly no judgement from me about what anyone chooses to do. **However, I do truly believe it is valuable for each of us to take the opportunity provided by this new year to critically examine how and why we engage with the mitzvot.**

Tonight is a great night for this examination because tonight is Kol Nidre, a spiritual peak in our calendar. We are told that on Yom Kippur we ascend to the highest spiritual heights, and for these next 24 hours we are the equivalent of angels. While experiencing that spiritual high we also make promises about what we will and won't do for the year. Our thoughts and feelings mix with the gorgeous music of our liturgy, and many of us will feel particularly close to God. But that closeness can fade over the coming weeks and months as we come down off the spiritual mountain. We might let our resolutions fade into the background if we don't maintain the spiritual connection and motivation that inspired us. Part of the way we can maintain that connection is by establishing new, improved spiritual habits.

As Rabbi Green said, we need something to remind us about our connection to God on a rainy Tuesday when we otherwise just don't care. Mitzvot, rituals, and halacha can be part of the way we maintain that connection, by helping us make mundane tasks like eating, shopping, and sleeping, into holy actions. Bringing mitzvot into these everyday actions is a big task and it is not always compatible with 21st century American living, but the disruption is valuable because it makes us constantly consider our spirituality, our connection to God, and our responsibilities to each other.

Maybe traditional observance of one new mitzvah (or mitzvot) would be meaningful to you. Maybe an alternative or modern or adapted approach is right for you. As your rabbi, it will be my great honor to explore new avenues of spiritual practice with you, and I hope we will have the chance to do that even while we remain online. Whatever you choose to take on in this new year, I wish you a great deal of success and strength on this journey, as you look for new ways to bring holiness and spirituality to your everyday lives.