Mountains to Ascend

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By
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Two mountains are of special significance in our religious tradition. Mount Sinai was the site of the Revelation of God to the people of Israel. This was the place where the Torah was given, where our religion was established. Yet, we do not actually know where Mount Sinai is! Some claim to identify this mountain, but we do not have a clear, unbroken tradition as to its real location. We don't have major tours and excursions to this holiest of locations. We don't pray facing toward Mount Sinai.

Mount Moriah is identified in our tradition as the site of the "binding of Isaac." Jacob is described as having had his wondrous dream—with a great ladder connecting heaven and earth, and with angels ascending and descending it—at "the place"—identified by rabbinic tradition as Mount Moriah. We know exactly where Mount Moriah is, and we visit it often. It is better known today as the Temple Mount, the place in Jerusalem where the ancient Temples stood, and where the Western Wall remains as a reminder of the sanctity of the place. When we pray, we face toward Mount Moriah.

Why is Mount Sinai—the place of the ultimate Revelation of God to the Israelites—so insignificant as an ongoing religious site, whereas Mount Moriah has continued to be a central feature of our religious life over all the centuries? In the case of Mount Sinai, the place of the Revelation is not the essential thing: the message is. The voice of God is everywhere and for all time, and is not limited to a particular mountain. Rabbinic teaching has it that each day a divine voice calls out from Sinai, reminding us to study Torah and be loyal to its words. We do not know where Mount Sinai is, because it is in fact a symbol of every place. We do not have tours to Mount Sinai, because the voice of God is everywhere.

Mount Moriah—the location of the Akedah and of Jacob's dream—represents a different religious reality. If Mount Sinai symbolizes God speaking out to humans, Mount Moriah symbolizes frail human beings reaching out to God. Whereas the Revelation at Mount Sinai was witnessed by hundreds of thousands of Israelites, the Akedah and Jacob's dream were experienced privately, without public fanfare. If the Torah had not recorded these stories, we would never have known about

them. Mount Moriah gained its sanctity and centrality not as the place where God dramatically spoke out to humans as at Sinai; but from the quiet, pious, sacrificial, and sturdy faith of lonely human beings crying out to God. The site of the Temple Mount was sanctified by memories of the devotion, faith and frailty of our forefathers. The Temple was where humans reached out to the Almighty, where they brought their first fruits in thanksgiving, where they brought sin offerings. The measure of the sacrificial service was determined by the sincerity of the people, by their joy and/or contrition—known only to themselves and to God. Mount Moriah is of eternal significance to us because it reflects our inner religious life and aspirations. It is symbolic of our reaching out to God in good times and bad.

Our tradition speaks of a third mountain: the Mountain of God. Psalm 24 asks: “Who shall ascend the Mountain of God, and who shall stand in His holy place?” It answers: “The clean of hands and pure of heart, who has not taken His name in vain nor sworn deceitfully.” Each one of us climbs his/her own mountain. Each of our lives is an attempt to ascend closer to the Lord, closer to personal fulfillment.

Some people climb mountains that seem wonderful and strong—but are essentially hollow. Others climb mountains that seem quiet and un-extraordinary, but they are strong and lasting. The measure of our success is not our wealth, fame or popularity; the measure is being clean of hands, pure of heart, sanctifying God’s name, being honest and trustworthy.

Mount Sinai reminds us that God speaks to us. Mount Moriah reminds us that we long for God. The Mountain of God reminds us that we have lives to lead, mountains to climb, things to accomplish. These three mountains together help us structure our lives and our religious imaginations.

“I lift my eyes unto the mountains, whence comes my help? My help is from the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth.”

Angel for Shabbat