

Twin Peaks: Mountains of History and Hope
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Some of you may recall the last scene in the film “Schindler’s List” when survivors place pebbles onto Schindler’s gravesite. He is buried on Mt Zion, just outside the Old City of Jerusalem.

Since the 12th century, a site on Mt Zion has been identified as King David's Tomb. It is in the same complex as the dining room venerated by Christians as the site of the Last Supper and the first Christian church. In 1524, the site was converted into a mosque. Christians were evicted and not allowed to return until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Because Jews were banned from the Old City after 1948, the Tomb of David, with a view of the Temple Mount, became a site of prayer and yearning. Until the Six-Day War, it was considered the holiest Jewish site accessible in Israel.

To complicate the complex reality of sacred sites, David was probably not buried there. He was probably buried in the City of David. The Biblical Mt Zion is not the contemporary Mt Zion.

Zion is one of two sacred mountains in our tradition. The other is, of course, Sinai. In *Sinai and Zion*, Jon Levenson explores the significance of the twin peaks in Biblical theology. The Revelation at Sinai, which follows the Pesah exodus from Egypt, is essential to Jewish self-understanding. At Sinai, the Torah is given, the presence of God is experienced, and the character and covenant of the people of Israel is established. That *b'rit* is conditional, dependent on living up to its stipulations, and is centred around Moses. Sinai is the mountain that challenges us to achieve.

Our Torah reading begins: “ וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר: ~ The Eternal spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai.” In his commentary, our great teacher and friend, Rashi, asks: “מה ענין שְׁמִטָּה אֶצֶל הַר סִינַי? Why did Scripture feel compelled to expressly state where it was commanded?”

Rashi goes on to explain: “Just as the general rules and minute details of the Sabbatical year were ordained on Mount Sinai, So, also, were all commandments with their general rules and their minute details ordained on Mount Sinai.” Rashi seeks to articulate the idea that all the commandments are linked to the experience of revelation at Mt Sinai.

I read this text differently from Rashi, drawing on another verse later in this Torah portion. “I am the Eternal your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God.” As I understand it, following Nahmanides, The Exodus was to lead to Sinai and an awareness of the Divine, which would come to fruition in the land of Israel. The Torah saw a connection between Sinai and what would later become Zion. The roots of Zionism are at the core of Jewish life.

If Sinai represented Israel's infancy, Zion becomes the symbol of Israel's maturity as a nation. Zion is associated with King David, the Bet Hamikdash, and the messianic dream. The Davidic covenant, central to Zion, is unconditional and eternal, with the Temple the point of contact for Divinity and humanity. Sinai provides a base; Zion imagines transcendence.

In his book, *Two Mountains*, David Brooks suggests that there are “two sets of virtues, the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. ...résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace. ...eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral — whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful. Were you capable of deep love?”

When we are young, we present ourselves as if we were offering our résumé, a statement of activities and accomplishments. “Hi. Nice to meet you. What do you do?” As we age, we are more focused on eulogy virtues, the values and relationships which have defined our lives. “So good to see you. Let’s check in about our lives, our families. What have you been thinking about recently?”

Brooks writes of people “who radiate joy —who seem to know why they were put on this earth.” There is a wholeness — *shleymut* is the Hebrew term — about these people. For many of them, life has a two-mountain quality. School, career, establish themselves. “It’s all the normal stuff: nice home, nice family, nice vacations, good food, good friends.”

Then something happens. Some find the view insufficient. Is this all? They sense there must be a more meaningful life journey. A few fall off the mountain. Something happens to their career, their family, their reputation. Failure. Disappointment. Life doesn’t only go up. Others face life-altering tragedy. Knocked sideways by the death of a child, a cancer, addiction, something not part of the plan. At any age. Forget the mountain. They are in the valley of the shadow of death, bewilderment, suffering.

“Seasons of suffering” sunder our souls. We are no longer the way we were. There are people in shul today who have faced that wilderness. Cracked open, no longer what they display. Some wither. Shrink, Become isolated. Perhaps they hold enduring grievances, carry complaints about historic hurts.

But for others, the pain leads to caring for others. And when they have encountered this yearning, they may heal and become whole.

On their first mountain, they had some sense of what they wanted. In the valley, they come to realize more. Some who have grown through pain are courageous enough to set aside aspects of their old self. Their motivations change. They want to be devoted by a cause. Instead of independence, they want inter-dependence — a web of relationships. They’ve gone from self-centred to other-centred.

That first peak wasn’t really my mountain. There’s another mountain that is actually mine. To ascend the second peak doesn’t mean rejecting the initial mountain. The journey from

Sinai to the Land of Promise, to Zion, leads to a more generous and satisfying phase of life.

I think of Della who left law to become an Anglican priest. Alan Veingrad who became Shlomo, leaving NFL football championships to become an Orthodox rabbi. This isn't limited to second-career clergy. A Bay Street financial whiz begins to built toilets in Africa. An orthodontist who starts to reclaim Jewish cemeteries in Eastern Europe.

Moshe left his first life in the palace and began another with an enslaved people. He went on to speak with God *panim el panim*. God's faithful servant, he led his people from slavery to freedom, endured their complaints, suffered their rebellions, and prayed for their forgiveness. Moshe was God's agent to perform miracles. As he approached the close of his life, Moshe's sister and brother died. He was told that he would not enter the Land of Promise. His sons would not succeed him. Joshua would take over. These must have been great disappointments.

Anticipating his own mortality, what was left to do? The book of Devarim tells us: "In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month... in the land of Moab, Moses began expounding this law ..." The liberator and miracle-worker, will now teach his Torah to the generation that he "will send into the future he will never see." He is no longer the prophet who speaks for God. Now he become Rabbenu, our Teacher, who seeks to articulate the theology of the mitzvot. He emphasizes love: of God for Israel and love we should offer God.

Moshe tells the people who will enter the Land that the primary problem "will not be failure but success; not slavery but freedom; not the bread of affliction but the temptations of affluence. **Remember**, he says again and again; **listen** to the voice of God; **rejoice** in what God has given you. These are the key verbs of the book. They remain the most powerful immune-system ever developed against the decadence-and-decline that has affected every civilisation since the dawn of time." (Jonathan Sacks)

The last month of Moshe's life offers an example of what Erik Erickson called generativity: nurturing what will outlast a person. Moshe speaks not to his contemporaries, but to those who will carry on after them. This is Moses 'second mountain.

As we consider our own lives, what tasks might we still take on? Whatever we have already written into our Book of Life, there is yet another chapter to be written, focused on being a blessing to others, sharing whatever gifts we have with those who have less, passing our values to new generations, using our experience to help others come through their difficult times, doing something that has little to do with ambition and much to do with making life better for at least one person on this planet.

The great American poet, Mary Oliver, wrote "When Death Comes".

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

I have been with families whose parent was unable to give them nurturing love as they matured, but — as the elder faced dependency, weakness and mortality — that individual still had the capacity to become a source of care, consideration, kindness and, yes, love. Even as lives founder on the rocks, there remain opportunities. It is never too late.

Just as our people moved from Sinai to Zion, we also are challenged to discover and climb our second peak. Whatever your accomplishments and achievements, there is always another mountain. It may become your greatest gift to the future.

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