



Climb Every Mountain • Parshat Ki Tavo

In this week's Torah reading, *Ki Tavo*, Moses gave the Israelites an unusual command. He told the people that after they crossed the Jordan River, they were to separate into two distinct groups; each group was charged with a different recitation. On one mountain, *Har Gerizim*, six tribes were to stand and bless the people: Simon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. On the other mountain, *Har Eival*, the remaining tribes – Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naftali – were to stand and articulate a set of curses. The Levites were then to respond to all the Israelites “in a loud voice (*kol ram*)” (Deut. 27:14). The text of these blessings and curses are listed in our sedra. When read in synagogue, the curses are chanted in a low voice.

Imagine the spectacle. *Ki Tavo* offers the staging. The mountains provided an expressive and dramatic backdrop, amplifying the curses and affirming the blessings. The people understood that if they were at a mountain, something grand and important was to take place. Mount Moriah was where Abraham, the knight of faith, was willing to risk it all for his faith in God. His individual commitment on that mountain was mirrored by the collective covenant we undertook as a people at Mount Sinai, when, with the natural orchestra of thunder and lightning, we were given the Ten Commandments. Suddenly, not far from the river that was to liberate us from the wilderness, we were presented with not one, but

two mountains. No leader was declaring his faith there or handing us the law. The recitations were left to the people themselves. The Levites merely said ‘amen’ to each statement.

These mountains represent the different stages in the spiritual development of a people. The first mountain, Abraham's mountain, represents faith. The second, Moses' mountain, represents law. But what does this set of mountains represent?

To answer this question, we turn to the verses that immediately precede ours. The chapter begins with the mandate to inscribe all of the commandments on large boulders after crossing the Jordan River. The boulders were to be plastered, and “all the words of this Law” were to be written directly on the plaster. Commentators debate what these words were and if it was indeed possible to contain every law on these large stones. At this same location, the Israelites were to build an altar also made out of stone to God. The stones of the law were twinned with the stones of worship to consecrate this new land immediately upon entry. If the people had any doubt about the values embedded in this new stage of their lives or the difference between where they came from, Egypt, and where they were going, the Land of Israel, these stones sent an unambiguous message of conviction.

Then, right before the tribes were to break up and

climb their respective mountains, the Israelites heard a surprising announcement: “Then Moses and the Levites spoke to all Israel: ‘Be still and listen, Israel. *Today you have become* the people of the Lord your God. Therefore, listen to the Lord your God, keeping his commandments and decrees, with which I charge you this day” (Deut. 27:9-10). For their forty long years of desert wandering, they were, we assumed, God’s people. God freed them from slavery, gave them the tablets, protected them day and night with a cloud and a pillar of fire, and gifted them daily with manna. These are acts that indicate a strong and growing bond. Yet, until that moment, that very day, our verse strangely imply that the people were not yet truly God’s people.

Each mountain experience represented a new stage of collective identity precipitated by an immersive, transformative experience. The Israelites first crossed a body of water as an act of liberation. They were going to cross yet another body of water to become a nation. It was not enough to put words on stones or to arrange rocks into an altar. They had to understand the ramifications and consequences of their behavior: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Moses would no longer be there to guide them or beg for forgiveness when they sinned. They needed to co-create and own a collective moral spirit embodied in the curses and blessings they spoke out loud to each other across these mountains. The words that echoed in the space between made them accountability partners to each other. When they were not speaking, they were told to be still and listen.

Leaders cannot carry the full weight of accountability alone. Leadership accountability, in the words of the editorial team at Indeed, a global employment website, “reduces blame shifting” and decreases mistakes. It also encourages a culture of experimentation because only those who are truly accountable can assess gains and risks (“Accountable Leadership,” Feb. 27, 2023). Accountability requires courageous followers who have learned to stand up for what they believe in

and commit to action. It often requires a strenuous climb.

With the climb up their respective mountains and their recitation of curses and blessings, the Israelites figuratively and emotionally imitated Moses and became the masters of their own destiny. They had to be the mountain climbers. In *Studies in Spirituality*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that to be a committed Jew, you don’t always need a mountain: “The beauty of Jewish spirituality is precisely that in Judaism, God is close. You don’t need to climb a mountain or enter an ashram to find the Divine Presence.” You need the light of Shabbat candles, the warmth of community, or the kindness of strangers.

But for leaders to grow, they have to be willing, not only to climb mountains, but also to identify the next mountain to climb.

So, what mountain lies before you right now that you need to scale?