

“Awesome Heights: Mountains in the Bible and What They Teach Us Today”

By Rabbi Eric L. Abbott

A Chasidic tale teaches of a little girl who would often skip school for hours. One day her teacher followed her, trailing behind as she traversed deep into the hilly woods, curious to discover what she did with that missing time. At one point she paused. He saw that there, amidst the tranquility of nature, the girl began to pray. The next day, her teacher asked what drew her to the woods, and the girl replied, “I find God there.” “Why?” the teacher asked. “Can’t you try to find God at school or in the synagogue? After all, God is the same everywhere.” “That might be true,” the girl replied, “But I am not.”¹

This little girl knew a profound truth: Sometimes, we need to change our setting, push ourselves out of our comfort zone, and escape to a different environment to experience something profound. For the ancient Israelites, mountains, with their massive heights and impressive views, often served as the setting for this experience. The mountains of the Bible evoked awe, fear, and amazement in the ancient Israelites and inspired them to encounter God in new and profound ways, and although we today may not connect to mountains in quite the same manner, perhaps we can stir ourselves to cultivate this same sense of awe and, in so doing, experience the Divine.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the famous professor of Jewish ethics and mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary, taught that awe forms the core of how we human beings begin to understand the beauty and mystery of God’s creation. When we open ourselves up to “radical amazement,” as he called it, we can open ourselves up to God. “Awe...is the sense of wonder and humility inspired by the sublime or felt in the presence of mystery,” he taught.² This awe can provoke a transcendent feeling and, with it, a sense of the Divine. “God begins where words

end,” Heschel elaborated.³ For many people, when we leave the hustle and bustle of the city or the routine of our suburban homes and escape to nature, then words may fail us—and, in that moment, we can expose ourselves to the wonderment of creation.

I have encountered awe on mountaintops. Though afraid of heights, I enjoy pushing myself out of my comfort zone through rock climbing. I recall a climbing trip to Rumney, New Hampshire many years ago. After a day of scaling the cliffs, I sought one last route, pushing myself to the limits of my endurance. When I reached the top, I affixed my anchors, leaned back into my harness, and turned around. As the afternoon faded into evening, the sun splashed the surrounding scenery with warm color, painting the surrounding mountains and fields with majestic purples and deep oranges. The beauty and vastness of life took my breath away. There on the mountain, I experienced awe at God’s world and felt closer to God.

Just as I felt awe on the side of that cliff, one can only imagine that for the Israelites, the mountains of ancient Israel evoked an even greater sense of wonder and humility. Due to geological features such as the Great Rift Valley, a wandering Israelite could travel the countryside seeing descents as low as 1,300 feet below sea level juxtaposed with heights of over 3,000 feet.⁴ Mountains scatter the terrain, from the Judean Hills surrounding Jerusalem to Mount Carmel in the north to the mountains of Moab in the south. The fact that the Bible presents a myriad of terms for massive, mountain-like topographical forms—including *הר* (*har*, “mountain”), *צור* (*tzur*, “[big] rock”), *מָרוֹם* (*marom*, “elevated height”), and countless others—indicates just how pervasive mountains were in the backdrop of the Bible. Indeed, they were so common and compelling that Moses could not resist speaking about them, such as when he called the land “this good mountain region” (Deuteronomy 3:25) and “a land of mountains and valleys” (Deuteronomy 11:11).

With such a prominence, these mountains served key geographical roles to the ancients, influencing everything from geopolitical boundaries to climate to trade routes. Mountains intricately fused into the lives of the people of the Bible, guiding them as they navigated their physical space. The prophet Elisha dwelled atop a mountain (2 Kings 4:25), Noah's ark rested on a mountain when the floodwaters subsided (Genesis 8:4), Solomon's workers built the Temple in Jerusalem using stones excavated from a mountain (1 Kings 5:29), and armies erected fortresses on mountaintops (Joshua 15:48). Gazing upon these staggering heights, the people of the land identified many reasons to climb the ever-present mountains that framed their existence.

As the Israelites ascended these heights, they would have encountered a host of feelings. When one climbs a mountain, far from a town or settlement, one experiences physical exertion coupled with intimate interactions with nature. Upon reaching the top, one discovers breathtaking views extending for miles. Add the erratic weather and intense storms that can appear on mountains, the far-reaching acoustics that can stretch over valleys, and the infinitesimal feeling that may accompany witnessing geological features that span the horizon, and there is no doubt as to why mountains conjure awe, wonder, and humility.

As such, for the ancient Israelites, like for many other ancient cultures, mountains not only influenced the way they navigated their physical space, but also inspired them spiritually. For instance, as poets and prophets strove to convey their relationship with God, the awe they saw in the mountains became a means by which they could express the ineffable. At times, the mountains of Israel came to personify the people of Israel, such as when God commands Ezekiel to prophesy *to* the mountains (Ezekiel 36:1). In other instances, the mountains become symbols, such as when Isaiah deftly castigates Israel's enemies by comparing their arrogance to climbing a mountain (Isaiah 14:13). For other writers, mountains helped them to describe God. Just as a

mountain or enormous rock (think Rock of Gibraltar) could shelter someone from a storm or enemy, so, too, could God protect God's people like a stone sanctuary (Isaiah 8:14) or a mountain stronghold (Psalm 31:3). These poets looked to the mountains and saw them quake before God, demonstrating God's supremacy over nature (Judges 5:5). The Bible takes the drop in our stomach we might feel atop a cliff or the deep dread during a thunderstorm and, through figurative language, magnifies them to express God's might.

Beyond the power of the word, the ancient Israelites used mountains to reach up toward God. In the Bible, the mountain frequently serves as an *axis mundi* ("world axis"), the high cosmic mountain that forms a bridge between heaven and earth. The biblical scholar Theodore Hiebert has described why mountains became such important religious sites:

With its peak reaching into the skies, it [the mountain] represents the closest connection in the environment between earth, the domain of humanity, and heaven, the realm of the gods. The splendor of the highest peaks produces a sense of awe, a sense heightened and made more mysterious when the cloud banks of the thunderstorm veil the summit from view. Once scaled, the mountain offers an unlimited vision, not only of the clouds and the heavens but also of the horizon of the earth.

The mountain, with its peak extending into the sky, becomes the literal meeting point between the mortal world and the divine heavens. Through ritual, our ancestors sought to bridge the gap between the two. Hence, mountaintops serve as the setting for religious events in the Bible, such as Abraham offering a sacrifice (Genesis 22:2), Jacob and Laban forming a covenant (Genesis 31:54), Moses and Aaron dying (Deuteronomy 32:50, Numbers 20:28), and Balaam prophesying (Numbers 22:41). In fact, Solomon built the seat of the Israelite cult, the Temple in Jerusalem, atop Mount Zion (Isaiah 2:3). Mountains, which offer natural amphitheaters, a platform from which one can see one's audience, and a sense of majesty mixed with the unknown, provide natural ambience for high ritual and an inspirational setting for humans to relate to God.

However, in biblical theology, not only do humans reach up to God on the mountaintop; God, in return, reaches down to humans. While God occasionally chooses springs (Genesis 16:7), rivers (Genesis 32:23-33), and trees (Genesis 12:6-7) as sites for theophany, God predominantly elects mountains for this role. Two biblical stories highlight the ways in which God reaches out to humans atop mountains and how, in response, our ancestors experienced awe on those peaks.

In the first story, one whose consequences echo throughout the Bible, God delivers revelation at Mount Sinai. Atop this mountain—*the* mountain, as the Bible sometimes refers to it (e.g., Exodus 19:2)—God reveals God's word to Moses and the people of Israel. The moment of revelation arouses intensity and suspense. As described especially in Exodus 19 and 20, the Israelites arrive at Sinai not long after leaving Egypt. At the mountain, they experience a ferocious tumult. Lightning flashes and the storm roars; the cry of a horn pierces the air. God's voice echoes as thunder. Thick clouds cover the mountain, creating a sense of mystery. The people, standing at the base of the mountain, tremble in fear. The mountain itself also trembles; perhaps it, too, stands in awe of God. This scene amplifies the intense, expansive, and transcendent feelings that one might feel if one were caught in a thunderstorm atop a mountain and directs them toward awe of God's power. God, above and outside the world, controls creation.

How many of us as children or adults felt similar feelings facing the immense power of nature? Hiding under the covers during a thunderstorm? Inching back from a high cliff overlooking a deep ravine? Staring into the murky depths of the ocean with trepidation? We experience nature and respond with both wonder and fear. We respond with awe.

However, lest we confuse nature with God, the Bible presents us with a different tale set on the very same mountain, now called Horeb, in 1 Kings 19. After destroying the prophets of Baal, Elijah flees from Jezebel and eventually arrives at “the mountain of God, Horeb” (v. 8).

God then calls out to him and passes by:

God said, “Come out, and stand on the mountain before the Eternal.” And behold, the Eternal passed by in a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and smashing stones before the Eternal; but the Eternal was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake; but the Eternal was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire; but the Eternal was not in the fire. And after the fire, a still, small voice. (1 Kings 19:11-12)

Like the previous story of Moses and the Israelites at Sinai, God reveals God’s glory to Elijah atop a mountain, complete with a massive upheaval of the natural order. However, while the revelation at Sinai involved powerful storm imagery to convey God’s might, this narrative employs the same imagery to teach the opposite. As the biblical scholar Nahum M. Sarna wrote:

The vivid, majestic, and terrifying depictions [of Exodus 19], which draw their ultimate inspiration from the storm and the earthquake, are meant to convey in human terms something of the awe-inspiring impact of the event upon those who experienced it. The narrative of I Kings 19:11-12 is intended to dispel any possibility of mistaking the atmospherics for the substance of theophany.

Thus, while Elijah’s moment on the mountain resembles Moses’s, this time, the awe comes not from the storm but from the quiet afterward.

Can we, like Elijah, hear the still, small voice on the mountaintop? Can we tremble in the heights, stand afraid of the power of nature, feel the awe upon looking out from a peak toward the landscape—not because of nature itself, but because we acknowledge with gratitude God as the creator of heaven and earth, the one who “affixed mountains through strength” (Psalm 65:7)? Can we feel awe not only in the big moments of fear of or amazement at impressive heights but in the quiet moments, too? Elijah teaches us that we can—if only we listen.

I recall a trip to Israel I led for college students, where I guided them atop a rocky height in the desert. Far from the glow and cacophony of cities, in the pitch black of night with only stars and silence surrounding them, students came face to face with the still, small voice. They expressed notions of experiencing something profound, something ineffable—something radically amazing.

For many of us, however, these encounters may seem foreign. We are not all mountain climbers or hikers, and we almost certainly do not offer sacrifices or prophesy atop mountains. Nonetheless, these biblical moments on mountains have something to teach us all: how to create intentional moments in which we can open ourselves up to the possibilities of wonder. Mountains in the Bible are catalysts for awe. As Rabbi Jamie Korngold, Founder and Senior Rabbi of Adventure Judaism, teaches:

Perhaps God [made] Moses climb Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments so that Moses would move beyond the confines of words. The physical exertion of the desert climb, coupled with the stark desert beauty, helped Moses to arrive spiritually and emotionally in a place beyond internal chatter, a place beyond rationalization or explanation. A state often called awe, in which you open your mouth to describe what is happening and find the only thing you can say is “Wow.” Only in this state was Moses able to hear the word of God, to sense God's presence, to reach out to the Divine.

Only when Moses ascended the mountain could he meet God face to face. Only when the Israelites left Egypt, entered the wilderness, and approached the mountain could they experience God's revelation. Only when Elijah endured the violence of nature atop the mountain could he hear the still, small voice. Mountains in the Bible, with their impressive views and terrifying heights, became impetuses to reach something greater. They forced our biblical ancestors to open themselves up to something new, feel something different, and experience awe—and, therefore, experience God.

When we cannot escape to the desert slopes of Israel, when we cannot climb the cliffs of Runney, when we cannot skip school and enter the forested hills—the mountains of the Bible teach us that we can still find God. We can find intentional ways to see the beauty in nature. We can seek out moments that take the words right out of our mouth: the birth of a baby, the wonder in a child's eyes, the harmonies of a symphony, and the laughter of a decades-long friendship.

May we each aspire to experience the awe of the world in our own ways, just as our biblical ancestors experienced it atop mountains. As we do, may we, like them, grow closer to God.
