

## DVAR TORAH on PARASHAT YITRO

Jan 22<sup>nd</sup> 2022

In today's parasha we have our first encounter with Har Sinai, Mount Sinai. It is the place where Moses goes to hear God's voice, and to pass on this message to the people.

In the text we are given no explanation as to why Mount Sinai, or any other mountain for that matter, should play such a starring role in our encounter with God. The most we hear about the mountain in the text is that it was a place of fear. God tells Moses in chapter 19: 'Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the Eternal will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai. You shall set bounds for the people round about, saying, 'Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death: no hand shall touch them, but they shall be either stoned or shot; beast or human, they shall not live.' When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain.'"

And it only becomes more terrifying on the third day, when there was 'thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn', enough to make the children of Israel tremble, and then God comes down on the mountain, with smoke, and fire, and now even the mountain is trembling.

It is at this point that Hazal had some fun with the idea of the mountain that is often quoted. We are told that the children of Israel stood at the foot of the mountain (tach'tit'). In Masechet Shabbat Rav Avdi bar Chama bar Chasa rereads 'tach'tit' as meaning literally beneath the mountain, and that 'the Holy Blessed One overturned the mountain above them like a vat, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, good, and if not, there will be your burial.' This playful reading of the text, apart from bringing some interesting theological questions about what it meant for the children of Israel to accept the Torah, heightens even further the awe and terror the children of Israel must have felt seeing Sinai- whether upright or upside-down.

I'd like to go wider thinking about the place of our natural geography in our spiritual lives. The Tanach, and especially the psalms, is full of lines that tell us of the beauty of nature and its ability to instil in us both fear and wonder and a deep sense of God's presence. We sung this morning in pseukei dezimra:

'Praise the Eternal, O you who are on earth,  
all sea monsters and ocean depths,  
fire and hail, snow and smoke,  
storm wind that executes God's command,  
all mountains and hills,  
all fruit trees and cedars,  
all wild and tamed beasts,  
creeping things and winged birds,  
all monarchs and peoples of the earth,  
all nobles of the earth and its judges,  
young of all genders alike,  
old and young together.'

I'm sure many of us had the experience that during lockdown maintaining our spiritual lives was tricky. We could not commune, and those of us who do not use technology on shabbat were often left isolated from Jewish community. I found it very difficult to make meaning on shabbat, preferring to escape into different worlds in books. But one moment when this wasn't the case was by the sea. I was incredibly fortunate that I ended up locked down for in the spring of 2020 in my in-law's cottage in Pembrokeshire, having been there for a holiday as restrictions came in. During pesach, which had been even more isolating- requiring my mother to brave the post-office to send me matzah, my husband and I walked to the beach, as we often did, and we had the place to ourselves. I sung some of the psalms of hallel, which felt so apt at that moment, being by the beauty of the sea. I heard from many friends and family that during this time nature was a huge comfort in a time of fear and loneliness.

Now I'm going to share a story that is my favourite Talmudic story. It is not PG, and may on the surface seem tangentially related to Mount Sinai- but it's such a good story it is worth telling anyway. In Masechet Avodah Zarah 17a, the gemara asks, 'is it true that someone

who commits the sin of forbidden sexual intercourse doesn't die?', and in response the story of Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya is brought.

In short, Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya was a very naughty man. He was known to have had sex with every sex worker in the world. One day, he heard that there was a sex worker overseas who would take a full purse of coins as her payment. He immediately crossed seven rivers to meet her. And we are told the intimate detail that when they were having sex, she farted. Who doesn't love some potty humour?! And not only this, the fart is there to teach us a lesson. Owing her fart, without a hint of embarrassment, the (unnamed) sex worker says 'Just as this passed wind will not return to its place, so too Elazar ben Durdaiya will not be accepted in repentance'.

Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya becomes very scared. And his first port of call is the mountains and hills- perhaps reflecting that he does not have human counsel to turn to? He asks the mountains and hills 'Mountains and hills, pray for mercy on my behalf', but they refuse, as they have their own repentance to think about. Next he turns to Heaven and Earth, and again is refused. He then turns to the Sun and the moon, and then to the stars and constellations, and is again refused.

At this point, Elazar ben Durdaiya realises he needs to turn inwards. He puts his head between his knees, a hugely vulnerable pose, and cried loudly until his soul left his body. At this moment a divine voice calls out: '**Rabbi** Elazar ben Durdaiya is destined for life in the World-to-Come.' This story is explained as one of great repentance, and according to Yehudah HaNasi that teaching us that 'Not only are penitents accepted, but they are even called: Rabbi', as the Divine Voice referred to Elazar ben Durdaiya as Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya.

There is so much to make of this story. That repentance can be prompted by a sex-worker's fart wisdom. That someone who seems to put all their energy into sexual gratification can repent and be called 'rabbi'. But I want to focus on the mountains. Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya turns to nature in a moment of panic and isolation, seas and rivers away from home, and although they cannot vouch for him, they help him realise his true path to teshuvah.

When I encounter natural beauty I constantly feel that my experience of it is tainted. Will anyone be able to enjoy this beauty in ten, twenty, thirty years' time? As we enter deeper into this climate crisis, I feel that we really are the children of Israel under mount Sinai, wondering if we will come away from our encounter with the awesomeness of nature alive. In many countries in parts of the year it is now simply too hot to be outside, and we are increasingly seeing extraordinary weather patterns, that scare us away from nature. It feels trite to say that nature can be scary in the same week as the disaster on Tonga, that we still do not know the full extent of.

In the story of Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya we see him at the beginning of the story, traversing seven rivers without another thought, unmoved by nature, and yet when he is faced with his own mortality he is drawn to converse with nature, pleading for mercy. We need to feel some fear when we encounter nature- the fear and trembling of mount Sinai is central to how we came to accept the responsibility of the Torah. We instinctively know that nature is central to our survival, but also is the seat of our mortality. But we have worked to remove that instinctive fear and awe in the face of nature- we live in a world where we can live our lives away from nature, work against nature in pursuit of comfort and quick gains. But we know that nature is what we turn to for inspiration when the going gets tough- when we need that word from a pillar of cloud. If we want every generation to feel as though they were personally at mount Sinai receiving the Torah, we need to see the climate emergency we are in and act accordingly- or we are no better than the man who runs madly across the world in pursuit of fleeting pleasure. Let us be the ones who merit to be called 'rabbi' when we repent.