CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted May 22, 2003 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRST SUMMITING OF MOUNT EVEREST: A SPIRITUAL LESSON FROM THE PHYSICAL WORLD © Judith Z. Abrams, 2003

One of the largest insights into the way we think and speak about things has been the understanding that being embodied predisposes us to see things in certain ways. For example, as babies, we see everyone towering over us and standing upright. Thus, we want to be "up". This basic notion is then used to describe many different spheres. For example, someone who's having a bad day is described as "down" while someone who's having a good day is said to be "up".

Mountains, where we can concretely be "up" are also places of spiritual height. Think of the important mountains of Judaism, such as Mount Moriah, Mount Sinai, Mount Carmel,Mount Hermon and the Temple Mount. As we approach June 10, the fiftieth anniversary of the first summiting of Everest, I would like to suggest that, that we use the mountain as the basis for an important metaphor of tolerance and spiritual growth.

When one reads accounts of expeditions to Mount Everest one finds concrete examples of diversity. There are several different routes up the mountain. The climb from the South side of Mount Everest (the easiest and most traveled route) begins with a flight into Nepal, a helicopter ride to the mountains and then a slow trek up to Base Camp at 17,600 feet. To reach the summit via the South route, one must travel through an icefall (a sort of frozen waterfall which moves downward about four feet per day making it the most lethal part of the climb). Camp One is at the top of the ice fall (19,500 feet). Camp 2 (21,500 feet) is situated in the middle of the Western Cwm (pronounced "koom") a canyon that has a relatively gentle rise. Camp 3 (23, 400 feet) is halfway up the steep ice slope called the Lhotse Face. (Lhotse is one of the mountains next to Everest.) Camp 4 (26,000 feet) is located on the South Col, a sort of flat space between Mount Everest and Lhotse. The climbers take a few hours to rest at Camp 4 before setting off up the mountain toward the summit.

They begin in the middle of the night so that they can reach the summit early in the day and return during daylight hours. One approaches the summit following the South East Ridge. If all goes as planned, the climbers reach the summit (29,028 feet) before 2:00 in the afternoon, usually placing a flag or other keepsake on the summit, and descend to Camp 4 to rest before returning all the way to Base Camp.

The Northern route up Everest is more difficult. The journey is quite different from the Southern approach from the very start. One flies into Nepal but then is transported by truck over the Nepalese-Chinese border. One actually drives to Base Camp. There are six camps on this route: Base Camp (18,044 feet), Camp 2 (19,488 feet), Camp 3 (21,161 feet), Camp 4 (22,965 feet), Camp 5 (25,196 feet) and Camp 6 (27, 230). From Camp 6, climbers make their summit bid. They start out in the middle of the night but their climb is much longer and more difficult than the Southern Route. They must overcome three "Steps": vertical rock walls and travel on the open ridge with steep drops on each side.

There are other routes up Mount Everest. In 1963, Americans Thomas Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld were the first people to climb the Western ridge up the mountain. In 1978, Reinhold Messner and his partner Peter Habeler were the first to reach the summit without using bottled oxygen via the Southern route. Many in the mountaineering world did not believe it was possible to climb so high without supplementary oxygen. In order to silence all doubters, Messner went to the northern side of the mountain in 1980 and summitted utterly alone without using oxygen. It was the first

solo ascent of Mount Everest. Since then, many people have climbed Mount Everest without oxygen.

So we now return to the initial question: what does tolerance of diversity have to do with climbing Mount Everest? It is this: no matter what the approach, the summit is the same for everyone. Each individual's climb will be unique. The new view from the summit that those coming up from the south see is the vast Tibetan plain. The view coming up from the north is a look at the range of mountains and a view down into the Western Cwm. The climbs are quite different but the summit is the same for everyone.

Spiritual climbers, just like mountaineers, must commit to one route while respecting the choices that others make about which path to climb. There have always been different routes by which people have achieved enlightenment in Judaism: Hassidic, Mitnagdish, Rabbinic, Karaite, Merkavah Mysticism, Kabbalah, Ashkenazic, Sephardic, etc. Sometimes the routes seem to have almost nothing in common, especially at the beginning, where they are most widely separated, at the mountain's base, so to speak. But as the spiritual climbers ascend, the conditions under which they labor become more and more similar until, at the peak, they are identical. Many climbers attempt to reach the summit yet only a few are able to do so. So, too, reaching the greatest mystical heights of Judaism is only for those few exceptional souls who can safely ascend and descend.

We can use information about climbing Mount Everest to help us understand diversity within Judaism. Such teaching would empower those of us on the journey to respect others and be confident that we will meet those who've taken other routes at the summit.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think that mountains are such important spiritual places, not only in Judaism but in many other religions as well?

2. How is ascending Everest similar to studying kabbalah?

3. How can one transfer lessons learned at 29,000 feet (or the highest parts of kabbalah) to sea level (or normal life)? Is it possible? Is it desirable?

4. What must you give up to spiritually climb?