

Building Mountains

Rabbi Jon Spira-Savett

Temple Beth Abraham

27 Av 5777 -- August 19, 2017 – *Parashat Re'eh*

There is a sweet little film from about twenty years ago starring Hugh Grant, called “The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill and Came Down a Mountain.” The story is that two government cartographers come to the small Welsh town of Ffynnon Garw, to measure the height of the mountain just outside the town. The cartographers determine that in fact it is not a mountain, but a hill, because it is slightly short of the 1000 feet required for classification as a mountain.

The villagers are of course dismayed, because they have always lived by a mountain. Their first response is just to assert to the surveyors that Ffynnon Garw is in fact a mountain village. But failing that, they develop a plan. They conspire to keep the cartographers from leaving town with their official measurement and their verdict. And while they are occupied, the townspeople begin to bring sacks of dirt to the hill, to dump there one on top of the other, in order to raise the height. They are going to make a hill into a mountain.

Of course they battle rain, which washes down their pile as it grows, but they keep going. Eventually, just before they have to leave town, the cartographers are brought back. And sure enough, by a small margin, Ffynnon Garw has its mountain.

This week the Torah portion talks about two mountains:

רֵאֵה אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרִכָּה וּקְלָלָה:

See, this day I give before you blessing and curse:

וְהָיָה כִּי יְבִיאֲכֶם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־אַתֶּם בָּא־שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ

וְנִתְּתָה אֶת־הַבְּרִכָּה עַל־הַר גְּרִזִים וְאֶת־הַקְּלָלָה עַל־הַר עֵיבָל:

It will happen, when Adonai your God bring you to the land that you are coming there to possess it, you shall put the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Eival.

(Deuteronomy 11:26, 29)

Later on, Moshe instructs that half the people should stand on the top of one mountain and half on the top of the other. As Rashi describes it, from the valley the Levites would face Mount Gerizim and shout out what blessing is, and then face Mount Eival and shout out what curse is.

Blessing and curse. Clear as the tops of two mountains. Clear as an echoing voice.

There are things in the world that you have to strain to see. Where goodness, where harm, is in the shadows or in a small corner. But there are times when good and evil are in clear view and clear sound.

Last weekend – last Shabbat – was one of those times. We got a look at blessing and curse in Charlottesville. The mountaintop of blessing, of good, in the people who put their bodies and their lives on the line, to stand up for unity, to block hate from moving forward. To show an understanding of what African-Americans experience when they see icons of the era of slavery in public places.

The mountaintop of curse, of evil, in the neo-Nazis, the white supremacists, who came with terror, hoping to hurt, armed to the teeth. Not to speak but to beat.

If you're not sure – or if you don't know what the answer is to the president's analysis of good people and violent people in roughly equal measure – there is a documentary of about 20 minutes that I linked the other day and can send again. It has the whole story, the supremacists and the peaceful counterprotestors and the antifa, and you can see the relative numbers and the relative force. You can see Christopher Cantwell – he's a prominent white supremacist who lives in Keene. He said he's holding out for a president who doesn't "give his daughter to a Jew", someone like Trump but a lot more racist. I can't imagine why the president of the United States wouldn't stand up for the honor of his own family, why that wouldn't engage him in standing up for us and the others who were targets of the demonstrators' hate.

Blessing and good are a mountain, and curse and evil are a mountain.

What are the real sizes of those mountains? Which mountain should be looking at now? How long should we stand and face Har Eival, probing the details of the curse? And when is it time to turn around, to face Har Gerizim and shout, urging ourselves along in blessing?

Rashi wrestles with this in his commentary on the Torah. The Torah says that first the Levi'im look at Har Eival and call out the curse, and then they look at Har Gerizim and call out the blessing. But Rashi says it's the reverse – first we are to hear the words of blessing ring out. Only then are we to listen to the curse. Only then can we appreciate what is evil, what evil deprives us of. Only after the blessing can we summon what we need to hear the words of the curse as they echo all around, without being flattened in the process.

Rashi's insight is that hearing the curse is both necessary and dangerous. That mountain is there, and we need to see it. But no amount of looking at it will make it smaller. We can overwhelm and demoralize ourselves by gazing too much at it, railing about the fact that it is there at all. But we cannot afford to be dragged into helplessness. Offensive monuments can be taken down, but the mountain of the curse will not fall into the sea so soon.

There are people who choose to stand on that mountain, and we can't pull them off in a day. All we can do is to keep them there, and set up to prevent other people from going up there. That's what the counterprotesters were doing in Charlottesville last Shabbat, and in Boston today.

It is not healthy to keep reading the same opinion summaries over and over, and to be stuck in rage about people who don't understand. At some point, that is self-indulgent. At some point, the issue isn't how bad we feel and how outraged we are, but the actual effects of institutionalized racism on African-Americans. I myself have made this mistake, even this week. As I spent time reading and writing and networking, it took me until Thursday to reach out to the local African-American leaders I actually know.

The shadow of Har Eival, the mountain of the curse, will still be there no matter what we are doing. We don't have to stare at it directly all the time.

And it is good for us to look at Har Gerizim, the mountain of blessing – the mountains of blessing. Look at how many people, increasing all the time, are opening their minds and opening their hearts to people who are different, who suffer more because of their difference. More in every age group, not just young but old as well. More in every ethnic and religious group – those established in this country for centuries, and those that are newer. More people in both political parties. This is also part of the news, but it's not always in the news. We have to make a conscious effort to stand on the mountain of blessing.

But it's not just about where we look – how we center ourselves spiritually, in reflection. Sometimes it seems like the mountain of blessing isn't quite as high as it needs to be. In geographical reality, in fact, the blessing mountain of Har Gerizim is just a bit shorter than Har Eival, the mountain of the curse. We are, then, exactly in the same position as the residents of Ffynnon Garw. Our mountain looks, this week, like it is not quite high enough.

I don't believe that the mountain of the curse is truly higher. But there is no question that we need to make the mountain of blessing taller than it is.

That work is the work of passion, and of community, and of grit.

I don't doubt that there is passion.

Community – I have been looking for that one place in Greater Nashua where you find all the leaders of different groups, communities of color and ethnicity and faith, civic and government and business leaders. There are only incomplete groups. The interfaith council does not have enough congregations. One Greater Nashua is perhaps the biggest table, and we are missing wide swaths. Within our congregation, the most developed relationships are between our Klezmer band and the Gospel choir. We need to build on that.

Community is crucial, because fighting back against public hate is only the surface level. To get beyond general proclamations, to change society, we need to be where we can talk – about what different groups have in common, and about the competitions and conflicts and jealousies between hated groups. About what we can learn from other groups' experiences, and about what they can learn from ours.

It's out of that talking and those challenges that a deeper *e pluribus unum* comes out. It's more than what we aren't, what we're against – it's what we build. And we have to know each other better to do that, and there's no shortcut. It takes time.

And the gritty work is about finally building the society that the mountain of blessing is beckoning and promising. Taking down the monuments, standing off with hate – those will seem easy in comparison. Our passion, our community, and then our detail work are necessary, because the answers we need are in good housing, which has to be designed and built. In education that doesn't give up on anyone and teaches young people to live together with difference through their many years together in school. In good law enforcement. And in an economic life that invests in the people of all backgrounds and all regions who have been left behind, who haven't had something to believe in and who are at each other's throats as a result.

That's what the mountain of blessing will be built of. Those are the sacks of soil, passed from hand to hand, slipping sometimes and sliding down, but building up if we keep at it.

And when we do, we will see that the two mountains are in fact different. The mountain of evil may seem like a monolith sometimes. But the mountain of blessing will be a sight to see. It will have a mighty foundation, set in place by the God of the universe, and it will bear the mark of the human hands that have raised it, that have lifted it high above the other mountains.

This is about more than two Shabbatot, in Charlottesville and Boston. *See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse.* We will have to keep at this work, and return here to talk about it often. But I know that we will. We will keep climbing up this hill, no matter how steep it seems, no matter how rough the path to reach the blessing.

And we will find that we are, as we always thought we were, a mountain village.