



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Behar-Bechukotai

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May 16, 2015
Behar-Bechukotai

Raising the Mountain



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

God’s natural world is as wondrous as it is diverse as it is fascinating – from forests of green trees to deserts of complete aridity; from flowers of colorful bloom to fruits of luscious deliciousness; from animals of elegant might to birds of graceful flight; from innocent children to wizened adults, and every version of human in between – the living world as we know it is a smorgasbord of life-forms.

Four are the life forms: 1) *domem*, inanimate objects (earth, stone, mineral); 2) *tzomeach*, flora, (trees, grass, flowers; 3) *chai*, fauna, (animals, birds, fish); and 4) *medaber*, “communicators,” i.e. human beings.

As nothing in life is simple, least of all life itself, each one of the four levels of life forms contains within itself aspects of the other levels. There is *domem* within the world of *tzomeach*, just as there is *tzomeach* within the world of *domem*.

The first of our double portion this Shabbat is *Behar*, meaning, “on the mountain.” And the mountain falls in the category of *tzomeah she’b’domem*, “growth within the inanimate.”

What life lessons does this teach us? What does it mean to turn the monotonous into the mountainous? Have you reached your peak?

Perhaps a tale or two regarding the wizened fools of Chelm may teach us about the summits of our lives.

RAISING THE MOUNTAIN: HOW TO REACH THE HIGHEST HEIGHTS

1. Lumberjack Extraordinaire (Joke)

Isaac, an elderly, very thin and frail-looking man, sees a full-page ad in a Haifa newspaper:

EXPERIENCED LUMBERJACK WANTED

Isaac applies for the job and a week later is asked to attend an interview with the foreman.

During his interview, the foreman says to Isaac, "I can't help but notice your age and your body build. Are you sure you're a lumberjack?"

"Yes, of course I am. Why would I have applied for the job if I wasn't?"

So the foreman gives Isaac an axe, takes him outside, points to a sapling growing near them and says to Isaac, "Okay, let's see you chop this down."

Isaac walks over to the sapling and, with one fell of the axe, chops it down.

The foreman then points out a larger tree and says, "Try this one."

Again, Isaac walks over to the tree and cuts it down effortlessly with one swing of the axe.

The foreman is amazed, but tries one more time. Pointing to a really large tree with a thick trunk, he says to Isaac, "Now try this one if you can."

Isaac walks over to the tree, takes a deep breath, swings his axe and with one crushing blow, the large tree comes crashing down

"I can't believe what I've just seen you do," says the foreman. "You're fantastic. Where did you learn to be such a great lumberjack?"

“Well if you must know,” says Isaac, “I worked in Africa, in the Sahara Forest, for a long time.”

“Don’t you mean the Sahara Desert?” asks the foreman.

“Well,” says Isaac, “*now* it’s a desert.”

2. Four Life Forms

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- 1) *domem*, inanimate objects (earth, stone, mineral)
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As nothing in life is simple, least of all life itself, each one of the four levels of life forms contains within itself aspects of the other levels. There is *domem* within the world of *tzomeach*, just as there is *tzomeach* within the world of *domem*.

One obvious example: it is written that all comes from the earth. The human being, *medaber*, is nevertheless composed of clay, of the *domem* of earth.

3. Parshat Behar-Bechukotai

Our Torah reading is called *Behar-Bechukotai*, for it contains two portions. (In Israel, only *Behar* is read this week). The first, *Behar*, literally translates as “on the mountain,” derived from its very first verse:

And the Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying...¹

If one were to title a book, *On the Mountain*, its readers would presume to find eloquent sentences about mountains within its pages. It would be safe to assume that such a book would tell us something about famous peaks and ranges.

So what lesson is the Torah teaching us by entitling our portion, *Behar*, “on the mountain?” I mean, what practical life-lesson may be gleaned from mountains?

4. Are Mountains Inanimate?

Of the four life forms I mentioned, into which does the mountain fall? One would hastily respond: “Why, in the world of *domem*, of course, since mountains, comprised of stone, are surely inanimate objects.”

But it’s not that simple.

In Torah literature we find² that within the inanimate world, mountains are sometimes considered *tzomeach she’b’domem*, “growth within the inanimate.”

The fundamental and key difference between *domem* and *tzomeach* is expansion and expansiveness: *tzomeach* grows and increases, *domem* does not. If you stare at a rock for a year straight you will not see the rock grow, increase, move, or even diminish. But, if you stare at a tree for a year straight, you will see much change and growth.

¹ Leviticus 25:1.

² See Ateret Rosh, Shaar Rosh Hashanah, ch. 24. (p. 53-54); Torat Chaim, Bereishit 20a; Shemot 112b; Sefer Hasichot, 5747, vol. II, pp. 409-417.

Though earth has the power of growth within it, (that's why we say the blessing *Boreh pri ha'adamah*, "the Creator of fruit of the earth") and though when you plant a *tzomeach* in the earth, flora will sprout, expand and grow, the earth itself is inanimate.

There are however creations in the inanimate world of *domem* that do grow and expand, albeit it at a different clip than most *tzomeach*.

One example is that of crystalline minerals, which crystallize over time. In Israel there are the Avshalom caves near the city of Bet Shemesh wherein one may take a tour of the stalactite and stalagmite minerals and literally watch as rocks grow.

But then there is another example given for *tzomeach she'b'domem*, for the "growth within the inanimate." And that example is mountains.³

5. Do Mountains Grow?

The obvious reason for categorizing mountains as *tzomeach she'b'domem*, "growth within the inanimate," is because, if most of the inanimate globe is flat, then anything that sticks out would seem to be a growing and expanding object. Mountains aren't flat and are therefore categorized as "growing" compared to the rest of the flat and static *domem*.

However, mountains do not actually grow; on the contrary – over time, mountains erode and decrease in size. Indeed, the First Book of Kings refers to *a great and strong wind splitting mountains and shattering boulders*.⁴ This clearly suggests that mountains are prone to splitting and shattering over time, not expanding and increasing.

The answer to why mountains are considered *tzomeach she'b'domem*, "growth within the inanimate," may be found in the reason that the winds split mountains and shatter boulders, but do not really affect the flatlands.

³ See the sources in note 2 at length.

⁴ Kings I 19:11.

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When winds blow they do two things: 1) they blister anything strong that stands in their path; and 2) they carry along with them materials that may cling to anything upon which they blow.

Thus mountains are affected in both ways by the winds: 1) They can be split by great and strong winds. 2) They grow as the wind blows materials upon the mountains.

What lesson can we learn from this in our lives?

As human beings, *medaber*, the highest life form created in the Divine Image, our souls are a literal spark of God, but our bodies are coarse matter, earth, dust (which returns to dust).

Much of our matter is inanimate, *domem*. But we also have a *tzomeach she'b'domem* part of us, our inanimate matter that grows and expands.

These are our mountains, our egos. Our egos come in two forms: 1) the ego that is arrogant and insecure; 2) the ego that is humble and genuinely confident.

In other words, our metaphorical mountain – the ego – can be a positive force or a negative one. We must have a healthy ego – a confident sense of self and an inner pride and confidence – to be able to stand strong in our commitments to Judaism and its moral and spiritual values. At the same time, this ego must be checked and never allowed to become haughty and conceited.

When we are arrogant and stubborn like a mountain, we are vulnerable and subject to the winds of change that blow around us, which allows us to be split open and shattered by the winds. However, when we stand firm but humble, we then grow and become stronger and taller from the wind. Why? Because the wind will leave all the sand and dust that it carries upon this secure mountain, making it bigger and stronger in its material circumference and height.

The ego that is arrogant is split and shattered by the wind, by the *ruach*, the spirit. The ego that is proud to be a material tool for the divine soul ends up growing bigger, taller and stronger with every blow of the wind, of the *ruach*, of the spirit.

It is our role in life to turn the inanimate material objects of life into living and growing organisms by being humbly proud in our service of God.

Some more lessons from mountains can be found in the town of Chelm. Have you heard of this place? It was a town that became known for its fools, with an entire body of stories told about the cockamamie people of Chelm – teaching us powerful psychological lessons. Every city has its “Chelm”...

7. Lesson 1 From Chelm: Expansive Efficiency

The town of Chelm decided to build a new *shul*. So, some strong, able-bodied men were sent to a mountaintop to gather heavy stones for the foundation. The men put the stones on their shoulders and trudged down the mountain to the town below.

When they arrived, the town constable yelled, “Foolish men! You should have rolled the stones down the mountain!”

The men agreed this was an excellent idea. So they turned around, and with the stones still on their shoulders, trudged back up the mountain, and rolled the stones back down again.

What do we learn from these fools? Mountains can be complicated entities.

Sometimes the easiest path down the mountain is not always the smartest; and sometimes the smartest path up the mountain is not easily found.

We must be wise in navigating the “mountain” within our beings, to ensure that its prominence be used constructively. We must be intelligent in the way we climb and descend the “mountain” of our ego.

[Like that one? Let me tell you another one.]

8. Lesson 2 From Chelm: Moving Mountains

Once upon a time, in the little village of Chelm, the people decided that they needed a new cemetery. The population of the city had expanded, and they needed to find a new location for the townspeople's eternal resting place. They looked and looked, but could not find a suitable location. They called a meeting of the wise people of the town and, for seven days, debated the issue.

At the end of the seven days, they reached a conclusion: they would move a mountain that stood on the southern side of the city and utilize the space thus created for the new cemetery.

This, of course, raised a new question: how does one move a mountain? They debated the issue for another seven days. Finally, the wise man of Chelm came up with an idea: "We will all rise, all men of the town as one - united in spirit and body - and together we will move the mountain."

The townspeople quickly accepted this "wise" advice. And all able-bodied men rushed to the mountain on the southern side of the city. They surrounded the mountain and pushed and shoved and leaned and tried as hard as they could, but they could not move the mountain.

Ten minutes went by, allowing the participants to catch their breath before they strenuously tried again. Again, they pushed and strained and shoved but could not move the mountain. At this point, the men folk of Chelm were drenched in sweat, so they removed their shirts, depositing them on the side, in preparation for their next try.

Meanwhile, a group of petty thieves watched them from the forest. And when the men of Chelm strained to move the mountain again, the thieves stole all the shirts and quickly disappeared from town.

After an hour of straining, one of the wise men discovered that his shirt was missing. Soon, all the men discovered that their shirts were missing. They began to wonder what was going on. The wise man of Chelm surmised the answer: "We must have been successful," he told them.

“We must have moved the mountain so far that we cannot even see the place where we left our shirts.” Upon hearing the explanation, the people began to applaud, cheer and even break out into dance over their success.

What do we learn from these fools? Just because things in life are missing doesn't mean you have moved mountains. A true sign of moving mountains is when things are found.

9. Highest Peaks (Conclusion)

A week from Sunday comes the festival of Shavuot, a celebration of the giving of the Torah, when we stood at Mount Sinai and received the blueprint for reaching the highest peaks.

Mount Sinai was unique in the fact that it was the “lowest of all mountains.”⁵ Teaching us that we must stand like a mountain, with healthy pride about all matters of Torah and Mitzvot. At the same time, this “mountain” is saturated with humility, sensing that it is the lowest of all mountains.

The lesson for us is clear: Much of life seems to be inanimate. This world is called “earth,” inanimate matter, for a reason. It is our job to make the inanimate grow ... to take the static material of life and make it expansive ... to take the narrow-minded predictability of physicality and broaden its horizons ... to turn the flat planes of tedium into three-dimensional heights ... to transform the monotonous into the mountainous.

We have the power to scale the heavens and scrape the skies. Yet we must always remember to do so with humility and modesty.

This, my dear friends, is how we prepare for the giving of the Torah upon the mountain of Sinai, and the re-building of the Temple upon the holy mount, as Isaiah prophesied:

⁵ Midrash Tehillim 68:17.

In the days to come, the mountain of God's house shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills. And all the nations shall stream to it. And the many peoples shall go and say: "Come, let us go up to the Mount of God, to the House of the God of Jacob - that He may instruct us in His ways, that we may walk in His paths." And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore.⁶

May it happen speedily in our days!

Shabbat Shalom!

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⁶ Isaiah 2:2-4.