"COME UP TO ME ON THE MOUNTAIN—-AND BE THERE"
עֲלֵה אֵלַי הָהָרָה וֶהְיֵה־שָׁם (Exodus 24:12)
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz - Temple Sholom – Vancouver BC Canada
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1. As was already mentioned, this morning's parasha is noteable because
    a. It comes right after the 10 Commandments
    b. Contains 54 of the 613 mitzvot.
    c. It deals with torts and damages.

2. But then, at the end of the parsha, there is a section which describes what happened after the proclamation of the 10 Commandments at Sinai.
    a. The Torah says that God ordered Moses to make a special sacrifice, and to dedicate the altar and ordain the kohanim with this sacrifice.
        i. So far pretty standard torah stuff
        ii. THEN God tells Moses to ascend the mountain—and to be there. "Aley ala ha-hara—vihey sham"—Come up to Me on the mountain—and be there. (Exodus 24:12

3. I want to study this verse with you first as it appears in the Torah and show you why I think it is so strange.
    a. Then I want to share with you three lessons we can take from this rather obscure verse.
        i. One comes from a great Hassidic rebbe of the eighteenth century who lived in the village of Kotsk. Who learned from this passage the importance of focusing.
        ii. The second comes from a very successful 21st century Jew learned from this passage a lesson in how to mourn.
        iii. The third comes from something you and I observe, and many , many of us do every day even though we know its so unhealthy and corrosive.

Now before I dive in, I have an embarrassing confession to make. I have taught this before, this very verse and at least two of these three examples. I learned them from a teaching by Rabbi Jack Reimer. As I started to write this drash based on some of his insights I went to save it and gave it a title with the quote from the verse, "Come up to me on the mountain" seemed like a good title for a Dvar Torah. Then my computer reminded me I already had a file with that name. It remembered but I didn't.

There is a well-known proverb in the pray trade, "if you don't remember giving it your congregation won't remember hearing it." I am not sure that is true in this case for you but it certainly was for me, all the more reason I think the lesson bares repeating, again not for you, or not only for you, but certainly, most certainly for me.

Let us look at the passage itself first. Most of the parasha of Mishpatim consists of laws. It deals with torts and damages. It deals with what happens if your ox gores another ox, or if you see the animal of your enemy collapsing under the burden that he is carrying, or things like that.

After all of that the Torah says that God ordered Moses to make a special sacrifice, and to dedicate the altar and ordain the kohanim with this sacrifice. And then, that peculiar verse. "Aley ala ha-hara—vihey sham"—Come up to Me on the mountain—and be there.

It is the last two words of that sentence that seem strange to us. If Moses is told to come up the mountain—why does he need to be told to be there?

This was the greatest opportunity in the life of Moses. He was being invited to a class in the meaning of the Torah that was going to be taught by God Himself. Do you think that he would cut class and go down the mountain before the lessons were over?

Do you think that he was going to take a break from his studies in order to jump on a zoom call with the office or doom scroll Instagram? Sitting in the front row of a class of one taught by the author of the book – do you think Moses is multi-tasking?

BTW, and this is a total aside from the point of this drash – I've been there and done that, well tried to anyway. Not with God but the next closest thing in my life at the time, my Professor of Jewish Military History when I was an undergraduate student, study Political Science at the University of Judaism. Yeah, that was the name of my university, I was there on a football scholarship.

The school was a small as it sounds, about 100 undergraduate students in the four-year liberal arts program. I signed up for a seminar in Jewish Military History. I was the only student, the professor Dr Yoav Ben Horin had written a number of scholarly articles on the subject and was a fellow at the RAND Corporation, non-profit global policy think tank that offers research and analysis to the United States military.

The UJ made a promise to it's 100 students, if they offered a course and even one student signed up for it they would honour their commitment and teach that course. I was that one student, Dr Ben Horin was the instructor, our texts were his many scholarly articles and one day (before cell phones and texting) I was sitting there, the only student in class daydreaming about something. He got up and left, I didn't notice till the door slammed closed. Let's just say, it never happened again.

Anyhow my point is, if God told you or me that God wanted to teach us every day for forty days and forty nights, and that God was going to reveal to us secrets that no one else on earth had ever been taught, would we have to be told not to cut class, to pay attention, and not to go down the mountain until the lessons was over?

I don't think so.

And so the last two words of this sentence seen unnecessary to us.

So what do they mean?

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk gives the first explanation. Menachem Mendel of Kotsk was one of the greatest rabbis in all of Hassidism. But he was an impatient and an angry man. He had no use for people who just dabbled in davening, or for people who studied casually instead of with all their minds. And so, he explained this passage this way:

He says: God added these two words—'-viheyey sham'–and be there—in order to teach us that it is possible to climb Mount Sinai and yet not really be there. Your body may be on Mount Sinai, but if your mind is elsewhere, your being there is a waste of time. Kind of like me on that day in Professor Ben Horin's Jewish Military History Class, or G-d forbid sometimes when we are deep in thought and driving our car. Both show terribly poor judgement, and the later might lead to physical injury to yourself and others.

Sinai is a peak experience, but if your mind wanders and if you are thinking of what is happening somewhere else during the time you are there, you might as well not be there. When you daven or when you study, says Rabbi Menachem Mendel, it is not enough to be in the classroom or in the synagogue physically. You have to be in the moment with all your mind and with all your heart. You have to focus on what you are studying or on what you are praying. And you have to put out of your mind every thought that might distract you. If you are saying the Shema, and your mind is on the work that is waiting for you at the office when the services are over, you might as well not waste your time saying the Shema. Prayer and Torah study, according to him, requires total focus and total concentration.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel teaching is that we should take these two extra words that we find at the end of the parasha, the words that say that it is not enough to climb Mount Sinai, but that we must also be there, as a lesson addressed to each and every one of us.

The second lesson comes from a lesson I learned from a member of our community while they sat shiva. This very busy and successful man decided that he was going to sit shivah according to Jewish law and custom which for him meant that he was not going to take or make any calls to his office during the week. If something came up, he decided, let them handle the matter by themselves, or let it wait until he got back. He was going to sit shivah, and not think about anything else for the whole week.

He was going to take seriously what the Torah says in today's parasha. He was going to 'be there, and not spend his days thinking about what was going on at the office.

He did that for the entire shivah period. And then, the very first thing that he did the moment that shivah was over was call his office. And do you know what they told him?

They told him that everything was fine. They told him that there had been no crises, and that they had managed very well without him.

And when he hung up the phone after receiving that report, he said that he learned an important lesson about life. He realized that someday someone would be sitting shivah for him, and that someday he would be away from the office, not for seven days, but forever.

And he said to himself; You know what? When that day comes, the office and the world will somehow get along without me.

And he said that perhaps that is one of the main lessons of sitting shivah. You close down your involvement in everything else, and when shivah is over, you realize that you are not as indispensable as you thought you were. You live with the presence of the absence of the one for whom you are mourning, and you realize that he will never be back in your life again—except as a role model and as a memory and as a guide—and you learn to make your peace with that fact. You treasure your loved one's memory even more when you realize that it is all that you will ever have of him in your life, and you try your best to benefit from the lessons that they taught you.

The last one, the last lesson I take from these two words, וֶהְיֵה־שָׁם is one that we see evidence of everyday; well, we would if we looked up from our cellphones when sitting right across the table, next to on the sofa or lying beside our loved one in bed.

The great 18th century kabbalistic Rabbi, Moshe Luzzatto taught that kedusha is a state in which there are no distractions. It is an experience in which two people become so fully united that all else is irrelevant. King David said it poetically, "דָּבְקָה נַפְשִׁי אַחֲרֶיךָ" [in this moment] my soul clings to yours."

When we check our cellphone before we check in with the person sleeping next to us, or our child running up to us, we are on the mountain, standing in the presence of the divine and our head is buried in our screen. Look up, see the holiness all around you.

Three lessons from two words:

1. Its not enough to climb the mountain you need to be there when you're there
2. You are not as indispensable as you thought you were, so take the time for the people that are indispensable to you now – those you love. All that you will ever have of the people you love in your life is now, a clock is ticking, it will end try your best to hold onto the lessons that they taught you, while they are teaching them.
3. Seek holiness in every interaction with another human being, see them, connect with them, they are the image of God right there before you.