

Prophets and Mountains

Moshe Sharon

Every great prophet has his mountain. Moses spoke to God on Mount Sinai. (Exodus, 20:19) Jesus' name is associated with the Mountain of Beatitude overlooking the Sea of Galilee (Matthew, 5:1ff) and with the Mount of Olives from where his ascension is supposed to have taken place (Luke 24:50, 51; Acts 1:12). Muhammad received his first revelation, and was consecrated to prophecy, in a cave on Mount Hirá' near Mecca. (Ibn Hishám, *Sírat Rasúl Allah*. Cairo, 1955 (1): 235ff) The Báb associated himself with Mákú which he called "the Land on the Mountain;" Bahá'u'lláh's mountain is Mount Carmel ("God's vineyard"). It is also the mountain of Elijah who witnessed the divine presence on Mount Sinai as well.

Mountains are not only lofty, nearer to heaven, so to speak, but the less accessible, and the higher and more rugged they are, the more secluded and more mysterious they seem. It is not a coincidence therefore, that in all cultures mountains, particularly summits, became the dwelling places of the gods. The Greeks chose Mt. Olympus as the residence of their gods, the Jews gathered at Mount Sinai to hear God speaking to them from smoke-engulfed, burning Sinai, and chose Mount Moriah, Zion, in Jerusalem for His temple "the place established for His dwelling." (Cf. Psalms, 132:13) Christian tradition placed the mysterious event of the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor and turned this mountain, too, into a Holy Mountain which was sanctified when Jesus ascended it. (Matthew 17:1-3) More than a thousand years before Jesus, Deborah the Prophetess sat under a palm tree on Mount Tabor and judged the Israelites, and from that same mountain she led the army of Israel, together with Barak, to defeat the Canaanite army of Siserah. (Judges 4:4ff)

The worship of the gods and goddesses on the mountains was one of the major issues against which the prophets of Israel fought vehemently. From the many passages in Bible it is clear that the idol worship on the mountains was the commonest and

most popular form of worship. It was no doubt exciting, frivolous and accessible. Isaiah attacking the immorality and inequity of his people using the words of the Lord added: “they have burnt incense upon the mountains and blasphemed Me upon the hills.” (Isaiah 65:7) Hoseah, who is probably the most outspoken of all the prophets of Israel leaves no doubt about the nature of this mountain worship. “They sacrifice upon the tops of the mountains, and burn incense upon the hills, under oaks and poplars and elms, because the shadow of them is good; therefore your daughters should commit harlotry, and your spouses shall commit adultery.” (Hoseah 4:13)

This alien mountain worship constituted the real danger to the Israel’s strict monotheism, and to the uniqueness of Israel as the people of the one God. Therefore, the description of the worship on the mountains is coupled with the emphatic order to the Israelites to destroy it. “Ye shall utterly destroy all the places wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods upon the high mountains and upon the hills...” (Deuteronomy 12:2)

The mountains of the heathen worshippers were clearly the negation of the Mountain of the Lord and His holy place. In contradistinction to the abundance of the places on the many mountains and hilltops where the worship of the gods of the other nations took place stood the one mountain, onto which only “he who hath clean hands and a pure heart, who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully” “shall ascend.” (Psalms 24:3-4) This mountain was identified as Mount Moriah and Mount Zion, the same mountain to which Abraham was sent to sacrifice his son Isaac: “Get thee into the land of Moriah - said the Lord - and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.” (Genesis 22:2) This is the mountain, which was later identified with the one on top of which the Temple of Solomon and the subsequent temples were built. This is the Mountain that was chosen by god himself to be the geographical connection between Him and His people: “Thou shall bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which thou hast made for thee to dwell, in the sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established.” (Exodus 15:17) It is clear that also in the case of the monotheist faith of Israel, God dwells, so to speak on a mountain. The interpreters of the Bibles have gone one step foreword by asserting that this particular verse means that: “the sanctuary below is directed towards the Throne above.” (Rashi’s (1040-1105 France) commentary of the

verse)

In addition to Mount Zion, Mount Sinai is also identified as the Holy; thus two Mountains are the Holy Mountains. Sinai is the Mountain of the revelation. This is the mountain of the public revelation to Israel and the private revelation to Moses. This is the Mountain of the Lord from which he called his prophet to come to Him. "And Moses went up to the God" (Exodus 19:3) and he heard from Him that "the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people on Mount Sinai. (ibid, 19:11) And as promised "the Mount of Sinai was altogether in a smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire..." On this mountain, the private revelation to the greatest prophets of Israel reaches its highest peak. For on this occasion Moses achieves the most intimate cognition of the divine being he comes as near as possible for a human being to the perfect knowledge of the divine reality. What a tremendous power have these simple words: "And the Lord spoke unto Moses face to face as a man speaketh unto his friend." (Exodus, 33:11) It is not an accident that in later, Islamic tradition Moses is described as *Kalím Alláh* - he who speaks with God. The Biblical description is very clear on this point: these few words emphasize the fact that not in fire and pandemonium came the Lord to meet his prophet and "majordomo" but in a cloud; and there they stood together, the creator and the created, "speaking" to each other.

Next to Moses, only Elijah, the Prophet warrior, had a similar occurrence but not identical. He too stood on Mount Sinai when God Passed By and was part of the immense mystical experience of being in the presence of the Divine Being. Elijah came from Mt. Carmel to Sinai after proving the superiority of the Lord of Israel over his competitor the Ba'al. Hidden in a small crack in the rock he heard the voice of God but he could not experience the Mystery of His reality like Moses to whom God said: Thou shalt see my back, for my face cannot be seen, for no human sees me and remains alive." (The whole episode: Exodus 33:19-22) Elijah experience was different He witnessed on the same mountain the Presence of God: "And behold the Lord passed by and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the Earthquake fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire a still small voice;" in it was the presence of God. Elijah witnessed the raging powers of nature before the stillness of the divine

presence but he was not in the degree of “Thou shall see my back.” However unlike Moses Elijah did not die but was taken up to heaven “by a whirlwind.” (2 Kings 2:1) In such a way he remains present in this world in all monotheistic traditions and tales.

Mount Zion is not only the dwelling place of the Lord but also the mountain from which he will appear in all His majesty. From Zion adorned with beauty the Lord Shall appear and begin his act of redemption for His people. In this way the Mountain of the Lord becomes the scene of the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy.

Mount Sinai is identified with Moses not with Elijah, whose Mountain is the Carmel. This mountain is coupled in the north of the country with Mount Tabor. Therefore, we see that there are four mountains that gained sanctity in the tradition of Israel: Tabor and Carmel, Sinai and Zion. Many *midrash* traditions are connected with these particular mountains. Most of them deal with the question which of all these mountains deserved that the Divine Presence should be on it or that the future Temple of the Lord should be built on it, or that the Torah should be given on it or that the Divine redemption should be manifested on it. While dealing with these issues the *midrash* emphasizes that prior to their sanctification in Israel at least two of them were the sites of heathen worship.

Thus we read in *Genesis Rabbah*:

When, The Holy Blessed be He, came to give the Torah on Sinai, the mountains started to quarrel with each other, one saying on me the torah will be given and the other saying on me the Torah will be given. Tabor came from Bet Elim and Carmel from Aspamiah. This one says I was called, and the other says, I was called (to come). To which God said: “why leap ye high hills” (Psalms 68:16/17)? On the tops of all of you idolatry was committed except for Sinai on which there was no idolatry and this is the mountain which God chose to sit on for which reason we read (Exodus,19:20): “And god descended on Mount Sinai.” (*Genesis Rabbah*, 99)

The neighbours of Israel were very familiar with the close relation between the Mountains and the god of Israel. In one case we are told that the Arameans of Syria blamed their defeated by the Israelites on the hilly territory in which the battle had taken place because the god of Israel, they said, is a

god “of hills; therefore they were stronger than we. But let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they.” (1Kings 20:23)

When the kingdom of Israel came under the influence of the cult of the Phoenician God Ba'al and his spouse the Goddess Astarte, Mt. Carmel was one of the main centres of their worship.

The Book of Kings contains one of the most dramatic accounts about the competition that took place on Mount Carmel between Elijah, the lone zealot prophet of the God of Israel, and the multitude of 400 priests of the Ba'al. Elijah, asking the help of God and receiving it in a form of divine fire that came down from heaven, proved the uselessness of the alien gods on that same Mountain which they wanted to claim for themselves. (1Kings, 20:20ff) Local tradition connected his memory with caves on Mount Carmel where he was supposed to have found refuge. The Greeks attributed divinity to the mountain or made it the dwelling place or one of the dwelling places of Zeus. In this case it was the god or Zeus of the Carmel. It is said that Vespasian, received the good tidings that he was to become the Roman Emperor from the chief priest of the god of Carmel.

The two mountains in the north of the Holy Land, Mt. Carmel on one hand and Mt. Tabor on the other, attracted the eye by their special features. They fired the imagination, and it is no accident that they play important part in the Biblical accounts and many traditions. Tabor, ascending from the surrounding plain attracts the eye with its peculiar shape of almost perfect dome, and the evergreen Carmel thrusts itself majestically into the sea like a head of a gazelle. The unusual topographical features of Tabor and Carmel conveyed certainty: Nothing can change their features. It is not surprising, therefore, that Jeremiah uses the example of the two mountains in order to prophecies the certainty of the arrival of the Babylonian King to attack on Egypt: “As I live saith the King, whose name is the Lord of Host, Surely like Tabor amongst the mountains and like Carmel by the sea, so shall he come.” (Jeremiah 46:18)

These four mountains in the Holy Land: Sinai, Zion (Moriah), Tabor and Carmel were combined in many Jewish traditions describing the End of Days and the reestablishment of the Lord's Temple. The four Mountains will be assembled together so that their summits combine to form the foundations of New

Jerusalem.

The Jewish *Midrash*, influenced no doubt by the evergreen vegetation on the Carmel and the vineyards flourishing on its fertile slopes, emphasizes the meaning of its Hebrew name: “the vineyard of God (*kerem el*),” and in the Jewish Cabbalist literature it is closely related to the mystery of the Divine Presence. The Carmel stood out as a unique topographical and geographical feature. It is green, forested and lofty, overlooking its environs and protruding into the sea. Its ancient sanctity was reinforced by the Biblical references and by the Jewish Midrashic tradition giving it a unique place in the Messianic Times and the divine redemption. Its close connection with the figure of Elijah, and his prophetic activity emphasized this bond between the mountain and the Messianic Advent. In the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the Prophet Elijah, who never tasted death, is the herald of the Messiah. It is not surprising, therefore, that Bahá’u’lláh, as the divine Messiah of the age, chose it as Mt. Carmel as his own mountain as well as the resting place of the Báb, whom he presented as his Herald, the modern embodiment of Elijah.