

Who Will Help You...Your Parents, Yourself, God?

Posted April 30, 2013 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Copyright © 2013 Judith Z. Abrams

BH

We're having so much fun learning about Psalms in the podcasts (<http://maqom.podbean.com/>) I wanted to bring it over into the written material, as well.

Psalm 121 is one of my favorites. You are probably familiar it:

“I will lift up my eyes to the mountains. From where does my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

I'm not the only one who loves this psalm. Mendelssohn set it music
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pC4Akc-xcQM>)

Before we see what the sages say on this psalm, let's take a look at the text, by itself.

Looking to the hills for help is not a uniquely Jewish phenomenon. Human beings innately look upward for help. This is part of our development as children. We are down low and those who can help us are vastly taller. We metaphorically extend this to our understanding of our physical environment. We look upward for help and the highest terrain features we have are mountains and hills.

Religions the world over value what happens high on the mountaintops (e.g., the giving of the Ten Commandments) to the extent that many of them built mountains for ritual purposes (e.g., ziggurats, Incan pyramids). The sages don't want your mind or your eye to stop, though, when you look up to the mountains. You may look to the mountains, but then they want your heart to keep looking further up:

“What is meant by, “to the mountains”? It means that on the day when the Holy One, blessed be He, comes to judge mankind, the children of Israel will look unto the parents to plead for them. [The sages are punning on the word “mountains”, *harim*, suggesting it could be read *horim*, i.e., parents.] But no father will be able to save his son and no man will be able to save his brother. In their time of distress, on the Day of Judgment, the children of Israel will lift up their eyes to their Father in heaven and say,

“For You are our father, for Abraham knows us not and Israel (i.e., Jacob) does not acknowledge us. You, Lord, are our father, our redeemer from everlasting is Your name (Isaiah 63:16).”

The sages say we should look first to the mountains and use them as a sort of compass. We look to the mountains to help us look even further up, to God. In the end, they seem to say, help is only coming from one place: not from mountaintops, not from parents, not from position, but from inner orientation toward God.

Discussion Questions

1. The Mossad HaRav Kook commentary on this psalm suggests that it is a dialogue between a parent and a child. The child is setting off on a journey. The parent walks with the child for a while, but then comes to the point where s/he must part from the parent and looks around, wondering to whom s/he can look for help, now that the parent's protection is coming to an end. The parent then says that God will be the child's guardian. The rest of the psalm is the parent's reassurance to the child.

I must say I love this interpretation of the psalm as a parent: it's a great lesson in how to let our children go on the adventure of adult life. It's an example of how we let them go.

Have you had the experience of letting a child go on his/her own way? How did you handle the “holding on and letting go”? How did your child? How can this sort of “hand off” best be accomplished?

2. Have you ever had a spiritual experience on a mountaintop? What happened? Were you able to incorporate that “high” into your daily spiritual life? How?

As always, looking forward to your insights!