



## I LIFT MY EYES TO THE MOUNTAINS

The mountains of my home fill me with awe. They rise like a majestic presence above the thick evergreen forests of the Pacific Northwest, their gleaming glaciers and craggy peaks touching the eternal sky. It's no wonder that humans have long considered mountains to be the abode of the gods.

Thousands of years ago, a psalmist of Israel wrote: *Esa aynai el he-harim, mayayin yavo ezri? I lift up my eyes to the mountains; what is the source of my help?* Often I have felt that the mountains themselves are the answer to the Psalmist's question "what is the source of my help?" When I lift my eyes to the mountains, I am reassured by their eternal, unchanging presence in a world that is so often full of confusion and suffering.

Yet even the mountains can suddenly and violently change their form.

We were sitting in the sanctuary in Richland, Washington on a sunny May morning many years ago when we heard the sound. I thought it was artillery from the military reservation to the west of our town. The sound was not quite loud enough to cause alarm; it was just loud enough to shake the stained glass windows a bit, just loud enough so that we all took notice. A friend who lived in Seattle at the time told me that when he heard it, he thought the storage boxes stacked in his garage had suddenly tumbled down. He and his father went to check, but the boxes were still stacked in place.

When we walked outside a few minutes later, we saw the cloud moving from the west. We had never seen anything like it before. It looked like a dark grey blanket with strange billows hanging from it. One onlooker declared: "It's the end of the world!" Another turned on the radio and heard the news: Mount Saint Helens had erupted with sudden, violent force.

What happened next was eerie. The cloud slowly spread over the blue morning sky and turned it completely grey. Street lights flickered on. Dogs barked in alarm. An announcer on the radio told those in the path of the cloud to seek shelter -- volcanic ash had started to fall and it wasn't safe to breathe. We spent the rest of the day in darkness.

Television broadcasts showed the extent of the devastation. The eruption flattened more than 150 square miles of evergreen forest. The North Fork Toutle River was unrecognizable: swollen with mud, melted glaciers, volcanic sludge and debris. Within seconds, the force of the blast erased beautiful Spirit Lake from the face of the earth. Fifty-seven people and thousands of animals perished in the eruption.

The pristine snow-covered Mount Saint Helens had ceased to be.

The blast ripped apart her symmetrical peak; the lush area around the mountain became a moonscape. All life seemed smothered under a blanket of grey ash, volcanic pumice and debris.

*Esa eiyvai el he-harim, may-ayin yavo ezri?*

I lift my eyes unto the mountains; what is the source of my help?

But it turns out that the eruption didn't erase life from Mount Saint Helens. Scientists discovered – to their amazement – that some burrowing animals actually survived the blast. And before too long, tender green shoots pushed their way through the blanket of ash towards the light.

This past summer I visited Mount Saint Helens, nearly thirty years since the devastating eruption. I drove by forests that had been replanted and that now have evergreen trees towering 70 feet. Closer to the mountain, where humans have not replanted the forest, sparse wildflowers, shrubs and scrubby trees have returned on their own, along with animals like meadowlarks, frogs and beavers. We even saw a sign warning of a recent cougar sighting as we hiked above beautiful Coldwater Lake, a young lake born after the eruption, a lake that came into being when Spirit Lake vanished.

For some in our community, this has been a year of devastation and upheaval. Some of the devastation has been economic. Jobs have vanished and savings have eroded. Even those who are secure at the moment may worry about the future. For others, the year has brought sorrow and pain of a different nature. Loved ones have died. Illness has weakened bodies. Grown children have lost their way.

Yet we can lift our eyes to the mountains and see that even after the most devastating destruction, life finds a way to return. New plants grow from the ashes of destruction; new trees strain to reach the sky. New lakes are born. All of creation pulses with an eternal resilience.

*Esa einei el he-harim, me-ayin yavo ezri?*

I lift my eyes unto the mountains; what is the source of my help?

*Ezri may-im Adonai, oseh sha-mayim va-aretz.*

We are a part of the resilience of God's creation. Our bodies were created to heal after injury. Our hearts were created to love after loss. Our hands were created to touch the hands of others.

Yet although we are a part of nature, we also stand apart from it. Like lakes, trees and animals, we are endowed with the capacity to flourish even after terrible suffering and destruction. Yet we are different from the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field. Our innate resilience is not always realized.

Think about it for a moment. We all know people who have endured pain and loss. Not all are resilient. Some people seem to go through the motions of life forever under a cloud of sadness. Others can move through grief and pain and emerge stronger and better on the other side.

What distinguishes one group from another? This is a topic of much debate and research, and it seems to do injustice to the question to try and answer it in one sermon. Yet I have noticed that resilient people have two qualities that distinguish them from the less-resilient. And further, I found that these qualities of resilience are reinforced by the wisdom of our Jewish tradition.

First, those who are resilient have the ability to find a deeper meaning and purpose in the pain they have experienced. Resilient people understand that no human being is exempt from pain; resilient people use that understanding to deepen their compassion for others who suffer. Many times our Torah reminds us: “do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” As a people, we transformed our collective memory of oppression into a guide for the future. Rather than dwell forever on pain, we are to ease the pain of others.

Second, those who are resilient never lose the capacity to hope for a better future. This is also part of the very core of what it means to be Jewish. We as a people have suffered tremendous losses and have still endured. After the destruction of ancient Israel’s spiritual center -- the first Temple in Jerusalem -- amid the misery of exile in Babylon, the prophet Isaiah assured his suffering brethren that God will comfort Jerusalem “as a mother comforts her son.” Hiding in an Amsterdam attack in the second world war, a Jewish girl wrote in her diary: “When I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more.” Through generations and generations, we have lived through destruction and have clung to our hope.

*Esa einei el he-harim, may-ayin yavo ezri? I lift my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come? Ezri may-im Adonai, oseh shamayim va-aretz.*

Our Jewish tradition speaks of Rosh Hashanah as the birthday of the world. This is a world in which change, whether violent or gentle, is always inevitable. We are a part of a creation in which the end of one world contains the seeds of a new one -- a world in which the destruction of one mountain lake gives birth to another. We are a part of the glorious resilience of nature, and part of the enduring Jewish people, together again at the birth of a new year.

May the New Year be one of resilience and blessing for us and for all of God’s creation.

Rabbi Jennifer Jaech  
Temple Israel of Northern Westchester  
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