Mountains of the Bible: The Living Mountain of God

Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles.
God, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing;
let there be moments when Your Presence,
like lightning, illumines the darkness in which we walk.
Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns unconsumed.
And we, clay touched by God,
will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder:
How filled with awe is this place and we did not know it!

—from the Mishkan T'filah, “A Prayer for Shabbat”

While the Nile River played a significant role in cradling baby Moses in the reeds along its banks (see “Rivers of the Bible: Mother River”), it was mountains that most significantly shaped the course and direction of the great prophet’s life. As a young man filled with angst over his people being subjected to indentured servitude in Egypt, and filled with longing to discover his life’s big purpose, one day Moses ventured a bit further afield while tending to his father-in-law’s flock of sheep. He made it deeper into the wilderness than he previously had, all the way to the base of Mount Horeb. Mount Horeb, also known in scripture as Mount Sinai, and known today as Jebel Musa (Arabic: جبل موسى, “Mount Moses”), is a rugged, jagged, granite massif in the southern Sinai Peninsula that presents an impressive vertical rise (7,497 ft) from the surrounding desert floor. It’s a mountain that seems designed to bask in the variegated wonders of desert light, appearing in shades of orange, red, russet, mauve, rose, depending on season and the time of day. While there are orchards, vineyards, and scrubby pines at the base of the mountain, the majority of the mountain itself is sheer, dry, weathered rock. It is an iconic “fierce landscape,” as theologian Belden Lane terms it. “The God of Sinai,” he writes, “is one who thrives on fierce landscapes, seemingly forcing God’s people into wild and wretched climes where truth must be absolute.”
On Moses’s first approach to the mountain, up on the mountainside he spots a bush that appears to be burning. Moses nears the burning bush. He marvels that the bush burns, but remains unconsumed, more like a steady oil lamp than an ash-heaping bushfire. God calls to Moses from that oil-lamp bush. God stops the young man in his tracks with a call to reverence and attention, sensitizing Moses to take his shoes off, for the ground he is standing on is “holy ground.” God reveals the name that, at least in the Jewish and Christian traditions, gets about as close to pointing to the wordless mystery of the divine presence as any word or name can get. God names Godself YHWH, pronounced Yahweh, meaning “I am that I am,” or “I will be who I will be,” or “God who makes that which has been made,” or “God who brings into existence whatever exists,” as different translations put it. Being, could be a close English word, or Becoming, or maybe better—being becoming itself, creation creating, existence existing, reality realizing, life living. To this day it is a common practice in orthodox Judaism to refrain from speaking this name aloud out of reverence for the holiness that it points to and contains. And so many translate Yahweh as Hashem, “The Name.”

On the side of the mountain Hashem introduced God’s self to Moses, and gave the young man insight into his life’s purpose—he was put here on this earth at the time he was put here to free his people from Egypt, and to lead them back to the promised land in Israel. Excited at this high purpose calling, Moses was also hesitant when faced with the enormity of the task. How will the people trust me and follow me on this dangerous journey of liberation, he wonders aloud?

“I will be with you,” God assures the young prophet, “and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.” (Exodus 3: 12)
Moses descends the mountain with his feet treading more lightly and carefully than before, each step sends a reminder-jolt up his leg of creation’s holiness, his eyes are newly opened to the wonder of being itself, his astonishment at the natural world set freshly ablaze.

On many times I’ve gone to the mountains feeling jaded and confused by life and the world. On many times I’ve returned with both my sense of amazement and my sense of purpose renewed. Mountains quicken our wonder, and clarify our purpose.

***

Moses took God’s invitation to worship Hashem on that mountain seriously, and three months later, after great trial and danger, after plagues and battles and the Red Sea parting, he lead the people out of Egypt and through the wilderness, back to Jebel Musa where they were able to set up a safe and remote base camp, and pause for a bit to regroup. They would end up staying at their Mount Sinai camp for about a full year. Exodus records Moses making at least eight trips up the mountain during this time. There were likely other ascents and interactions with the mountain that were unrecorded. On one of those trips he camped on the top of the mountain for forty days and forty nights. Moses returned to the mountain again and again, learning it in every season and under every aspect of light, approaching the mountain as a way of growing in knowledge and understanding of God, the very mystery and materiality of being itself—of being becoming, of reality realizing itself. Rather than climb many mountains, rather than “bag” many peaks, rather than casting a broad net in his explorations, Moses went in and up and deep on one single mountain.

As naturalist Richard Nelson has put it, “There may be more to learn by climbing the same mountain a hundred times than by climbing a hundred different mountains.”

***

Scottish Modernist writer and poet Nan Shepherd was born (1893), lived, and died (1981) in the Scottish Highlands outside of Aberdeen, on the north side of the River Dee as it makes its way from the Cairngorm Mountains to the North Sea. The great tide and pull of her life was always in the upstream direction, as she heard the same call to explore the Cairngorms as Scottish-born John Muir heard the call to explore the Sierra Nevada of California. “The mountains are calling & I must go & I will work on while I can, studying incessantly.” Muir wrote in an 1873 letter to his sister Sarah. Nan Shepherd heard something of the same call to work and study in the Cairngorms, producing from her first-hand mountain experience a stunning literary work called The Living Mountain that is part memoir, part field guide, part prose-poem, part Zen Buddhist koan, part Presbyterian theological inquiry into creation as the “theater of God’s glory” (Calvin) as she encountered it through years of sauntering in the Cairngorm Mountains.

She began work on The Living Mountain in the 1940s, after having published two novels and a book of poems to modest reception. When the draft of her mountain book was completed in 1945, she shared it with one friend and one publisher. These two admired the book, but
wondered if there would be much market for it, so it went unpublished, with Shepherd letting the manuscript rest in a drawer in her house. It wasn’t until 1977, when an older Nan was going through her possessions that she picked up the manuscript and gave it another look. In the meantime, she had never stopped exploring the Cairngorms. When she read it again, more than thirty years after writing it, she “realized that the tale of my traffic with a mountain is as valid today as it was then. That it was a traffic of love is sufficiently clear; but love pursued with fervour is one of the roads to knowledge.”

The book was published in 1977 and has since become an instant classic of nature literature, demanding a place next to John Muir, Peter Matthiessen, Mary Oliver, and Rachel Carson. In 2016 the Royal Bank of Scotland graced their new £5 note with a portrait of Nan and two of her quotes. The first, from her 1928 novel *The Quarry Wood*—"It's a grand thing, to get leave to live." The second, from *Living Mountain*—"But the struggle between frost and the force in running water is not quickly over. The battle fluctuates, and at the point of fluctuation between the motion in water and the immobility of frost, strange and beautiful forms are evolved."

Nan Shepherd’s writing approach in *The Living Mountain* reflects her hiking approach. "At first," she writes, as a young woman, “mad to recover the tang of height, I made always for the summits, and would not take time to explore the recesses.” *The Living Mountain* tells the story about how, over time, her approach to “hill-walking” developed and matured beyond the fixation with altitude and peaks—a particularly masculine approach to mountaineering in which the conquest or assault of the summit is thought to be the aim and goal of mountain climbing. In *Living Mountain*, Shepherd does for mountains what Rachel Carson’s *Undersea* did for Oceans—both women explore landscapes previously mapped and interpreted mostly through the
masculine lens, and report a different perspective, one where contemplation rather than conquest prevails.

And so in *Living Mountain*, rather than making out for the summits, Nan explores the mountains more aimlessly, with serendipity and curiosity leading the way as she wanders deep into the recesses, the plateaus, the lakes and streams of the hills. For her, the pilgrim’s method of circumambulation, peregrination, Kora (Tibetan: གོ་ར), replaces the mountaineer’s technical, competitive, linear summit-fever. “Often the mountain gives itself most completely,” she writes, “when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend with no intention but to be with him.”

For her the body’s senses, not the trail, lead the way. She compares her hiking method to that of a dog sniffing around and following wherever the scent might lead. Indeed, among other sensory accounts, she reports insightfully on the different smells of the mountain—“Pines, like heather, yield their fragrance to the sun’s heat...the bog myrtle...is cool and clean, and like the wild thyme it gives its scent most strongly when crushed...juniper is secretive with its scent...and Birch needs rain to release its odour. It is a scent with body to it, fruity like old brandy, and on a wet warm day, one can be as good as drunk with it.” (52-53)

*The Living Mountain* is structured like a creation narrative. There are twelve chapters, evoking the wholeness of a full year’s journey around the sun. Her account of the mountains begins at the basic level with what she calls “the elementals”—rock, water, ice, air, sun. It continues with the softer, creaturely life in the mountains—plants, birds, animals, insects, humans. The final movement is a poetic meditation on the senses and the ways the mind and the mountain interpenetrate to give a final picture of the mountain as a living whole—“the mountain’s
wholeness,” she calls it, “one entity, the living mountain,”—which is nothing less than a vision of the interdependence, the interconnectedness—the essential and final oneness—of Being itself.

^_^ On the third new moon after they left Egypt, the Israelites set up camp at the base of Mount Sinai. Moses, eager to be back on the “holy ground” of his burning-bush theophany experience, immediately sets off on his first ascent up the mountain. Eager, as we all ever are, to have an immediate encounter with the divine. And so he sets up the mountain to meet God, holding fast to his first-hand, empirically-based belief that Hashem lives on that specific mountain. This is no small thing, no small detail in the Bible. In terms of the natural features of the earth and their connection to God, it’s hard to argue with the case of prominence that mountains have. God, for Moses was thought to have a specific and clear address. Not in the trees or clouds or rivers. But in the mountains. Not on any mountain, but on Mount Sinai.

This extended stay at the holy mountain is in many ways the foundational moment in the Hebrew Bible—it’s when the Israelites receive the Torah and the Ten Commandments. It’s the touchstone moment that is recounted every year on the Shavuot holiday. Later rabbincial interpretation posits that every soul that would ever be born was present there at Mount Sinai to receive God’s teaching and God’s covenant, and that in fact we’re all still in some sense there, camping at the base of the mountain, awaiting a word from the Lord. To go to synagogue or to go to church is to sit there at the base of God’s mountain, and to discuss and discern amongst ourselves how to interpret the revelation that comes down from on high—what it means, how to live in relation to God, one another, and God’s creation. The Biblical Israelites camped at Mount Sinai for a full year, twelve months. But in some sense, they’re still there, in some sense we’re all still there. In some sense, in the Biblical imagination, we can never get closer to God than Mount Sinai. We can never get closer than Sinai, because Sinai is the mountain of God.

^_^ On the first ascent, “Moses went up to God,” as the scripture puts it, and “the Lord called to him from the mountain.” (Exodus 19: 3) God has a message for Moses to bring back down to the people. Remember this moment, God says. Remember how God granted liberation from bondage. Remember how “I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself,” God says. If you keep covenant with me, God promises, then you shall be a “holy nation.”

Moses hikes down the mountain to relay this mountain message, starting a back-and-forth conversation with Moses, the mountain, God, and the people that would continue for the next year, as Moses went back up and down the mountain at least eight times. Like Nan Shepherd returning again and again to the Cairngorms, and creating The Living Mountain out of her “traffic of love” with the mountains, Moses enacts his own “traffic” with Mount Sinai, one which resulted in the “Laws of Moses,” the Torah, and the Ten Commandments. And so at the center
of the Hebrew Bible, at the very heart of it, lies a teaching that is decidedly a mountain teaching, based on a vision of the God of the mountains revealed as *being becoming itself, reality realizing, existence existing*. It's a vision that one can still seek to experience first-hand among mountain peaks and plants and the beauty of alpenglow mountain light and soft slow-shifting moon shadows and thick dark clouds hiding the peaks behind dense endless mystery.

^^^  

In hiking up and down Mount Sinai again and again, Moses is the mediator between God and the people. And on the way up, and on the way down, Moses soaks in the wisdom of the mountain. The mountain wisdom guides his steps, as he learns the routes by which the mountain will allow him safe access and safe departure. The mountain wisdom seeps through his pores as he sweats under the heat of the sun, and returns to him when he drinks from the mountain streams. The mountain wisdom guides him by the nose, as sage-brush mingles with clay-dust in the heat of the day, and juniper sweetens and sharpens the cool hours. “Each of the senses,” as Nan Shepher knew well, “is a way in to what the mountain has to give.”

It was on the fourth ascent that God summoned Moses to pay attention to the sensory wisdom that the mountain had to teach. That morning there was thunder and lightning. A thick dark cloud covered the mountain. The people gathered at the foot of the mountain, likely scared for Moses as he began to ascend under such ominous conditions. They heard a loud blast that sounded like a trumpet. They smelled smoke coming up off the mountain. Moses went up and disappeared into a cloud of thick darkness. Mystics like Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius have seen in Moses’s ascent a trail-map for the soul’s ascent to God. That one gets closer to God the higher up the mountain one goes, and that at the top, the ultimate encounter with the divine must happen under the thick, dense darkness of cloud. The thought is that bewilderment and wordless wonder, not clarity and certainty, grows as we grow closer to the absolute mystery of God. The final moment of encounter is beyond words, and is beyond understanding. “The divine is there,” Gregory of Nyssa writes about Moses on the mountain in *The Life of Moses*, “where understanding does not reach.”

^^^  

The Cairngorms are a wide, broad, windswept plateau of a mountain range, noteworthy as the tallest mountains in the British Islands, and for their alpine-tundra environment that speaks of regions further north in the arctic. Nan Shepher crisscrossed the Cairngorm plateau again and again, her experience of the mountain range deepening with each visit. She knew well the wisdom that there could be more to learn by climbing the same mountain a hundred times than by climbing a hundred different mountains. And yet, the more she visited, the more she learned from the mountain, the more her sense of the mountain’s unknown and unknowable aspects grew too. “One never quite knows the mountain,” she writes on the first page of *The Living Mountain*. 
“However often I walk on them, these hills hold astonishment for me. There is no getting accustomed to them.” For a contemplative hill-walker like Nan Shepherd, when it comes to encountering the type of absolute reality that mountains are and that they speak to the soul about, ”knowledge does not dispel mystery,” as she puts it, but deepens it. “Knowing another” she writes on the last page, ”is endless... The thing to be known grows with the knowing.”

On the Moses’s sixth ascent he brought a group of priests and elders halfway up the mountain with him. There they were granted something they thought was impossible. There they “saw the God of Israel.” And in this vision, sitting under God’s feet, somewhere close to where they were halfway up the mountain, they saw “what looked like a floor of lapis-lazuli tiles, dazzlingly pure like the sky... they beheld God, and they ate and drank.” (Exodus 24: 10-11) If you’ve ever been on top of a mountain looking down on clear mountain ponds or lakes, then perhaps you can imagine the way a mountain lake can hold the sky with mirrorlike precision and reflective glow. Rattlesnake Cliffs is my favorite place in Vermont for this, with its top-down view of Silver Lake hovering like a polished platter above the larger, full-length mirror of Lake Dunmore.

Loch Avon is such a mountain mirror-lake in the Cairngorms. The source of River Avon, Loch Avon is situated southwest-northeast and is held in on three sides by tall peaks—Cairn Gorm, Ben Macdui, and Beinn Mheadhoin—while opening up into its outlet river on the northeast side. Viewed from the east side, you take in a canvas that captures all of heaven and all of earth—green pasture slopes, gray bones of rock, and a lake “dazzling pure like the sky,” reflecting an image down below of a slice of heaven above.

“Loch Avon,” photograph by John Parminter
Nan Shepherd only wrote a couple poems in her native Scots dialect. One of them is called “Loch Avon.”

Loch A’an, Loch A’an, hoo deep ye lie!
Tell nane yer depth and nane shall I.
Bricht though yer deepmaist pit may be,
Y’ll haunt me till the day I dee.
Bricht, an’ bricht, an’ bricht as air,
Y’ll haunt me noo for evermair.

^^^After that beautiful picnic with his climbing companions at the mountain-heaven-lake of God’s feet, Moses continues on that sixth ascent alone to the top. He continues up to converse again with God. To be “alone with the Alone,” as Thomas Merton put it. Moses disappears into a cloud again. He is on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. He falls asleep on the mountain forty times. And forty times he wakes up to a new day.

In chapter ten (“Sleep”) of The Living Mountain, Nan Shepherd describes perhaps the most curious and unique of her hill-climbing practices—taking naps and sleeping on the mountains as a way of learning them. “No one knows the mountain completely,” she writes, “who has not slept on it.” She calls this spiritual practice “quiescence.” “One neither thinks,” she continues, “nor desires, nor remembers, but dwells in pure intimacy with the tangible world... Those moments of perceptiveness before sleep are among the most rewarding of the day. I am emptied of preoccupation, there is nothing between me and the earth and sky.”

Nan’s practice of mountain quiescence is akin to meditation or prayer. It’s a method for emptying the mind. For making the mind like a mountain lake, mirroring reality. “For falling asleep on the mountain,” she writes, “has the delicious corollary of awaking. To come up out of the blank of sleep and open one’s eyes on scaur and gully, wondering, because one had forgotten where one was, is to recapture some pristine amazement not often savoured.”

^^^I imagine Moses on the mountain during his sixth ascend, sleeping and waking on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. On the top of my closest mountain here in Vermont, Snake Mountain, I have a practice of closing my eyes for a few minutes on top of the mountain. In meditation I let the thoughts of the day rise to consciousness and drift away on the ever-present wind on the summit. They glide away like the hawks, vultures, and ravens that play in the mountain air currents. I try to forget for a moment everything I think I know about life and the
world. I draw as close as I can to a place of still blankness, to that cloud of thick darkness that Moses knew—the gracious void, the generative absence from which all things arise.

And then I open my eyes. With a good dose of “pristine amazement,” the first thing I notice is the physical, material reality of the world. There’s rock; there’s sky; there’s cloud and sun and field and a lake that shines like lapis-lazuli tiles. There’s all this muchness, when there might just as well have been nothing. Radical amazement only begins to capture the feeling. If I stick with this first feeling I notice that I too am part of all this—body mind and spirit—and that body mind and spirit—full being aliveness—is pervasive everywhere and in everything that I see. Reality is a single, interrelated blanket-like field, and that it’s all alive and changing and moving—my body with its movements of heartbeat, vision, hearing, touch, thought; the clouds with their perpetual drift and metamorphosis; the wind dancing with the wildflowers and trees; the midday light fading into evening into dusk into night into dawn into day again; everything appearing, changing, disappearing, appearing again. Everything is moving all the time, without beginning, without end. YHWH, Moses heard when he opened his eyes and saw the burning bush—God identifying God’s self with the vast, endless unfolding of existence—Being becoming itself.

It was after this sixth ascent, after sleeping and waking to immediate consciousness of total-mountain-reality and God-presence, that Moses returned down the mountain with two stone tablets. They held the Ten Commandments, what Judaism refers to as the Ten Words. With timeless wisdom, they condense and articulate how to relate to God, Creation, Reality, and how to relate to our human neighbors. Like most great artists who talk about the muses and inspiration visiting them with a gift from beyond themselves, Moses credits the work to God.

\[\text{The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. –Exodus 32: 16}\]

\[\text{^^^}\]

When Moses descended after being away for those forty days, he was dismayed to find that his people had started to turn from their worship of God, and instead had fashioned a golden calf and were worshiping this idol. In a fit of rage, Moses smashes the two stone tablets. The God of the mountain is angered too, and thunder and lightning, fire and smoke make the mountain tremble again. Moses makes a quick seventh trip up to plead with God to forgive his “stiff-necked” people. God only partway relents and lets go of the anger and disappointment.

Moses knows the conversation isn’t finished yet, and so he prepares himself for his eighth and final ascent of the mountain. God tells him to bring two new stone tablets and to rendezvous on the mountain early in the morning. No one else is to come with Moses this time, or even to watch him ascend. Even the animals are to be kept away from grazing at the base of the mountain.
On top of the mountain, holding his two blank tablets, God visits Moses, again in a cloud. God stands next to Moses, and speaks again the name that Moses heard at the bush—YHWH. God passes by Moses as swiftly as the summit wind, and whispers to Moses truths about God’s nature. Truth’s about God being “merciful and gracious,” “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” Moses, overcome by the power of the moment, “quickly bowed his head to the earth, and worshiped.” (Exodus 34: 8)

Speechless, Moses came down from Mount Sinai for the eighth and final time, carrying the two tablets with him again, fresh with the ink of God’s hand, timeless instructions for living life in its fullness and rightness and beauty. And the people were amazed, because when the prophet came down off the mountain this final time, after this immediate encounter with God, his face was shining, glowing with the glow of God.

My favorite photograph of Nan Shepherd has her glowing in the mountains too. The photo shows her standing contrapposto, barefoot (oddly, there’s a second photo that shows only her lower half) and alone in a field of wildflowers. She’s wearing a long white linen shirt-dress, the bottom tattered by the rocks and wind. In one hand she holds a walking stick. In the other, a field book, or chapbook of poetry. A canvas satchel holds her supplies for her day wandering in the Cairngorms. She’s near the top of the plateau and looking downhill at the exact same angle as the mountain, with a gentle but playful smile that she would have described with one of her favorite words that recurs as a central theme in her work—féy, the Scots term for “bodily lightness,” and “joyous release.” Her face is like a mountain pond, perfectly reflecting and glowing with the warm daisy hue of the soft, hazy summer sky.
蝸牛
そろそろ登れ
富士の山

O snail,
Climb Mt. Fuji,
But slowly, slowly!

--haiku by Kobayashi Issa (1763 – 1828)

In the last chapter, chapter twelve (“Being”) of *The Living Mountain*, Nan Shepherd reflects on her journey of gradual awareness and awakening towards realizing the mountain as an integral whole—as a representation and metaphor of creation’s essential oneness. That the mountain is not just the peak but the rivers and the air and the wildflowers and the animals and the people and the sky and the valley and on and on. The “total mountain,” she calls it. “Slowly I have found my way in...It is an experience that grows; undistinguished days add their part, and now and then, unpredictable and unforgettable, come the hours when heaven and earth fall away and one sees a new creation. The many details—a stroke here, a stroke there—come for a moment into perfect focus, and one can read at last the word that has been from the beginning.”

I think about Moses on that eight-descent bringing back the second copy of the Ten Commandments. I imagine that on the mountain he too had one of those moments of seeing clearly—a vision of the total, integral, interconnected mountains-and-rivers-and-valleys-and-oceans world of God. A vision in which everything belongs and has its place. A moment of empty mind mirroring existence in its fullness and glory. A moment in which Moses could “read at last the word that has been from the beginning.” And so Moses wrote down the words that he heard in that timeless Word, and he carried them back down to his people, a gift from the living mountain of God.

A gift of the spiritual opportunity and invitation not to seek to dispel but to seek to deepen the mystery of existence itself. Moses called it YHWH. In the last words of *The Living Mountain*, Nan Shepherd called it Being.

*I believe that I now understand in some small measure why the Buddhist goes on pilgrimage to a mountain. The journey is itself part of the technique by which the god is sought. It is a journey into Being; for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain’s life, I penetrate also into my own. For an hour I am beyond desire. It is not ecstasy, that leap out of the self that makes man like a god. I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am. To know Being, this is the final grace accorded from the mountain.*

--Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*