

## V'etchanan: A Mountain of Red and White

Moshe Taragin

Moshe desperately pleads with Hashem for entry into Israel. Realizing that he will not reside in Israel, he yearns to caress its stones or even breathe its air. Sadly, he is banned, and can only survey the landscape from atop his mountain perch. He specifically covets the “great mountain” or as he refers to it, the “har hatov”. Oddly he employs the strange nickname of “Levanon” to describe this good mountain. What does the nickname of Levanon connote about the mikdash, and why does Moshe employ it this stage?

### The white mountain

Firstly, the term *Levanon* evokes the phrase *lavan*, which refers to the color white. The mikdash enabled a chatat-korban or a sin-sacrifice, which, effectively whitened human virtue, which had been stained red by sin. Though the whitening effect refers specifically to sin-sacrifices, it alludes, more generally, to the full sweep of sacrifices and ceremonies of the mikdash. In addition to ritual and sacrifice, the mikdash was also a hub of prayer. All human prayer – both Jewish and Gentile- streamed up this mountain, on its way through the gates of Heaven. Finally, the mikdash was a core of Torah knowledge, as the luchot were housed in the aron and the great Sanhedrin was hosted in an adjacent lobby. This mountain was the consummate “building of Hashem”, housing religion, ritual, and prayer. It was majestic white.

### The red mountain

Additionally, the term *Levanon* evokes the term *lev* or heart, and this mountain both fastened and fascinated every Jewish heart. Three times a year, when the mikdash stood, an entire population of men women and children would pilgrimage en masse to this national complex. Even during the rest of the year, when the mountain was quieter, it was still the one location which captivated and unified the entire nation.

After the mikdash was demolished, the mountain played an even greater role in capturing Jewish hearts. For thousands of years, it magnetized scattered Jewish

hearts across the globe. Lost in distant wastelands, we all dreamed about this mountain, inserting it into prayers, longed for it at weddings, and collectively prayed for our national return to Zion.

This mountain is *both white and red*. It whitens human virtue but also pulses with the heartbeat of every Jew. White and Red. One mountain with two colors.

The paradox

These two colors clash and the two meanings of Levanon are also paradoxical. For the mikdash to serve as a site of ritual it must be carefully protected and guarded. Halachikally impure people must be turned away and those who do enter, must carefully respect the guidelines and protocols of this heavenly mountain. For this mountain to remain *white* it must be exclusive. Not all behavior is accepted and not every person can always be invited.

However, for the mikdash to serve as the epicenter of every Jewish heart and the unifier of the Jewish imagination, every type of Jew must be invited, and all levels of observance must be welcomed. How can a broad population be included while still maintaining the religious integrity of the mountain?

In the past, halacha carved out carefully calibrated rules which restricted entry but still enabled inclusiveness. The outer precincts of the mikdash were accessible to all, save those with extreme rare and severe halachik impurity. Most people were allowed to visit *some part* of the mountain, even if they couldn't enter the inner chambers.

Even without actual presence, broad inclusion was achieved by allocating broad participation in mikdash ceremonies. For example, every week a different delegation of Jews would assemble in local towns, performing the mikdash-related ritual of *ma'amdut*. The delegates fasted and prayed so that the korbanot of the mikdash would be received in heaven. Though they stood afar from the mikdash, their ceremony was absolutely vital for mikdash success.

Interestingly, even though year-round entrance was carefully restricted, there were significant concessions implemented during the festival pilgrimage. The gemara in Chagiga describes leniencies which accounted for the increased foot traffic atop the mountain. The barriers to full scale entry remained in place, but

various leniencies were accepted along the margins allowing for a more freely accessible experience.

In the past it was relatively easy to calibrate between the two colors. Actual visitation was strictly regulated year-round, with slight concessions during festivals. Additionally, inclusion was realized even without actual presence on this mountain.

### A complex equation

In the modern state of Israel this challenge is not as easily navigated. The mountain and the Kotel are perhaps the last symbol of national unity in a badly fractured Israeli society. In 1967, the liberation of the Kotel unleashed an the type of national unity which seems unattainable in today's splintered reality. What price would we be willing to pay for the Kotel-centered national solidarity of 1967, or even for a glimmer of that harmony? It is hard to imagine a location which more deeply and broadly unites Jews, both across the religious spectrum and across the globe.

Yet the Kotel is also a site of prayer and the laws of *beit kneset* must be strictly applied. Beyond its formal status as a site of prayer, it is also the last-standing wall of our lost *mikdash*, behind which Hashem waits patiently for our redemption. Even if prayer were not conducted at the Kotel, we would still demand the decorum and *gravitas* reflective of the divine presence. How can the Kotel serve both functions of *Levanon*? How can it at once serve as a holy site of prayer and ritual, while also beckoning a broad range of Jews- many of whom do not subscribe to strict Orthodox standards of prayer? How can this mountain be both white *and* red?

### No easy answers

It is a good question, and one which doesn't yield an easy or immediate answer. Equally important to finding a solution, is acknowledging the paradox and exhibiting sensitivity to each color and to each function of this mountain. We cannot forfeit either function of this mountain. We must protect its holiness just as we include every Jewish heart in its experience.

Not every quandary in modern Israel can be simply or easily solved. Returning our people back to their ancient homeland is a fraught process which will probably unfold over multiple generations. It will take us some time to iron out the wrinkles of Jewish history. We imagine that redemption will be an immediate shift and we devotedly pray for that form of “electric” divine overhaul. More likely though, the process will occur in stages, and miracle solutions to unwieldy dilemmas, will be rare.

For the first time in thousands of years, we not only attend to our personal religious code but also to the religious experiences of a broad population— many of whom are not strictly observant of our standards. We are no longer living in Jewish “communities”, but in a Jewish state. Policies which exclude those whose standards fall short of our own, may be suitable in a community setting. However, there is only one land of Israel and only one Kotel, and we want every Jew to feel a part of each.

In the past, Jewish communities often faced religious questions. In Israel we face *quotients not questions*. How can we balance between *two* competing values? Religious challenges in Israel are more complex and more nuanced than they may be in Jewish communities.

Life in Israel is three-dimensional -many, many colors.