

Shabbat Parashat Mishpatim – *Shabbat M'varkhim HaHodesh*
“Going Up”

At the very end of this week's *parasha*, God tells Moses to “go up” Mount Sinai in order to receive “the tablets, Torah, and commandments that God wrote in order to teach the people.” As we learned in earlier *parashiyot* in this Book of *Sh'mot/Exodus*, God is said to “live” at the peak of the mountain. When Moses first met God at the burning bush, he had to climb up the mountain to meet God. Now again, with the entire nation of Israel assembled at the foot of the mountain with him, Moses must ascend to the peak to meet God. Even though we know that Moses needs to physically climb the mountain in order to reach God, there is more to Moses' “ascent” to God than meets the eye.

In order for an individual truly to be able to “ascend to God,” s/he must do more than open a *siddur* and recite prayers, go to a synagogue to attend a service, or open a book of the Bible and begin to study. There is a spiritual intentionality that must be developed in preparation for the activity. One of the common traditional words used for prayer is “*Avodah*.” While modern Hebrew no longer uses this word to mean prayer, it has been put to use now to mean “work.” This transformation of the meaning of the word *Avodah* is very appropriate and not a logical stretch by any means.

When the Rabbis discuss the worship of God, they are discussing the creation of a deeply meaningful connection with God that cannot be “turned on” with the simple flip of a spiritual switch or opening of a book. In fact, the Rabbis of the Talmud argue that one must spend approximately one hour in very deep, thoughtful, and serious meditation before even considering reciting the main prayers of the morning service. It is from this practice that the preliminary services of *Birkot HaShahar/The Morning Blessings* and *P'sukei D'Zimra/Songs of Praise* came into being. Therefore, prayer is seen as a form of “labor” or “work” by the Rabbis. It requires a warm up, stretching, and directed concentration. It is very much more than an activity into which we can simply enter. It requires an “elevation” of mind and spirit, along with the soul.

To be reading this week of a spiritual and physical journey up to God is particularly timely for our school. Each year, our Grade 6 students participate in a Shabbaton experience with other Jewish Day Schools. For the second year running, we are traveling to Seattle and will be joined there by students from Richmond, Portland, Edmonton, and be met by our hosts in Seattle. This weekend is an opportunity for our students to build friendships with students from other schools in other cities and to gather together for a spiritual elevation on Shabbat. Living a fun, but traditional, observance of Shabbat together as a large group is an experience that cannot be replicated and is one of the most memorable aspects of our students' lives as part of the VTT community. As our younger students approach the Grade 6 year, they know that the Shabbaton is on the way, greatly anticipating a Shabbat weekend with their friends and students from other schools. We are all looking forward to an uplifting weekend, returning on Sunday evening with memories that will last long into the future.

Moses' physical climb up the mountain is equaled by the challenge of the spiritual ascent that he faced and that we all face as we attempt to reach God. Our Shabbaton will create an opportunity for our Grade 6 students to gather together for an ascent on Shabbat. I encourage our entire community to take steps of our own this Shabbat to find ways to make Shabbat a “spiritual high.” It will take some work to get there, but we will all be the better for having completed it.

Shabbat Shalom v'Gavo'ah/A Peaceful Shabbat on High