

## *Parashat Ree – August 18, 2012*

When we think about famous mountains in the Torah, probably we will think about Mount Sinai (where we received the Torah) and maybe also about Mount Moria (where Abraham was tested by G-d through the sacrifice of Itzchak, and where the Temple was built).

However the Bible mentions other mountains also important, which represent not only mere geographical features or beautiful places to go. For our tradition, mountains can be the point of encounter between G-d's Word and the devotion of human beings.

Besides several different topics, Ree, our Parsha, speaks about two not-so-known mountains, Gerizim and Eival, which are located in the northern part of Israel.

According to the Torah, when it will be the time for the people of Israel to cross the Jordan river and to enter the land of Israel, they will have to do a special ritual in those two mountains where they will commit to G-d and to the fulfillment of the precepts.

One of those two mountains, Mount Gerizim, is located close to the valley of Shechem and is very beautiful: It is completely green, covered by plants and by fruit trees. And the other one, Eival, is located a little northern of Mount Gerizim, but it is completely different: It is arid, infertile and covered by dry ground.

And that is very curious: In spite of being so close to one another (Gerizim is located in front of Mount Eival), one is so different from the other! And I think this is very interesting because both of them share the same ground, receive the same rain in the winter and the same sun in the summer, and even though one of them is cold and dry, and the other is covered by green up to the top. How it could be, that sharing the same conditions, Gerizim is so different from Eival?

I am not a geologist so I don't have a scientific answer for that question (and I am sure there is one), but because I am a rabbi, some years ago I was thinking about this question and I realized that actually we can extract from it a very interesting and rich message for our lives: Maybe it is

possible to compare these two mountains, Guerizim and Eibal, with how different people understand religion and spirituality.

Probably every one of us have seen different people who, having received the same religious tradition, having read the same religious texts and practiced the same rituals, are completely different to one another in the way they understand what is to be a religious man or woman... or applying this to our tradition: What it is to be Jew.

We know that there are people, for example, who understand that Judaism asks from them a blind and compulsive observance, sometimes giving up on their critical capacities as we were talking about last week. Many of them also understand that Jewish tradition demands them to impose religious rituals on others, manipulating politics and law, and also through the use of violence.

But we also know the other face. We know that having received the same rain and the same oxygen, and having shared the same old heritage, there are people who understand Judaism as an invitation to tolerance and respect, as the opposite of violence or an imposition, and as an opportunity for getting closer to other human beings, no matter who they are.

Rabbi Felipe Yaffe, who was my teacher and Dean of the Rabbinical Seminar in Buenos Aires, told us once a very impressive anecdote about something that happened to him when he was finishing his rabbinical studies in Israel, and I think it can help us to really understand the reality of what we are talking about:

Once he was walking in streets of Jerusalem when Shabbat was ending and he saw a man that was opening his shop just minutes before the official time set for the end of Shabbat. In that moment a group of fanatic orthodox Jews, furious because of the lack of respect of that man, who according to them, was desecrating our holy day, started to insult him and to throw stones destroying completely the windows of his shop. Rabbi Yaffe was very moved with what was happening, so he decided not be quiet and to defend this Jew that he understood was being a victim of religious violence and fanaticism. In order to intervene, he thought he needed to speak with the ultra-orthodox people in the same language, so he decided to use a quote from

the Talmud that his master, Rabbi Marshal Mayer Z"l, used to say frequently, and is the one that says "Kol Israel Averim Ze la Ze", "Every Jew is responsible for the other". He wanted to ask them "If you are responsible for him, how you can through stones and destroy his shop?"

So he approached the scene, asked them with good manners for an explanation, and when he was going to quote the Talmud, one of the fanatics answered him with the same sentence! He said to him "Kol Harevim Ze La ze, every Jew is responsible for the other... We have the responsibility of showing to him that his behaviour is not correct, and also to others, we need to show to everyone that opening you store in Shabbat is forbidden by Jewish law".

I think the story speaks by itself: The same tradition, the same texts, can lead us to so different ways of understanding what it is to be a Jew. Tolerance, understanding and love for other human beings from one side, and imposition, hatred and violence from the other.

Parashat Ree starts telling us "Ree anochi noten lifneichem hayom bracha uklala - Look I give you today the choice between blessings and curse".

There are different ways of being a Jew.

We have received a rich tradition, full of beautiful rituals, messages, values and meanings. But we must be very careful, because there are many ways of understanding the same values and meaning, and we need to think and to choose what is the one that represents me and is closer to what I am.

G-d asks from us to choose from between blessing and curse.

We can go after a Judaism that represents imposition and tells you that there is no other legitimate way of being a Jew.

Or we can choose tolerance, pluralism, love and respect. A Judaism that understands that those values are the pillars that support a committed Jewish life.

One way will probably lead us to be like the Mount Eibal: Dry, grey and infertile.

And one I am sure will invite us to be as rich as Mount Guerizim: Beautiful, green and full of life,  
we can share with others.