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Why Men Climb Mountains, 1958.

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Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

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Why do men climb mountains?

During World War II the British government maintained a prisoner-of-war camp in Africa, near the foot of Mount Kenya. Three of the Italian soldiers who were imprisoned there became captivated with the idea of climbing the snow-capped mountainside of this high precipice which towered above their prison compound. They determined to escape from the camp, to brave the bullets of the sentries set there to prevent such an escape, to brave the hardships of a very difficult ascent without sufficient equipment or provision, only for the thrill of the moment, for the thrill of standing on the top of Mount Kenya and fulfilling a dream born in their captivity. For long before these men had actually broken out of the camp they had determined to return to captivity after their ascent. They broke out, not for freedom, but for the freedom of standing for a brief instant at the very peak of this towering mountain, an idea which had captivated them in their captivity - captured them - and they became obsessed with this concept of climbing Mount Kenya, and clim it they did, against overwhelming obstacles.

Why do men climb mountains? Some men, like these three soldiers, climb mountains because it is an obsession, some the idea of ascending a particular peak represents a challenge which they cannot shake off, which has so completely overwhelmed them that it has become the be-all and the end-all of their existence.

Professor Benedict de Sauciere was a very famous humanist in Switzerland in the end of the 18th century. Professor Sauciers began to dream in his middle age of climbing Mont Blanc. More and more of his time, more and more of his funds, more and more of

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his energies were invested in this ascent. He tried and he failed. He tried again and he failed. Finally he was able to ascend to the very top of Mont Elanc, the first man in history so to do. In his memoirs he has left us an interesting revalation of the psychology which forced him, which compelled him, which obsessed him to climb this mountain. "It had become for me," he says, "a kind of illness. I could not even look upon the mountain which is visible from so many points round about without being caught by an aching of despair." And this "aching of despair," this obsession, has impelled many of the intrepid mountaineers up, ever upward.

But if some men climb mountains because they are compelled to do, because it is an obsession with them, others climb mountains simply because it is a profession for them. We think of the great Shirka guide in Tibet, Norkay - Tenziz Norkay - who was the first man to stand at the very top of the world, the peak of Mount Everest. For him mountain climbing was merely a means of adding to his meager income. He had lived in the highlands all his life, tending his sheep, following the strays up the sheer mountainside, and he was able now to increase his livelihood by guiding outland adventurers through familiar paths and sometimes beyond them.

Men climb mountains, my friends, for many reasons. Some climb inaccessible peaks because they see in this conquest the means of attaining a measure of fame and notoriety. It is their way of establishing their identity in our world. Others climb mountains because it is a relief for them from the home and from the hearth - from the humdrum of existence, from a set of obligations which seem oppressive to them. Climbing a mountain offers them a release, a freedom, a momentary sense of their importance, a momentary feeling that they are alone with God and nature, free of all the complications which surround each of us in life. And still others climb the mountains because they are seeking the lore of the mountains, the science and knowledge of minerology and meteorology and biology and botany which the high slopes can teach to man.

It is interesting to note that the mountaineers have been among the most literate of all the adventurers of our world. They are particularly addicted to describing not only their expeditions against these heights but also in autobiography, in describing their reasons for trying to ascend these peaks. We have only to think

back in the last decade to remember the very popular and very well written description of the conquest of Everest and of Makalu and of Annapurna and of K-2. Reading these novels or these chronicles of ascent. I have come to the conclusion that mountaineers, climbers, alpinists can generally be divided into two main types of people. There are two types of attitudes which seem to be the motivating force which impel these men to their adventures. The first and the most prevalent of all these attitudes is that of the thrill-seeker, the dare-devil, the man who courts adventure for the horrible fascination of danger and of peril, for the struggle, and hardship, and success, and release. There is an incontrovertible excitement and exhilaration in pitting yourself against an implacable enemy and to be able in the end to win through. Edward Whymper was a Swiss who was also the first man to ever climb the Matterhorn, or rather the first man to lead an expedition up the Matterhorn. In his chronicle of that expedition he shows us a bit of insight into this psychology of the dare-devil, the man who courts danger for its heady savor and wine. "Like a gambler," he writes, "who loses each throw, I was only the more eager to have another try to see if the luck would change." We know many who are dared vils in life, many who court adventure, who place themselves in the arena of peril in order to satisfy some deep-seated inner need or to win the applause of a thrill-seeking audience. Two thousand years ago a Hebrew scholar, Ben Surah, made this observation - perhaps he made it watching a gladiator fight in Rome, but it is equally apt in our day for he said, "He who loves danger shall perish therein." "He who loves danger shall perish therein." Perhaps the most romanticized and publicized daredevil of our age was the Spanish bull-fighter Manolet. Ernest Hemingway made him into the acme, the paragon, of all who are willing to stake their lives at a moment of decision. Manolet's death - his inevitable death in the one bull-fight too many, the one fateful step - is it not symbolic of the ultimate death and destruction of all who for pay or for pleasure simply court death. And is not their death a rather pointless sacrifice on the altar of an unheeding goddess of notoriety? I have very little respect for those who simply show this bravado of the daredevil. Oh, it requires a great deal of courage certainly, but it lacks one important elelent of the truly

heroic, and that is that it is basically pointless. To climb a mountainside, to endure its hardships, to push your strength beyond its limits, to test your skill beyond its utmost capacity, to brave the unexpected avalanche, the unknown crevice, the loose foothold, all this is ultimately pointless if its only reason for being is the satisfying of some inner gratification, the momentary thrill of gambling your life on the throw of a die, the momentary pleasure of the applause of an arena of people seeking to empathize and to satisfy their urges through you.

I have always felt that the truly heroic, the truly courageous person is much less known to us and his deeds are much less obvious. Often he is an unknown and unsung hero. For it has seemed to me that it requires much more courage and a much more prolonged test of character to be able, say, to meet without self-pity and without bemoaning your fate a lifetime of invalidism than it does to enter into a hundred bullrings or a hundred speed trials or to climb a hundred mountainsides.

Each of us must in our own way ultimately in life face certain tests of our character. And these tests are not easy tests. They are demanding. They require a constancy of determination and dedication which is much greater in its demands upon the human person than any of these momentary physical exertions which we call the achievements of the daredevil.

When I was a child I was nourished on the literature of Robert Louis Sevenson. It began with his nursery rhymes, which were a delight to me. I grew to appreciate his tales of adventure and of mystery and of suspense. Only recently I have had occasion to reread his biography. In his later life Mr. Stevenson was racked with a debilitating disease of the lungs. The doctors ordered him to leave his familiar surroundings and his friends and to go toothe island of Samoa, primitive and fardistant, to live out there his days. I found in one of the letters of Mr. Stevenson a paragraph of self-appraisal which expresses quite beautifully and clearly the point that I am trying to make:

For fourteen years (he writes) I have not had a day's real health; I have awakened sick, I have gone to bed weary; and I have done my work unflinchingly. I have written in bed, and I have written out of it. I have written in haemorrhages, written in sickness, written torn by coughing, written when my head swam for weakness; and for so long, it seems to me that I have won my wager and recovered my glove. And the battle goes on -- ill or

well is a trifle, so as it goes. I was made for a contest, and the Powers have so willed that my battlefield should be this dingy, inglorious one of the bed and the physic bottle. At least I have not failed, but I would have preferred a place of trumpeting and the open air above my head.

Each of us, my friends, will be called to such a battle. It may be a battle with our desire for freedom and our knowledge that we must sacrifice our freedom to nourish and to care for someone near and precious to us. It may be our urge for popularity and our knowledge that we must speak the truth though by doing so we court unpopularity. It may be our natural desire for revenge but our recognition that we must return good for evil and a pleasant word for an unkind thought. It may be our desire to place the burden of our cares upon another but our knowledge that we must walk the long way of life alone and not put the ache of loneliness as a burden upon our children and our dear ones. Whatever our tests may be, these are the true tests of a person and of character. And though we may be called upon in time to test ourselves in the arena of battle then that is necessary. I put to you that the most basic and universal of tests are these individual tests of character. We must meet them every day of our lives, and they demand a measure of sacrifice far beyond the sacrifice of the daredevil or the thrill-seeker.

I spoke to you of two basic attitudes which differentiate the mountain climber. Undoubtedly all who climb the mountains have been compelled in a sense by the exhilaration of this courting of danger. It is natural to respond to excitement. But strangely, there is another strain running through these diaries and chronicles of the mountain climber. It is the urge, I think, to place one's foot where a human foot has never been placed before, to top a peak where human strength has never before been able to ascend. To explore, to uncover, to discover. It is the urge to push aside another of the landmarks which we call "impassible" in the progress of the human race. Sir John Hunt was the chief of the British expedition of 1953 which conquered Mount Everest. In his account of that expedition he bespeaks the psychology which I am indicating: "To solve a problem which has long resisted the skill and persistence of others is an irresistable magnet in every sphere of activity. The possibility of entering the unknown goaded us on."

"The possibility of entering the unknown goaded us on." Our prayer book has

a very felicitous phrase for this urge of the human being to overleap and to soar above and to reach out and to reach up. They call it the "heaven-soaring spirit of man." It is the urge which has made man cross the uncharted oceans, penetrate the deepest impassable jungles, challenge the wastelands of the North, ascend the emptiness of the air. It is the basic life-urge - wondrous urge - of the human spirit that made man cease to be primitive and an animal and permitted him to grow and become what he is today. Take the earliest of men. The world is a narrow world. It is a fearful world, it is a frightening world. He has no tools save his hands. He has no transportation save his limbs. He has no science save the sheer instinct of animal survival. He has no language, and he has no knowledge which requires the language. He lives in a world which is surrounded by darkness and which he peoples with evil spirits which represent the bitterness of his environment. He preys on the very animals who prey on him. His world is a few acres in a valley, in which he finds his food. And take today's man. He has conquered the air. He is about to conquer the universe. Here is the vastness of his art, of his literature, of his music, of his wisdom. What is it that has changed man's instinct into reason, his ignorance into knowledge, his cunning into science, his bruteness into humanness? Is it not that man is endowed with reason, but is it not more that this reason of man is coupled to a restless, inquiring. inquisitive, never-satiate instinct to overleap, to go beyond the limitations of our environment, to push out into areas which are still virgin, which are not yet subject to man's will? And here perhaps we have come to an understanding of why the literature of mountain climbing is so popular to the arm-chair adventurer. Yes, we thrill to the details of preparation, exercise and determination, and research which go into each of these particular expeditions. But more than this it is that these tales of ascent, these tales of conquest represent I think a sustained allegory of human civilization. The repeated frustrations are the frustrations of men before the limits of nature. The occasional casualty is the occasional sacrifice of person and wealth in the search of new discovery and new exploration. And the victory of the mountaineer, standing for a brief moment on top of his peak, is

it not the victory of the human spirit, the victory of every man who has searched out and won out, a victory for the restlessness and the inquisitiveness and the impatience which is in a sense man's nobility.

Here we come also to the tragic glory which is recorded in the history of man. We have ascended in the past few thousand years of human consciousness so many peaks. We have charted the oceans. We have reduced the world to a manageable whole. Few of the secrets of the universe - this worldly universe - now still elude us. And yet there are the peaks of life which were faced by the first man which we still face and before which we are still baffled. And these are the peaks which represent control of our own person - control of our greed, and of our callous indifference, of our selfishness, of our lack of compassion towards our fellow men. We have conquered the world. We stand certainly on the threshold of entering into the world of space and ultimately perhaps we will conquer that world. But the world of ourselves - this world we have not conquered, and we are as far from conquering that world as the earliest man. Perhaps we ought to relearn the wisdom of the scholar Ben Surah, who two thousand years ago described the hero, not as the gladiator in the arena, the knight in battle, but simply as "he who has achieved self-mastery." The man in control of his passions, in control of his destiny, the man who whatever the onslaught of fate is unwilling to place the burden of responsibility upon others, is unwilling to become a burden to others, and remains always a credit to himself and to his society.

There is an old Indian legend about an Indian chieftain who had three sons, and who one morning called these sons into his temple and said to them, "I want you to climb the sacred mountain near our village and I want you to bring back to me the most precious thing that you find on that mountain." The first son ascended half-way up the hillside, and he found there a magnificent cluster of mountain flowers, fresh and bright and colorful, and these he brought back to his father as the most precious thing he had found on the mountain. The second son was more hardy, intrepid, and he ascended two-thirds of the way up the mountain. And there he found a rich wein of mineral ore, colorful and valuable. And he took a piece of this ore and

he brought it down to his father and he said to him, "This is the most valuable element which I have found on the mountain." The third son, the youngest and the most energetic of the boys, ascended to the very peak of the mountain. He had ascended beyond the timber line. There was no longer any vegetation. He had ascended to that point of a mountain where there is only a sheer slab of rock. There was nothing that he could bring back to his father. And when he returned he told his father only this, "I ascended to the top. I could bring back nothing to you but what a vision I had there of the radiance of the sun, what a fascinating, captivating radiance that was." We have for long now, you and I, our world brought back the beauty of the flower, brought back the wealth of the mineral. But few of us have pushed on beyond these discoveries and explorations and conquests of the physical world to the world of spirit, the world which sees a vision of a society united in peace, established in justice, enjoying freedom. And yet this is the most crucial of the problems of our age. And if we are an age which is willing to invest billions of dollars in the conquest of space ought we not equally to be an age willing individually to invest prodigious energy in the control of ourselves, in the establishment of the vision which we see at the mountain top as reality in the world of men? Our Bible strangely describes this mountain climber of whom I speak: "Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord? He who has clean hands and a pure heart. He who has not taken My name in vain and has not sworn deceitfully." The mountain climbers, my friends, which our world requires are those who will climb the mountains of our social problems, those who will climb the mountains of our political difficulties, and those who will begin by climbing the problems and weaknesses of their characters, mastering themselves and so best serving the Master of all.

Amen.

"For fourteen years I have not had a day's real health; I have awakened sick and gone to bed weary; and I have done my work unflinchingly. I have written in bed, and written out of it, written in haemorrhages, written in sickness, written torn by coughing, written when my head swam for weakness; and for so long, it seems to me I have won my wager and recovered my glove. And the battle goes on -- ill or well is a trifle, so as it goes. I was made for a contest, and the Powers have so willed that my battlefield should be this dingy, inglorious one of the bed and the physic bottle. At least I have not failed, but I would have preferred a place of trumpeting and the open air above my head."

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