



The 11th Commandment Brought down from Sinai

by Deena Metzger

After a year of private ritual preparation, I return to Mount Sinai to celebrate my 60th birthday. Of course, I hope for a vision. This journey has been carefully orchestrated so that my husband, Michael Ortiz Hill, and I will climb the mountain in order to be at the top on the 22nd of September, the Autumn Equinox, also Yom Kippur.

I climbed this mountain in 1980—17 years ago—entering from the Israeli side and driving across pristine wadis (despoiled only by the occasional rusting tank) to the place where we would begin the ascent some hours after midnight in order to be at the summit of Mount Sinai at dawn. When the sun broke across the horizon, piercing the clouds with its brilliant light, our little band of pilgrims, 30 or so strong, stood



together in silent awe, and then a few Bavarian women broke into song.

In those days there was nothing at the foot of the mountain but the monastery of Santa Katerina, ancient home to Greek Orthodox monks. Now, however, with the Sinai Peninsula returned to Egypt, a bustling village has grown up at the base, and hotels and apartment complexes have been thrown up rapidly. Mount Sinai is a boom town.

Litter gathers in windswept eddies across streets and bare ground. From my hotel window I look out at construction sites—small settlements, power plants and oasis all fenced in. The desert is rapidly disappearing into islands of concrete, the Bedouin dispossessed, the animals (like animals everywhere) exiled with nowhere to go.

Still, the light is brilliant. Dazzling. The stones of the mountains gather the yellow light into themselves and thrust it back toward the sky, a study in blue and gold. Wind twisting in a dust devil moves across the sand and gathers two plastic bags, one black, one white, into its swirl so that they dance about each other high in the air, edges touching, graceful as two birds spinning wing to wing on the whirling currents.

So much preparation and the invocation of many gods has preceded my pilgrimage. Entering from Egypt this time, I was thinking about those ancient deities so long abandoned whose mystical teachings, which may surpass anything we know in our lives, have almost vanished. This desert is the domain of the "neter" or the god Set, the destroyer, the principle of dryness and fire who wars perpetually with Horus, the solar principle, the son of the green god Osiris who became the black god (or "neter") of the Under (*nether*) world. Between these two Egyptian gods, Set and Horus, is the great goddess Isis—the life force, creativity and cosmic waters—who sustains the eternal tension between permanence (Set) and fertility (Horus).

Moses came out of this world, was most probably an adept of the Egyptian Mysteries and so was walking in at least two profound spiritual traditions when he climbed Mount Sinai, the Mountain of the Moon (the word *sin*) in order to meet the One.

The moon will be full when I am here. The moon takes me to Hekate—Egyptian Hekate, frog goddess of midwives—mediator between the worlds, lunar goddess of occult knowledge, childbirth and death. Hekate of the tri-via—of the three ways (maiden, mother, crone), of the crossroads. Her meeting place is wherever three roads intersect. The offerings one brings to this ancient one are the scraps from one's table, garbage, compost, the stuff of decomposition and regeneration.

While I am packing, some hours before we are to leave to climb Mount Sinai, Michael is fighting mosquitoes, reminding me of Sister Cao Ngoc Phuong periodically slapping at mosquitoes as we sat under an oak in Ojai, Calif., listening to a dharma talk by the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Is it permissible to kill mosquitoes? How God tests us, I think.

Just after midnight, Michael and I are delivered by taxi to the outskirts of Santa Katerina. Passing us on the road are scores of Bedouin men more wrapped than dressed in cotton against the sand and night, riding upon or leading camels in silent waves out of and into the darkness. "Camel? Camel?" they call, offering to take us up to the summit. They offer this service every night of the year. We refuse, though our packs, Michael's especially, are extremely heavy as we are planning to spend three days at the summit. Having come so far to climb the mountain, I will not refuse the ordeal. A great star rises in the east and accompanies us as we go.

Soon after we begin our climb, others come up behind us. Ten, 20, 30, 60, 100, 200 more file past, walking or on camels. Apparently, every night is like this. As I try to find my way on the uneven stones, I spy abandoned plastic water bottles, candy wrappers, cigarette butts, plastic bags, bottle caps, toilet tissues, human waste, a constant rain of debris from those who think nothing of befouling the site they have traveled so far to see.

Given the traffic, I should not be shocked by the presence of a cafe three-quarters of the way up from the desert floor. Here the camels stop and the ordeal of the steps begins. Having succumbed gratefully to the temptation of mango juice, tea and a chocolate bar, I pick up the accumulation of soda bottles, wrappers and plastic strewn across the courtyard. Then I thank the impoverished Bedouin shopkeeper in tattered clothes who smiles at me through ravaged teeth.

Refreshed, Michael and I start up the steep and irregular rocks set as stairs and come upon a group of Japanese travelers, descending in single file in the dark, holding flashlights like candles and singing "Amazing Grace." As we pass a hovel of metal and stones that gives no sign that it is fit for human habitation, a plaintive and ecstatic melody of morning prayer emerges like radiance from a stone, like a rose out of compost, like the first emanation of beauty out of the abyss.

What a blessing it is to hear these sounds of prayers! We leave the path and sit down in meditation, enraptured by the harmony of sacred song. The solemn hymns of the Japanese tourists descend to meet the ascending chants of the Muslim prayers. This is a holy moment. Perhaps only such a cry can open the gates of Heaven.

**"My prayers are
not those I
expect to utter.
I can only think
of the way we
dishonor the
earth and so I
pray for wolves,
elephants, camels
frogs, salmon,
squirrels, even
mosquitoes."**

At dawn, we reach the small summit. A very large crowd has gathered to watch the coming of day. People shake themselves out of sleeping bags thrown about everywhere, including the courtyard of a tiny church and the space surrounding another refreshment stand. Tourists swarm over the surrounding stones, all waiting for light. Now the glorious emergence of the sun across the range of forbidding mountains, great granite waves peaking, is greeted by excited chatter and camera-clicking as now this and now that tourist places herself, himself before the angle of the light in order to be captured perfectly.

A young Japanese woman places herself directly in front of my view, smiling into the camera as if to say, "Look at me. I am here!" How appropriate that this woman's triumph coincides with the advent of the rising sun, Amaterasu, the ancient sun goddess enclosed in a mirror in a box in a cabinet in the center of a Temple in the Land of the Rising Sun.

Confused, disappointed, Michael and I wander off toward the west where, following a search for a secluded spot, we find a circle of stones. After cleaning up the site, we spend several hours in prayer and meditation, painfully aware that our sanctuary might at any moment be overtaken by others. My prayers are not those I expect to utter after having traveled halfway across the earth for this moment! But I can only think of the way we dishonor and despoil earth and so I pray for wolves, elephants, rhinos, camels, frogs, salmon, squirrels, tigers, turtles, bears, eagles, dolphin, whales. As I call out for the protection of all the creatures, the words come to me, "protect even the mosquito."

By mid-afternoon we hear voices again and decide not to add to the gathering crowd. We will descend rather than spending the next two days here as planned. Angling back toward the summit I come upon the Ten Commandments awkwardly scrawled on a piece of torn cardboard attached to the iron staves fencing the church. By this time, I am so anguished by the garbage and litter that I deface the sign by adding an 11th commandment:

"Thou shalt not litter or deface the Holy Mountain."

I am tenderly aware of the sincerity of the person, a man I presume, who lettered this simple sign. Perhaps he is the priest of this small church. Reverence, certainly, has led him to remind us of the holiness of the site, and yet I choose to deface his inscription by adding another commandment—even though I had no intention of bringing down from Mount Sinai any law. But I have climbed the Mountain and I have heard another commandment and I can't ignore this. Even if it has not come from God—unless God is within us.

This commandment has confronted me since I came to Egypt and stood at the head of the Sphinx, looking out across the littered sand to Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken at the entrance to the pyramids. This commandment is part of a history of teachings "received." It is the injunction that

grabbed me two years ago when I had come to the bedside of my dear friend Morena Monteforte in the haven she had made for herself in Tepostlan, Mexico, and I was compelled to spend the afternoon clearing litter, as best I could, from the public meadow and stream outside her house—my offering to Hekate, the crone, she who decays, she who loves offerings of garbage. Such was my prayer for Morena who was dying.

By five in the afternoon I am lying down in the tidy whitewashed bedroom of the Daniella hotel. A mosquito buzzes around my head. Not any mosquito this time but the one which appears after I prayed for all creatures. Now that we have closed the window so no more mosquitoes can enter (or exit) and we have scented ourselves with repellent, I am preoccupied by this lone mosquito who requires blood to fulfill her life cycle and who is trapped in a room with two humans she can't approach. We have become her unique form of torture and hell as she is ours. I do not kill the mosquito.

The sound of prayer, the chant of the *muezzin*, pervades the town from the mosque. Despite the insects, I open the door and see a golden light gilding the tops of the mountains which are otherwise a dull brown. I am grateful that dawn and twilight bring this adornment of light.

But I am not thinking about light or law or beauty or



What? No Garbage Cans?

Is your cucumber bitter?—Throw it away. Are there briars in your path?—Turn aside. That is enough. Do not dwell on the thought, "Why have such things been brought into the world?" A person of true wisdom would only laugh at you, just as a carpenter would laugh at you if you if you found fault with the shavings lying about his shop. The carpenter, at least, has a place to throw out his scraps; yet Nature has no such place outside Herself. And this is the miracle of Her workmanship; though limited to Herself, She takes back everything that is old, worn out, and useless: and from within Herself, brings forth a new creation. She requires neither a substance outside Herself, nor a place to discard the waste: Her own space, her own material, and Her own workmanship is sufficient unto Her.

—Marcus Aurelius, 2nd Century

spirit. This is what I am thinking: We are at the garbage heap of history. The businessman in *The Graduate* proclaiming "plastics" is our prophet. This is who we are; our excrement is visible, displayed, preserved. Without self-awareness we have come to serve Set, the destroyer, who by his nature, as principle of dryness, is unchanging, preserving all things. The god of what is unchanging against the gods of that which changes, lives and dies. This Set has become our only god. Because we do not wish to worship other gods, we turn our backs on those deities who guard the cycles of life, and we bring our indestructible offerings of plastic and refuse to this holy ground.

At Sinai, as at the Sphinx, as at the Great Pyramid of Cheops at Giza, wherever I look I am confronted by litter, refuse, excrement, debris, offal, graffiti. A constant reiteration: Here we are. This is our mark. These mirrors reflect our faces. These are the artifacts of our beliefs and great ideas. These signs confirm that we walk in the world as if we have conjured a virtual reality that can be swept clean by pressing a delete button.

I had hopes for a vision and I found it, but it is not the vision I imagined. Four years before the millennium, the vision I come upon at Mount Sinai is of garbage and mosquitoes.

If this is the vision, what can the creed (or commandments) of a new vision or religion be other than this: Protect the lives of all creatures. Spend a good portion of your hours each day picking up garbage. Avoid plastics. Live so that you and your belongings return to the Source. Take nothing from the Mountain or the Mother that cannot be returned to the Mountain and the Mother.

Before we had climbed the mountain, I bought juice from a shopkeeper and asked him, not seeing any receptacles for refuse on the street, if he would mind throwing away my empty container. He thanked me profusely and spoke of his disgust with the litter in the streets and the fate of the foxes in the desert where the garbage, when collected, is dumped without being buried.

It is now 5 a.m., and I decide, as Michael and I finish packing our suitcases, to run over to that little shop and slip 360 Egyptian pounds [20 x 18—*chai*, meaning life] under the door. I write a note asking the shopkeeper if he would, no matter what else he does with the money, create two signs: One for the foot and the other for the summit of

**"Though I am
at the top of
Mount Sinai,
I am not
thinking about
light or law or
beauty or spirit.
This is what
I am thinking:
We are at the
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of history."**

Mount Sinai which will say, "Please do not deface or litter the Holy Mountain. Carry all debris out with you."

The taxi comes. As we enter the car, these is an eclipse of the moon. It is getting darker despite the dawn. The earth deflects the light of the sun. From the mosque, we hear the sound of prayers reaching up to the sky. The birds are still silent but the mosquitoes hum. We are in a passage between the worlds: this is Hekate's domain! I repeat my prayers of the mountain as quickly as I can.

We drive away, but for all I know something may transpire, in this dark passage, to bring us back from the clutches of Set into the mysteries of the living world.

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Another Woman's Commandment

Thou shalt bring forth the feminine in the world in all that you do. When you are talking to your children, sitting in a board meeting, or lying beside your lover, you will act with *rahamim* (usually translated as "mercy"; the root word comes from "womb"). You will remember that *Shaddai*, God's name, also means breast and shield, and you will fight for lovingkindness in every relationship and in every encounter, never forgetting the transformative power of cooperation and compassion.

—Malka Drucker

Malka Drucker is the author of more than 15 books for children. She has also written, with photographer Gay Block, Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust (Holmes & Meier).