
Getting Engaged in the Himalayan Mountains: Lubavitcher Rabbis, Tuna Fish, and Thou

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My girlfriend Sandy turned to me and said she thought she was going to be sick. It was 4:30 a.m., we were tired, and we were hiking up a steep slope to a lookout point called Poon Hill in Nepal. From this vista one could see the Annapurna Mountain range which includes some of the world's tallest mountains. We had been "trekking" in the Annapurna range for eight days. Trekking is just a fancy name for hiking, and it involved walking through some of the most beautiful scenery in the world along ancient Nepalese trading routes. I had heard that the view from Poon Hill was the highlight of the entire trek so I had planned to make that the spot where I was going to propose to my girlfriend. The fact that she was going to throw up might have put a little damper on the experience, so I was glad when she reached the top of the hill with her insides still intact. We found a little clearing away from some other tourists, I screwed up my courage, and asked her to become my wife.

It was only a few moments later, when we heard a voice calling, "Sandy! Sandy!" Standing on a mountaintop in the middle of Nepal, we were a little surprised to meet someone we knew. Coming towards us were two yarmulked, dark-bearded men with twisted *pe'ot* (earlocks) dangling in the Nepalese wind. It was two Lubavitcher rabbis that Sandy had met at the famed Pesach seder in Katmandu just a few days before.

The two rabbis had decided to trek around the Annapurna range as well. Only it was the intermediate days of Pesach, so whereas my girlfriend and I just called ourselves Sephardic and ate rice and beans, they were lugging around with them backpacks full of tuna fish cans. In fact, they had hired a porter whose sole job was to lug tuna fish, because that was about the only thing they could eat.

We began to have a conversation about trekking, and Nepal, and the Katmandu seder, when they asked me, "Nu, did you lay tefillin this morning?"

Even on top of a mountain in Nepal, they were doing outreach! I told them I hadn't laid tefillin that morning. "Have you ever laid tefillin before?" they asked. I nodded yes. "So, we have a pair," they said. I had no choice at that point but to accept the tefillin bag that was quickly being pushed in front of me.

As I was wrapping the tefillin around my left arm, my brand new fiancée told them the one thing I did not want her to say. "He's a Reform rabbi," she said. I expected an instantaneous argument to develop, but this did not materialize. Instead, this piece of information sent them into a bit of tizzy about their tefillin coup. Not only were they getting someone to lay tefillin on top of a Nepalese mountain, but a Reform rabbi no less! One of the rabbis started talking to me, as I was continuing to wrap the tefillin, "So, you went to yeshivah? Where did you go to yeshiva?" It seemed like he was trying to keep me occupied, because as he was asking me these questions, he was telling the other rabbi, "Get the camera, quick, get the camera."

I'm not sure why taking my picture wearing tefillin was so important for them. Maybe my photo is on the wall of some Lubavitch bulletin board marked "extraordinary outreach efforts" with a caption underneath, "Reform Jew on top of Poon Hill, Annapurna Mountain Range, Nepal." But as I was amusing myself thinking about my picture in the Lubavitch hall of fame, I was deeply grateful to them for giving me their tefillin. Because there I was on the top of this beautiful mountain range, having just gotten engaged, saying the prayer for putting on tefillin.

As you wrap the tefillin around your middle finger you recite verses from the book of Hosea that affirm a vow of betrothal between the wearer and God. *V'ayrastikh li l'olam, v'ayrastikh li b'tzedek, u-v'mishpat, u-v'hesed, u-v'rachamim. V'ayrastikh li be-emunah, v'yadat et Adonai.*

Looking at the world's third largest mountain, looking truly into the realms of heaven, having just gotten betrothed, I took a long look at Sandy, my new fiancée, and recited, "I betroth you to me forever, I betroth you in righteousness and justice, in kindness and mercy, and you shall know God." Standing there, thousands of feet above the earth with two Chabad rabbis and backpacks full of tuna fish cans, I saw truly, through the eyes of my beloved, what it meant to say, "you shall know God." Love is the knowledge of God.

Rabbi Dan Judson is the spiritual leader of Temple Beth David of the South Shore in Canton, MA. He is the author of a forthcoming book, *Meeting at the Well: A Jewish Spiritual Guide to Being Engaged*.