

MONUMENTAL STONES THAT SPEAK TO THE WORLD

By Rabbi David Algaze

"It shall be on the day that you cross the Jordan to the land that Hashem, your G-d gives you, you shall set great stones and you shall coat them with plaster. You shall inscribe on them all the words of this Torah..." (Devarim 27:2-3) *"You shall inscribe on the stones all the words of this Torah, well clarified (ba'er hetev)"* (ib. 8)

As soon as Israel crosses the Jordan into the land they have to set these monumental stones and write on them the words of the Torah. The symbolism of this act could not be clearer: the entrance of the Jewish people into the Land, and its eventual permanence on it, were the result of Israel's connection to the Torah. Only because of the Torah, we received the Land and this proclamation was made immediately upon entering the land of Israel. The stones were taken from the dried bed of the Jordan, from the place where the priests had stood with the Ark before the waters of the Jordan parted. Why precisely were these stones selected? This was meant to highlight the miraculous course of the people of Israel from its beginnings and that will accompany them throughout their history. It was not before Israel that the waters retreated but before the Ark of the Torah. These stones will remind us "that all human force and barriers will retreat before Israel and that Israel as long as it follows the Torah, will overcome all earthly obstacles." (R. Hirsch)

The Torah was engraved in the stone, below the surface, and then coated with plaster, so that when the plaster dried up, one could take the letters out so they would protrude and one could also take them out. What was written on these stones? Some say that it was the entire text of the Torah from Bereshit until the last words "before the eyes of all Israel." Rav Saadia Gaon (Babylonia 882-942) suggests that the text consisted of a list of all the commandments, in the manner of warnings. Some Kabbalists surmised that only the Ten Commandments were written on the stones because one may deduce all 613 commandments from them. Abarbanel sees these stones as a type of mezuzah on the entrance to the land, a constant reminder of our task in the world: learn, teach and obey the Torah.

The expression *ba'er hetev*, translated as well clarified, was the subject of many interpretations. Besides the plain meaning that the text should be written in a very clear manner (Ibn Ezra), the Rabbis understood that the meaning of this phrase was that the Torah, in addition to the Hebrew, was written in seventy languages so that people of other nations could read it. (Sota 32a). In fact, according to the Midrash, the nations were inspired to send seventy delegates to Israel so that each nation could have a copy of the Torah in their own language. This teaches that the Torah was not meant for the Jewish people alone but was available to any human being who desired to obey the commandments. Far from the exclusivist and elitist character often ascribed to Judaism, this act was meant to announce that our mission was universal for the spiritual and moral salvation of the entire world.

The translation of the Torah into all the languages existing among the nations was intended to educate the world on the meaning of Israel's mission. First, that Israel would be the teacher of the Torah and its main spokespersons and representatives. Second, that Israel's mission was going to be accompanied forever by their presence in the Land of Israel. This was not just a place or a residence, but it was the source of their assignment and task, the land whence inspiration would come to them. It was a land where a model society would be built, one that would illuminate the world as a lighthouse for the nations. It is for this reason that the stones were placed near the city of Schechem, because that is where our father Abraham, upon entering the land, had received G-d's blessing, "And you shall be a blessing...and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:3-4 and 6). The Jewish nation followed in Abraham's steps as the entry point into the land, Schechem, as well as in its extending a universal message toward the nations of the world.

One of the canards against the Jews throughout our history has been that we are an elitist, separatist nation, unconcerned about the rest of humanity. The phrase "You have chosen from among the nations" has often served as cause for hatred. Some Jewish sects even omitted the phrase from their liturgy because of this fear. However, nothing could be further from the truth. The Jewish people is the only genuine cosmopolitan people, dedicated to propagate our message to the world in peaceful means. We do not seek converts, although we welcome them, and we do not force other nations to accept the Torah through violence, as other religions have done. Our way is the way of the teacher, the model. By living a life of moral rectitude and of peaceful and gracious lifestyles, we can inspire others to emulate us and wish to become part of our nation. There is no "jihad" in our tradition, but neither is there indifference.

The Bible, our Tanach, in its multiple translations to date, well over 1,700 languages and dialects has been widely distributed throughout the world. UNESCO estimates that between the years 1800 and 1950, about 1.5 million copies of the Bible. During the years 1966 to 1970 the number skyrocketed to 173 million copies. The stones may be gone but the message of universalism persists in these copies of our Bible that inspire and mold the civilizations of the world. Although some of the genuine values of the Torah have been misinterpreted, exaggerated or falsified, they still are our world's greatest hope. The monumental stones of the Jordan are still speaking to the world.

Rosh Hashanah Beginning Service -October 3rd at 6 pm *with Rabbi Levitt at Havurat Yisrael*



If you did not have a chance to hear the shofar, we will be happy to welcome you at this shofar blowing together with insights of the new year and explanations of the Mahzor.

Dues and Pledges

We appreciate our members. You who pay dues are the pillar of Havurat and we appreciate your loyalty and care. If you have put off paying your dues, do it before Rosh Hashanah. It is the right time. Start the year right!



Havurat Yisrael Community Hospitality

Lead by Rabbi Levitt and Sarah Esses
Please contact them for questions or places available.

October 7th Commemoration

The Queens community will come together on Monday October 7th to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the attacks in Israel. Space is limited and pre-registration is required.

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/community-wide-commemoration-of-october-7th-one-year-later-tickets-1005172978437>

Lecture by Rabbi Mendelson (Machane Chodesh)
at Havurat Yisrael last Sunday Sept. 15



Refuah Shlema Alte Ester Riva bat Devorah Shifra, Chava Naomi bat Doba Chana, Yaakov ben Leah, Tzvi ben Sara, Chavah bat Rivka, Talia Leah bat Sarah, Gabriela bat Sarah, Miriam Bat Rivka, Reuben ben Malka, Baruch Chaim ben Basha, Malka Bat Simcha and Yonatan Yitzhak ben Ateret, Hannah bat Yehudit, Hila Rivka Hodaya bat Rochel and Binyamin Baer ben Chana.