

At the Threshold of The Land

Minneapolis Jewish Artist Lab
Rabbi Alexander Davis, Beth El Synagogue
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Read Joshua 3:6-4:24

- Why erect stones? Why this memorial?
- What do the stones represent?

Psalms 114:3-5

בְּצֵאת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם בֵּית יַעֲקֹב מֵעַם לֵעָז: ב הֲיִתָּה יְהוּדָה לְקָדְשׁוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמְּשָׁלוֹתָיו: ג הַיָּם
רָאָה וַיִּנָּס הַיַּרְדֵּן יָסֵב לְאַחֹר: ד הַהָרִים תִּרְקְדוּ כְּאֵילִים גְּבֻעוֹת כְּבַנְיָצֵאן: ה מֵהֲלֹךְ הַיָּם כִּי תָנוּס
הַיַּרְדֵּן תֵּסֵב לְאַחֹר: ו הַהָרִים תִּרְקְדוּ כְּאֵילִים גְּבֻעוֹת כְּבַנְיָצֵאן: ז מִלִּפְנֵי אֲדוֹן חוֹלֵי אֶרֶץ מִלִּפְנֵי
אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב: ח הַהַפְּכֵי הַצּוּר אֲגַם־מַיִם חֲלַמִּישׁ לְמַעַיְנו־מַיִם

(3) The sea saw it, and fled; The Jordan turned backward. (4) The mountains skipped like rams, The hills like young sheep. (5) What ails you, O thou sea, that you flee? You Jordan, that you turn backward?

Sotah 34a. 35b, 36a

What was the height of the water? Twelve *mil* by twelve *mil* in accordance with the dimensions of the camp of Israel. Such is the statement of R. Judah; and R. Eleazar b. Simeon said to him, "According to your explanation, which is swifter, man or water? Surely water is swifter; therefore the water must have returned and drowned them! It rather teaches that the waters were heaped up like stacks to a height of more than three hundred *mil*, until all the kings of the East and West saw them."

Ein Yaakov, Sotah 7:15

Thus it is to be found that there were three kinds of stones, one was that which Moses erected on this side of the Jordan, as it is said (Deut. 1, 5) And this side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, began Moses to explain this law and it is said further, (Ib. 27, 8) And thou shalt write upon the stones all the words of Ba'er [to explain], and we infer through analogy applying the similar word Ba'er used in both places. Another kind of stone was that which Joshua set up in the Jordan, as it is said (Josh. 4, 9) Twelve stones also did Joshua set up in the midst of the Jordan; and the third are the stones which Joshua set up in Gilgal, as it is said (Ib., ib., 20) And those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, did Joshua set up in Gilgal.

See Deuteronomy 27:2-8

See Exodus 24:4

Abarvanel, Deut. 27:2-8

... "Inscribe upon them all the words of the Torah about your crossing over to enter the land." Moses is telling them that again, under the circumstances, the obvious thing to do is to memorialize their entering the land, as conquerors typically do.

"Write the Torah on the stones" -- all this is similar to the actions of the previous generation when standing at Mt. Sinai when they received the Torah (Ex. 24:4). It combines with fulfilling the mitzvah, "You shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates." Therefore they are commanded that when they cross over the Jordan, they should write the Torah on the stones, in the manner of a mezuzah on the 'gate' through which they are entering.

Ibn Ezra, Deut. ad loc.

Saadia, of blessed memory, thought that only the 613 commandments were inscribed on them

Ramban, ad loc.

In my opinion, our verse is saying, "inscribe upon them all the words of this Teaching- the Torah in its entirety, for the sake of which you are crossing over to enter the land. That is, the reason you must write the entire Torah on the stones as soon as you cross is that is for the Torah's sake that you have entered the land.



Gilgal in the Madaba Map (6th Century): A tile-roofed church with twelve stones and the caption ΓΑΛΓΑΛΑ ΔΩΔΕΚΑΛΙΘΟΝ – “Galgala, which is also the twelve stones”

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Taken together, there is a dual message to be communicated by the unique memorial of the twelve stones, and it addresses the unique spiritual patrimony of the people of Israel. On the one hand, they must have steadfast and unshakable trust in God, a trust that is rooted to the earth, immovable in anticipation of His salvation. At the same time, however, they must become the agents of their own deliverance by confidently 'traversing the waters' at their own initiative, demonstrating not only absolute faith in God but also initiative and effort as well. Twelve stones, the crystallization of Israel's purpose in the world, are placed in the river's raging waters to remember the Ark's miraculous work and their firm faith, but twelve other stones are simultaneously transported to the new land to highlight the people's own resourcefulness in securing and settling it.