

Written on Stone: Parshat Ki Tavo, 5781

וַיִּצוּ מֹשֶׁה וְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הָעָם לֵאמֹר שָׁמֹר אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּצְוָה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם: וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲבְרוּ אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ וְהִקְמַתָּ לָּךְ אֲבָנִים גְּדֹלוֹת וְשָׂדַתְּ אֹתָם בְּשִׂיד: וְכָתַבְתָּ עֲלֵיהֶן אֶת־כָּל־דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת בְּעֵבֶרֶךָ לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר תָּבֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' אֱלֹהֵי־אֲבוֹתֶיךָ לָּךְ: וְהָיָה בְּעֵבֶרְכֶם אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן תִּקְיְמוּ אֶת־הָאֲבָנִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּהָר עֵיבָל וְשָׂדַתְּ אוֹתָם בְּשִׂיד:

Deuteronomy 27:1-4 Moses and the elders of Israel charged the people, saying: Observe all the Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day.

As soon as you have crossed the Jordan into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones. Coat them with plaster and inscribe upon them all the words of this Teaching. When you cross over to enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you upon crossing the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, about which I charge you this day, on Mount Ebal, and coat them with plaster.

וּבְנִיתָ שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים לֹא־תִנִּיף עֲלֵיהֶם בְּרֹזֶל: אֲבָנִים שְׁלֵמוֹת תִּבְנֶה אֶת־מִזְבֵּחַ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהַעֲלִיתָ עָלָיו עֹלֹת לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ: וְזָבַחְתָּ שְׁלָמִים וְאָכַלְתָּ שָׁם וְשִׂמַחְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

5-7 There, too, you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. Do not wield an iron tool over them; you must build the altar of the LORD your God of unhewn stones. You shall offer on it burnt offerings to the LORD your God, and you shall sacrifice there offerings of well-being and eat them, rejoicing before the LORD your God.

וְכָתַבְתָּ עַל־הָאֲבָנִים אֶת־כָּל־דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת בְּאֵר הַיִּטָּב: (ו)

8 And on those stones you shall inscribe every word of this Teaching most distinctly.

Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 35b

You are found saying that there were three sets of stones. One is a set that Moses erected in the land of Moab, as it is stated: "Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses took upon himself to expound [*be'er*] this law, saying" (Deuteronomy 1:5). And it states there with regard to the mitzva to erect the stones on Mount Ebal: "And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law clearly elucidated [*ba'er*]" (Deuteronomy 27:8). It is derived through a verbal analogy between the word "*be'er*" that appears with regard to Moses, and the word "*ba'er*" that appears with regard to the mitzva to write the Torah on the stones on Mount Ebal that Moses also wrote down the Torah on stones.

And there is one set that Joshua erected in the Jordan, as it is stated: "Joshua also set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests that bore the Ark of the Covenant stood, and they are there to this day" (Joshua 4:9).

And there is one set that Joshua erected in Gilgal, as it is stated: "And these twelve stones, which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal" (Joshua 4:20).

The Sages taught: How did the Jewish people write the Torah?

Rabbi Yehuda says: They wrote it on stones, as it is stated: "And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 27:8). And afterward they plastered them over with plaster.

OR HAMIDBAR

SPIRITUAL JUDAISM IN THE DESERT

Rabbi Shimon said to him: According to your statement that they plastered over the writing, how did the nations of the world study Torah?

He said to him: The Holy One, granted them an extra degree of understanding, and they sent their scribes [*noteirin*], and they peeled off the plaster and copied it down. And on account of this matter their decree to be sent to the pit of destruction was sealed, as once the Torah was in their possession, they should have studied it, and they did not study.

Rabbi Shimon says: That is not what happened. Rather, the Jewish people wrote the text of the Torah on top of the plaster, and they wrote below for the gentiles to read that the verse commands the Jewish people to destroy the gentile inhabitants of Eretz Yisrael: "Lest they teach you to do like all their abominations" (Deuteronomy 20:18). You derive from the fact that they wrote this verse that if the gentiles who lived in Eretz Israel would have repented, the Jews would have accepted them, i.e., allowed them to live in Eretz Yisrael.

Mishnah Middot 3:4

The stones both of the ascent and of the altar were taken from the valley of Bet Kerem. They dug into virgin soil and brought from there whole stones on which no iron had been lifted, since iron disqualifies by mere touch, though a flaw made by anything could disqualify. If one of them received a flaw, it was disqualified, but the rest were not.

They were whitewashed twice a year, once at Pessah and once at Hag, and the Sanctuary was whitewashed once a year, at Pessah.

Rabbi says: they were whitewashed every Friday with a cloth on account of the blood stains.

The plaster was not laid on with an iron trowel, for fear that it might touch and disqualify. Since iron was created to shorten man's days and the altar was created to prolong man's days, and it is not right therefore that that which shortens should be lifted against that which prolongs.

Sifra, Kedoshim, Chapter 11 8

R. Yochanan b. Zakkai said (Devarim 27:6) "Of whole (*shleimot*) stones shall you build the altar of the Lord your G d, etc.": "stones which make peace" (*shalem*). Now does this not follow a fortiori: If stones, which do not see, and which do not hear, and which do not speak — because they "make peace" between Israel and their Father in heaven, Scripture writes (Devarim 27:5) "You shall not lift iron over them," then a man who makes peace between a man and his wife, between family and family, between city and city, between country and country, and between one people and another — how much more so will calamity not befall him!

Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 32a

And afterward they brought the stones as commanded in the Torah, and they built the altar and plastered it with plaster, and they wrote on it all of the words of the Torah in seventy languages, as it is stated: "And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law clearly elucidated" (Deuteronomy 27:8), indicating that it was to be written in every language.