YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**PARASHAT KI TAVO**

Stones That Speak

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Preface

This *shiur* will address the story of the stones that are to be set up upon the nation’s entry into the land, and upon which the Torah is to be written. In fact, the text presents two stories, recounted alongside each other, and we shall attempt to identify and characterize each separate strand of the narrative. Thereafter we shall examine the complex implementation of this unit in the days of Yehoshua.

“And Moshe and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying: Observe all the commandments which I command you this day. And it shall be, on the day when you shall pass over the Jordan to the land which the Lord your God gives you, that you shall set up for yourself great stones, and cover them with plaster, and you shall write upon them all the words of this Torah, when you have passed over, that you may go in to the land which the Lord your God gives you – a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you.” (*Devarim* 27:1-3)

“All the words of this Torah” must be written on the stones. What is the point of setting up these stones? What is the meaning of the plaster? Whom is the writing of the Torah actually meant to serve?

“On the day when you shall pass over the Jordan”

“And Moshe and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying” – our unit is introduced as a command issuing not from God, but rather from Moshe. He is joined by the elders of Israel, who, as representatives of the people, serve to make the people part of this command. “Observe all of these commandments which I command you this day” – much commentary has been written on this verse. The words “which I command you this day” would seem to refer to *Sefer* *Devarim*, which is essentially a speech (or speeches) by Moshe and is understood as his command to the people.[[1]](#footnote-1) This attribution of the “command” may be viewed as a more precise indication of the unit of the command.[[2]](#footnote-2) “And it shall be, on the day when you will pass over (*ba-yom asher ta’avru*) the Jordan” – the ceremony of which the text speaks will take place on the day of the crossing of the Jordan, thereby noting the significance of the event – the entry into the land.[[3]](#footnote-3) “To the land which the Lord your God gives you” – the text does not suffice with mention of the land, but emphasizes that it is given by God. “Giving” means that it is handed over to the domain of the people. The subject is not “inheritance” – which would cast it as relative to the nations who were living in it, but rather “giving” – relative to its original, primal resting in God’s hands. These words point to a central axis in *Sefer Devarim*, according to which the giving of the land is perceived as a process. At the point of departure the land belongs to God. This state represents a form of existence in which God is Sovereign and He is responsible for many aspects of the reality within the land. Gradually God “makes way,” as it were, and the land is handed over to the domain of the people, with all the ramifications of this transition. The entry into the land, then, is interpreted as sovereignty that is handed over to the people, and this is the subject at the center of the event. “You shall set up for yourself great stones” – the setting up of the stones may be understood as testimony for future generations as to what happened at this place.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is a tangible indication of the entry into the land as presenting a new foundation for the existence and activity of the nation. “And you shall cover it with plaster” – the stones will not be left in their natural state, in the dimension of their primal creation, but rather will be overlaid with human creativity that molds them.

The next verse adds a new dimension to the event: “And you shall write upon them all the words of this Torah when you are passed over” – it is not enough to have natural stones, nor will the creativity and molding of them suffice; they must be inscribed with Torah. Like “this command,” “this Torah” likewise refers to *Sefer Devarim*, which embodies the human point of departure – Moshe’s repetition of God’s Divine Torah from a perspective that is dependent upon time (the fortieth year) and place (the entry into the land). “In order that you may come into the land which the Lord your God gives to you; a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you” – the writing has a purpose: it will allow the nation to realize the vision of coming into the land in which it will be sovereign, as God has promised. Attention should be paid to the expression “the Lord your God” which repeats itself over and over in this unit. The appeal to the nation is made in the singular, as a single entity, and it is this entity in relation to which God is “the Lord your God.” This attribution is a function and development of the destiny which stands as the foundation of the promise concerning the land: “as the Lord God of your fathers has spoken to you” – God is not just your God in the present, but also “the God of your fathers” to whom the land was promised, and now this promise is being realized by you.

“When you have passed over the Jordan”

The next verses describe a new stage:

“And it shall be, when you have passed over the Jordan, that you shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in Mount Eval, and you shall cover them with plaster. And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones; you shall not lift up any iron tool upon them. You shall build the altar of the Lord your God of whole stones, and you shall offer burnt offerings upon it to the Lord your God. And you shall offer peace offerings, and shall eat there, and rejoice before the Lord your God. And you shall write upon the stones all the words of this Torah, very plainly.” (27:4-7)

Once again the text speaks of crossing over the Jordan, setting up the stones, the plaster, and the writing. We shall examine these verses more closely and then compare them with the preceding verses, discussed above.

“And it shall be, when you have passed over (*be-ovrekhem*) the Jordan” – not on the day of the crossing, but rather later on; on the other hand, it is a time that is still perceived as part of, or connected to, the crossing. Its formulation in the present (*ovrekhem*) offers a broad perspective, as though viewing the entry into the land in the sense of a process, such that the “crossing” does not end with the physical arrival on the other side of the Jordan. “You shall set up these stones” – in contrast to the previous formulation – “*va-hakimota lekha*,” in the past tense with the conversive ‘*vav*,*’* the text now speaks in the future (“*takimu”*), thereby adopting a more abstract position, describing something that has yet to come into existence. “Which I command you this day, upon Mount Eval, and you shall cover them with plaster” – with these words Moshe reinforces or emphasizes two actions – the setting up of the stones on Mount Eval, and the plastering of them. “And you shall build there an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones; you shall not lift up any iron tool upon them” – this element is new; it has no parallel in the previous unit. The nation is commanded to build an altar to God, Who is called “the Lord your God,” and not to lift any iron [tool] upon its stones. The lifting of iron is understood as an act of war, it is a symbol of violence; the altar, in contrast, is a place of peace. “You shall build the altar of the Lord your God of whole stones” – not broken stones, or hewn stones, which tell a story of hurt and recall war.[[5]](#footnote-5) “And you shall offer burnt offerings upon it to the Lord your God” – upon that altar you shall bring the burnt offering which, more than any other offering, embodies giving to God.[[6]](#footnote-6) “And you shall offer peace offerings, and shall eat there, and rejoice before the Lord your God” – in the wake of the high level of God’s presence at the burnt offering, the text follows it up with an instruction concerning the peace offering, which relates to peace and to joy, and all of this is “before the Lord your God” – Who is present at this occasion. “And you shall write upon the stones all the words of this Torah, very plainly” – Now, the subject is no longer the writing itself, nor even the orientation towards the entry into the land. The subject is a broader one – the explanation or commentary of the Torah, “very plainly.” The Sages, in a great number of midrashim, deduce from here that the Torah is to be written in seventy languages (*Mishna Sota* 7:5; *Tosefta* ibid. 8,7 and elsewhere).

What are the differences between the first unit and the second? Let us examine them side by side, taking note of similarities and differences.

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| First unit | Second unit |
| “And Moshe and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying: Observe all the commandments which I command you this day. |  |
| And it shall be, on the day when you shall pass over the Jordan to the land which the Lord your God gives you, | “And it shall be, when you have passed over the Jordan, |
| that you shall set up for yourself great stones | that you will set up these stones, which I command you this day, on Mount Eval |
| And cover them with plaster. | and cover them with plaster. |
|  | And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones; you shall not lift up any iron tool upon them. You shall build the altar of the Lord your God of whole stones, and you shall offer burnt offerings upon it to the Lord your God. And you shall offer peace offerings, and shall eat there, and rejoice before the Lord your God. |
| and you shall write upon them all the words of this Torah, when you have passed over, that you may go in to the land which the Lord your God gives you – a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you.” | And you shall write upon the stones all the words of this Torah, very plainly.” |
| 1. The command relates to the day of the crossing of the Jordan. 2. Mention is made of the fact that it is God Who gives the land to Bnei Yisrael. 3. The place where the stones are to be set up is not specified. The timing of their placement – on the day of the crossing of the Jordan – indicates that the place must be somewhere close by. 4. “You shall set up *for yourself*….” 5. The command to cover the stones with plaster precedes the command to write “the words of this Torah” upon them. 6. The writing of the Torah takes place at a specific point in time – “when you cross over” 7. The aim of the setting up of the stones is stated explicitly: “In order that you may go in to the land which the Lord your God gives you; a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you.” | 1. The event takes place “when you have crossed over” – not on the day of the crossing. 2. There is no mention of God giving the land. 3. The stones are to be set up at Mount Eval, after the crossing of the Jordan. 4. There is no mention of the stones being “great.” The setting up is not specified as being “for yourself.” “You shall set up these stones” – a renewed setting up of the original stones. 5. The instruction to cover the stones with plaster is followed by a command that appears nowhere in the first unit: the building of an altar that has not had any iron lifted over it; peace offerings, eating before God, and joy. All of these are expressions of a future concept of peace: there is no lifting of iron weapons, and the peace offerings make peace between the different worlds. 6. The writing of the Torah has no separate noting of any particular timing. 7. No purpose is explicitly stated. |

There are in fact two commands, pertaining to two different stages. The first stage is a sign for future generations to commemorate a formative event: the crossing of the Jordan and the entry into the land. On the day of the crossing, stones must be set up, and covered with plaster, and upon them the commandments of *Sefer Devarim* must be written. Unlike the Tablets of the Covenant, which feature Divine engraving upon the stone, here the writing is done by the people, on a foundation of plaster – a human creation. Accordingly, the Torah that is referred to here is the fruit of human insight into the word of God, and the nation commits itself, and this commitment will make it possible for them to live in the land (“in order that you may go in to the land which the Lord your God gives you; a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you.”)

The second unit views the crossing, or transition, from a broader perspective that includes the time after the crossing – “when you have crossed over….” In contrast to the first unit, which speaks of the Torah that makes it possible for the nation to live in its land, the subject is now the Torah’s message for Am Yisrael and for all of humanity. The crossing of the Jordan is viewed as entry into a space where the people stand directly before God: they build an altar and sacrifice burnt offerings upon it. The altar expresses a future ideal of peace (no iron instrument is lifted over it), and it is used for peace offerings which bring harmony. The issue here is no longer the basis and justification for the nation’s existence in the land, but rather the writing of a Torah that has significance for the world. The Torah is not to be written in “raw” form, but rather “very plainly,” or “well explicated” – in other words, in such a way as to explain and give meaning to reality. According to Chazal, this Torah addresses all the nations, each in its own language, thereby making accessible to them the message that Bnei Yisrael bring to the world.

Two ceremonies in *Sefer Yehoshua*

Let us consider the implementation of this command as described in *Sefer* *Yehoshua*. The story of the stones is realized in two different units – first, in the midst of the crossing of the Jordan, and then afterwards when the nation reaches Mount Eval. One cannot *help* but note the parallel to the two stages described in our *parasha*. At the same time, the realization of the command is somewhat complex:

“And it was, when all the people had finished crossing over the Jordan, that the Lord spoke to Yehoshua, saying: Take yourselves twelve men out of the people, a man out of each tribe; and command them, saying: Take yourselves hence out of the midst of the Jordan, out of the place where the feet of the *kohanim* stood firm, twelve stones, and you shall carry them over with you, and leave them in the lodging place where you shall lodge tonight.” (*Yehoshua* 4:1-3)

The physical crossing of the Jordan has already happened, and yet God tells Yehoshua to choose twelve men and command them to take twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan, from the place where the *kohanim* had stood. The waters of the Jordan had stood still before the feet of the *kohanim*,[[7]](#footnote-7) and this miracle will be commemorated and eternalized by carrying the stones over and laying them in the place where the nation will sleep. This event has historical significance; it is a sign for future generations:

“In order that this may be a sign among you, that when your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, ‘What are these stones to you?’, then you shall answer them: ‘That the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord; when it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off’ – and these stones shall be for a memorial for Bnei Yisrael forever” (4:6-7).

The fact that the waters were cut off before the Ark of the Covenant will be commemorated for all time.

As a second stage, the event assumes additional significance:

“And he spoke to Bnei Yisrael, saying: When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What are these stones? Then you shall let your children know, saying, Israel passed over this Jordan on dry land. For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan from before you, until you were passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Reed Sea, which He dried up before us, until we had crossed over…” (ibid. 21-23).

Here the subject is that “*Israel* passed over this Jordan on dry land.” The Lord your God dried up the Jordan before *the nation*, not before “the Ark of the Covenant.” Here, the point is not wonder at God’s Presence at the event, but rather the empowerment of the nation, before whom the waters of the Jordan were dried up, “until you were passed over.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The focus of the description is the great miracle in which nature was halted and made way for the Ark of God’s Covenant, or for Bnei Yisrael. This represents one possible understanding of the way in which the text sets up the memory of the crossing of the Jordan as the basis for the nation’s existence in the land.

Let us now look at the other ceremony described in *Sefer Yehoshua*:

“Then Yehoshua built an altar to the Lord God of Israel in Mount Eval, as Moshe, the servant of the Lord, commanded Bnei Yisrael, as it is written in the book of the Torah of Moshe – an altar of whole stones, over which no man lifted up any iron instrument, and they offered burnt offerings upon it to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings. And he wrote there upon the stones a copy of the Torah of Moshe, which he wrote in the presence of Bnei Yisrael.” (8:30-33)

This description comes after the first steps in the war of conquest of the land have already been taken, at Yericho and at Ai. Now, Yehoshua holds a ceremony that is introduced with the building of an altar to the Lord God of Israel, in Mount Eval. Unlike the case of the stones of the Jordan, concerning which the command is repeated, here the text refers back to the original command in *Sefer* *Devarim*: “as Moshe, the servant of the Lord, commanded Bnei Yisrael.” Here, as in that command, the stones are whole; no iron instrument has been lifted over them. Here, as there, burnt offerings and peace offerings are sacrificed upon it, and in addition the Torah is written upon it. It should also be noted that, like the second unit in our *parasha*, which locates the action at Mount Eval and is then immediately followed by the ceremony of the blessings and curses at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval, the description in *Sefer Yehoshua* likewise continues with this ceremony.

Command vs action

Despite the obvious similarities to the ceremony of the setting up of stones held on the day of the crossing, there are gaps between the command in the Torah and its realization. The unit in *Sefer Yehoshua* ignores the command as recorded in the Torah; it is as if God issues a new command about the stones. To put it differently: Yehoshua does not decide, on his own initiative, to carry out the command; it is only after God prompts him that he sets up the stones. In addition, the writing of the Torah on the stones is not fulfilled here; moreover, Yehoshua commands that stones be set up in another place – at the place of the crossing of the Jordan - and it is these stones that serve as an eternal reminder: “And these stones shall be a memorial for Bnei Yisrael forever” (*Yehoshua* 4:7). We encounter another gap when it comes to the ceremony held at Mount Eval: in contrast to the focus on the stones, as in the description in the Torah, the subject here is the altar: “Then Yehoshua built an altar to the Lord God of Israel in Mount Eval….” Only at a later stage is there a description of the stones upon which Yehoshua writes the Torah. Furthermore, the description of the ceremony makes no mention of plaster.

These gaps point the way to a central axis in *Sefer Yehoshua*. Over and over again, opportunities present themselves for Yehoshua and the people to assume responsibility and act, but they refrain from doing so, preferring to wait for God’s lead.[[9]](#footnote-9) Accordingly, Yehoshua does not initiate the story of the stones, because it expresses a spiritual intention that he is not part of. The Torah is not written on the stones at the crossing of the Jordan because Yehoshua and the people are not ready for such a statement. His initiative to commemorate the place of the miracle – under the place where the *kohanim’s* feet had stood – embodies his perspective: a focus on the role of the *kohanim* and of God in causing the miracle to happen. Thus, he views the waters of the Jordan as having stood still before “the Ark of the Lord,” and as an expression of God’s power. At a later stage he gives expression to the empowerment of the people: “For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan from before you, until you were passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Reed Sea, which He dried up before us, until we had crossed over.” The Jordan, like the Reed Sea, stood still before Bnei Yisrael, and not – as previously described – before the Ark. The second unit contains expressions of the same delay in recognizing the empowerment of the people: the stones in and of themselves, as symbolizing the people, are not the subject. The subject is the altar, which expresses self-nullification before God. Only later on is there a description of the stones upon which Yehoshua writes a copy of the book of the Torah – without any plaster; i.e., with no expression of the empowerment of the human dimension.

Afterword

Upon entering the land, Bnei Yisrael are commanded to write “the words of this Torah” upon stones. The idea of this writing is not self-evident. At first, the Torah was written on the first set of Tablets – by God, on tablets that are His work.[[10]](#footnote-10) When it came to the second set of tablets, Moshe hewed the stones and God wrote upon them.[[11]](#footnote-11) In both instances, the actual writing is done by God. Now, upon the nation’s entry into the land, a new spiritual position is achieved. The people bring stones, cover them with plaster, and write upon them the words of this Torah. The writing is a sort of commitment, the setting of a new foundation for the observance and fulfillment of Torah in the land – not by virtue of God’s obligating command, but by virtue of the people’s commitment and obligation of themselves.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Over and over again in *Sefer Devarim* we find similar expressions. For example, “Therefore you shall observe all the commandments which I command you this day, in order that you may be strong and go in and possess the land, into which you go to possess it” (*Devarim* 11:8); “For if you diligently observe all these commandments which I command you, to do them, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, and to hold fast to Him” (ibid. 11:22); “Only if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe to do all these commandments which I command you this day” (15:5); “If you shall observe all these commandments to do them, which I command you this day – to love the Lord your God, and to walk always in His ways – then you shall add three more cities for you, beside these three…” (19:9). In this context we might understand the command to write as referring to *Sefer Devarim*, or parts of it. The reference to *Sefer Devarim* is mentioned in the *Mekhilta* as the view of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who cites as proof the description in *Sefer Yehoshua* of what is written on the stones – “the mishneh Torah of Moshe” (*Yehoshua* 8:32). A different view cited in the midrash views the command as referring to the call to peace (*Devarim* 20:10-11). Ralbag, in his commentary on Yehoshua, maintains that the reference is to the unit setting forth the blessings and the curses. See further in Prof. Meir Bar-Ilan, *Ha-Torah ha-Ketuva al ha-Avanim be-Har Eival*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It starts in Chapter 4: “This is the Torah which Moshe set before Bnei Yisrael. These are the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments which Moshe spoke to Bnei Yisrael when they came out of Egypt” (4:44-45). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is interesting that the day of the Exodus from Egypt is Pesach – an event commemorated for all generations in the Pesach sacrifice, with all the many related laws, while the day of entry into Eretz Yisrael is commemorated not in time, but rather in space – in the form of the stones that must be set up. Only a person who happens to pass by that place will see them; future generations will not know where they are located. The Exodus from Egypt was “to eternal freedom,” as opposed to the entry into the land, which is essentially the realization of this great vision; it is more tangible, more dependent on context and the encounter with reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is reminiscent of the monument of stones that is set up by Yaakov, testifying to the agreement made at that place: “And Yaakov said to his brethren, Gather stones, and they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there upon the heap. And Lavan called it Yegar Sahaduta, but Yaakov called it Gal-Ed (meaning, a monument). And Lavan said: This heap is a witness between me and you this day. Therefore the name of it was called Gal-Ed…” (*Bereishit* 31:46-48). The same idea is made explicit in the description of the setting up of the stones in *Sefer* *Yehoshua*: “…and these stones shall be for a memorial for Bnei Yisrael forever” (*Yehoshua* 4:7). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In the midrashim, the Sages connect the instruction that the stones be whole with the idea of peace: “The text says, ‘You shall build the altar of the Lord your God with whole stones’ (*avanim shelemot*) – implying, stones that bring peace (*avanim she-metilot shalom*). From this we deduce a lesson: If in relation to stones which neither see nor hear nor speak, but which bring peace between Israel and their Father in heaven, God says ‘They should be whole before Me’, then how much more should Torah scholars, who by their very existence bring peace to the world, be whole before God.” (*Tosefta Bava Kama*, chapter 7, law 7; a slightly different version appears in Melkhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Yitro 11, and elsewhere). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The burnt offering is discussed at the beginning *of Sefer Vayikra* and is presented as a sacrifice in which man dedicates himself entirely to God. See our *shiur* on [*parashat Vayikra*](http://etzion.org.il/en/introduction-book-vayikra). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “And it shall be, as soon as the soles of the feet of the *kohanim* who bear the Ark of the Lord – the Lord of all the earth – shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, that the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off, those waters that come down from above, and they shall stand in a heap” (*Yehoshua* 3:13). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The next verse continues: “In order that all the people of the earth might know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty, that you might fear the Lord your God forever.” (24) This conclusion represents further empowerment - both in view of the nations of the world who will see God’s mighty hand accompanying Israel, and in their own fear of God forever. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A very clear example is the battle for Yericho. God commands a battle that resembles a regular, this-worldly war, but Yehoshua places the emphasis on Divine miracles. For example, God says: “You shall go round the city, all the men of war, going about the city once; thus shall you do six days” (6:3), with the focus on the men of war. Yehoshua, on the other hand, places the emphasis on the Ark and the *kohanim*. This is expressed, *inter alia*, in the description of the journeying of the Ark as representing the journey of the people: “So the Ark of the Lord went about the city, going about it once, and they came to the camp, and spent the night in the camp” (6:11). Yehoshua’s curse upon anyone who would rebuild Yericho is likewise a function of his view of the war against it as God’s war. The midrashim discuss this further. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets.” (*Shemot* 32:16) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “And the Lord said to Moshe: Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones, and I shall write upon the tablets the words which were upon the first tablets, which you shattered” (ibid. 34:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)