

## **Rocks**

We Jews have unusual rituals and unique customs. Therefore, we don't always know why we do what we do when we do it. We celebrate holidays that differ greatly from the celebrations of other peoples. We welcome our children into life and usher them through school, impressing the mark of our values upon them as they grow. At the age of maturity, they celebrate being thirteen in a way totally unique to us. Even our weddings are different, set apart through chupah, ketubah, and by the odd act of breaking glass.

Yet, perhaps most unique or odd of all our acts, we save for a special place – the Bayt Olam, the eternal home, the name we call our cemeteries. It has become our unique custom when visiting the graves of our dear ones to place a small stone upon their markers. A simple act, no doubt, yet strange, nonetheless.

For hundreds of years, in thousands of places, our people have paid our respect and left our stones. A rational people always has a reason, an explanation even for the seemingly inexplicable.

So, why the stone, you ask? The reasons are many. Rocks and stones, after all, are central to our history. Was it not on a stone altar on Mount Moriah that Abraham undertook his test with Isaac? Abraham, the first Jew tested by his early Gd, even testing his early Gd. Abraham and Gd coming to an understanding ... testing each other's mettle at the rock upon which Isaac lay bound — the rock, witness to their new-found faith in one another.

And rocks and stones tested Moses, too. Moses, the leader ... Moses, the lawgiver ... Moses, whose forty days on Sinai's rocky peak led to a revolution of the spirit, as hewn stone, bearing few words, became the constitution of this newly forming people. Moses, at the height of his prowess, brought law on stone ... carved stones, as covenant between Gd and the people ... stone bearing witness to the words: "You are My people, and I shall be your Gd." And when, at Meribah, Moses failed his Gd by smiting the rock for water, again rock bore witness ... that Moses, the leader, could not, would never realize his dream. He would not enter Israel – the land toward which he had led the people faithfully for 40 years.

Moses upon his mountain watches in frustration, yet in satisfaction, knowing that Joshua will lead the people across the Jordan River, carrying twelve stones (twelve rocks), one for each tribe, Torah to be written upon them, testimony to Gd that those who cross shall be ever faithful to the One by whose mighty hand and outstretched arm they were redeemed from Egypt.

Stones as witness ... rocks for testimony. Our history is written upon them. At a pile of stones, Jacob and his father-in-law, Laban, made their peace pact together. On a rock for his pillow at Beth-El, Jacob dreamed his dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder reaching into heaven, and when he awoke he made his pact with Gd to be a faithful servant in exchange for safe passage. Stone pillow as gateway to spiritual enlightenment.

Inert matter, stones. No sense, no feeling, cold and impersonal rocks. Eternal, indestructible, multi-faceted stone. Eternal, indestructible, multi-faceted, the Jew?

And Solomon hired thousands to quarry out the rock to build his Temple. Nary a hammer nor chisel shaped the stone, the legend tells us, but a small worm — the Shamir — ate out perforations, and the rocks split in precise contiguity one to the other. For 500 years, the Temple built of these rocks stood witness as Jew and Gd kept peace with each other. Then, down they came on the night of Babylonia's rage; stones turned to rubble over which foxes roamed. But, then again, a century later, one by one, the stones reclaimed their ancient shape, and Gd reclaimed the Throne of Glory, the ancient seat on the outstretched wings of the cherubim in the dark and silent chamber – the Holy of Holies, behind the thick parochet, the precious veil.

Stones rise — a Temple. The Romans came ... an axe, a flame, and stones fall — rubbish. 1900 years, and the Temple mount changes. The very spot at which Gd and Abraham met while Isaac witnessed their love. The very spot on which two Temples stood is now the pride of others — the Shrine of Omar.

Yet, stones do not betray us Jews. We trust their eternal, banal force. The Temples fell, but a wall remained, a wall so common and homely, as unlikely a wall as history has ever known, that Wall, the Wall at which copious tears were shed over the centuries; that wall that wailed with us, its people, that retaining wall that holds back the dirt upon which the Temples stood, that wall remains. Stones, rock placed on rock, remains. Our Wall, our witness. For 1900 years, we and the Wall have been intimate with each other, privy to each other's secrets, each other's prayers. Oh yes, the Wall spoke. Stones speak to Jews, you know.

“Remember,” it said over and over again. “Z'chor remember.”

And we did. Gd, how we remembered! And we spoke back. For 1900 years, we have spoken love toward that Wall, hundreds of millions of words of love: “*Yitgadal V'yikdash Shemay Rabba ...*” over and over a hundred, and a thousand times a hundred, and a million times more, we said those words as a love poem to Gd. And then came more poems as Psalms of praise, countless recitations of Psalms, rivers of Psalms as offerings for our ... grief in love, and our ... love despite grief.

And when we had finished each day's words of praise, we wrote our private prayers, and our hopes, and our dreams, and our longings, and our notes to those who have gone before us on scraps of paper, each note called a kvitel, a personal feeling, a plea, a promise, a reminder, a message of sorts – rolled or folded and stuffed into the nooks and crags of that rock Wall.

“Take this, Oh Lord, my note, my soul. Hide me in your stony Wall, O Rock of Israel.”

Or, perhaps we thought,

“Deliver this to my loved ones *alayhem ha'shalom* – eternal peace to them, that they might know they rest still in my thoughts and in my heart.”

And so, the Wall nurtured and sustained the soul of our people. Wall of magnet force attracting us, pulling us, drawing us, gently unrelenting, whispering, “Return to me, return to me; stand by me — remember.”

So, why the small stone on the head marker, you ask? Another second please. I’m getting there.

And we travel through Israel over long abandoned ground, eye fixed on the horizon. For what? For a mound of stones. Crazy Jew, a mound? And what, pray tell, is a mound? A tel, we pray? Just rocks — a tel of rocks. A mound of abandoned stones under which ancient cities lie — our cities, our towns, our history in those tels of rocks.

We Jews live in rock and stone. Why rocks, you ask? I am standing in the solemn Memorial Tent at Yad V’Shem in Jerusalem. I see large rocks jutting out of the floor bearing names. Auschwitz, Treblinka — oh, stop already, I can’t bear to hear those names! But, Sobibor, Maidanek, you must! Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka. Stones bear witness. *Z’chor* — remember! Infernal, damnable stones. Those stones, why those stones, too? The others I can understand. The others are reasonable; the others I can take, but those stones? Why?

In every death there is pain. In memory, there is pain. In life, there is so much love and joy, but there is also pain. Strange? But in pain, and sometimes only in pain, comes the hint that we are alive. In those stones, which hover symbolically over the remains of six million, is the pain that reminds us that we are alive. *Am Yisrael Chai* — Our people in its pain lives! Perhaps, indeed, we are as eternal as the stones.

And those little rocks on the headstones in the cemetery? We place them there to hold the notes we wrote or the thoughts we thought. The little rocks we take, not so much from the ground, but from our heart. Those rocks are our pain congealed, our witness to those we loved and continue to love in memory. As King David reminds us so poignantly, we shall go to them — no more they to us.

This little rock that I place upon the grave is testimony — *Z’chor*, I remember; testimony that I remember you in love. Let this small rock bear witness. Let all rocks and stones bear witness to our love, our pain. And above all, let the Rock of Israel bear witness to our love, our pain. *Yitgadal V’yikdash Shemay Rabba ...!*