

PARASHAT KI-TAVO

"Great Stones" and "Whole Stones"

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A. Introduction

In our *parasha*, Moshe concludes his long speech – the "speech of the *mitzvot*," which occupies the majority of *Sefer Devarim* (chapters 5-26). Immediately thereafter, we find two commandments concerning actions which *Bnei Yisrael* must perform after they cross the Jordan, at Mount Eval: the writing of the words of the Torah on great stones, and the building of an altar. The presentation in the text suggests that there is a connection between these two commands:¹[1]

(1) Moshe and the elders of Israel commanded the nation, saying: Observe all of the commandment which I command you this day. (2) And it shall be on the day that you cross over the Jordan, to the land which the Lord your God has given you, that you will set up great stones and cover them with plaster. (3) And you shall write upon them all the words of this Torah, when you have passed over, in order that you may come to the land which the Lord your God gives to you – a land flowing with milk and honey – as the Lord God of your fathers told you. (4) And it shall be, when you have passed over the Jordan, that you shall set up these stones which I command you this day at Mount Eval, and you shall cover them with plaster.

(5) And you shall build an altar there to the Lord your God – an altar of stones; you shall not lift up any iron tool over them. (6) With whole stones shall you build the altar of the Lord your God, and you shall offer burnt offerings upon it to the Lord your God. (7) And you shall offer peace offerings, and eat there, and rejoice before the Lord your God. (8) And you shall write upon the stone all the words of this Torah, very plainly.

The connection between the two commands is manifest in two elements. The first is the structure of this brief *parasha*: it begins with a command to write the Torah upon stones (verses 2-4), proceeds to the command to build the altar (verses 5-7), and then goes back to writing on the stones (verse 8), such that it all forms a single unit.

This is especially apparent in verse 8, which seems out of place. The *parasha* repeats twice the two-part command to write the Torah. In verse 2, we find the first part: the setting up of the stones after crossing over the Jordan and the instruction to "cover them with plaster." In verse 3, we find the second part: the writing of the words of the Torah upon the stones. Verse 4 appears to repeat the first part of the command – the

1 [1] All references are to *Devarim* 27, unless otherwise indicated.

setting up of the stones after crossing over the Jordan and the instruction to "cover them with plaster." We therefore expect this to be followed immediately by the second part of the command – the writing of the Torah upon the stones. However, the repetition of this part appears only in verse 8, after the three verses setting forth the command to build the altar, which seems parenthetical. We might summarize this structure by saying that the command to write the Torah upon the stones is the framework of the unit, which also contains a shorter command to build an altar and to offer sacrifices upon it.

The second connection between the two commands is expressed in the word "stones," which appears in both, thereby linking them. This word appears five times in the eight verses of the unit: three times in relation to the writing of the words of the Torah and twice in relation to the building of the altar. This, too, suggests that the central subject of the unit is the writing on the stones, while the building of the altar is secondary.

What is the connection between the two commands? Why does the Torah link them? What does the writing of the Torah upon stones have to do with building an altar of stones?

B. "Cursed is he who does not fulfill the words of this Torah"

First, we must understand the significance of the main commandment in the unit: the writing of the words of the Torah² upon the stones at Mount Eval. From the text, it

2 [2] We shall not elaborate here on the question of what this "Torah" is that must be written at Mount Eval. We have seen previously that the simple meaning of the words "Torah" in *Sefer Devarim* is the "speech of the mitzvot," as we deduce from what is written immediately prior to the beginning of the speech: "This is the Torah which Moshe placed 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; see Rashi ad loc: "This is the Torah' – that which is about to be set forth after this unit.")

However, the *mishna* in *Massekhet Sota* (7:1) maintains that the entire Torah was written on the stones, and from the words "very plainly" (*be'er hetev*), the *mishna* deduces that it was written in seventy languages. The *Mekhilta Devarim* (see S.Z. Shechter, "*Mekhilta li-Devarim Parshat Re'eh*" in *Tiferet Yisrael – Sefer ha-Yovel Likhvod R. Yisrael Levi* [Jerusalem, 5732], pp. 189-192) cites the opinion of R. Shimon bar Yochai, which is closer to the plain meaning of the verse; he maintains that "they wrote only a copy of Moshe's Torah." This view is based on the description in *Sefer Yehoshua* of the fulfillment of this command: "And he wrote there upon the stones a copy of Moshe's Torah, which he wrote in the presence of *Bnei Yisrael*" (*Yehoshua* 8:32). The expression "they wrote only..." seems to indicate that R. Shimon bar Yochai disagrees not only with the opinion that the Torah was written in seventy languages, but also with the opinion that the entire Torah was written. In his view, it was only *Sefer Devarim*. (The scope of our discussion does not allow for elaboration on the question of whether this refers only to the "speech of the mitzvot" or also to other parts of the *Sefer*.) The Metzudat David comments on the verse in *Yehoshua*, "A copy of Moshe's Torah' (*mishneh torat Moshe*) – the book 'These are the words' (*'eleh ha-devarim* – i.e., *Sefer Devarim*) is known as '*Mishneh Torah*' (literally, "repetition of the Torah"), for it is a restatement of that which is written in the previous four books."

The *Mekhilta*, ad loc, cites a third opinion, which limits even further the text inscribed on the stones. This view maintains that only matters pertaining to the other nations were written (such as, for example, the unit, "When you draw near to a city to fight against it;" *Devarim* 20:19).

The commentators also offer other possibilities. Ibn Ezra writes in the name of Sa'adia Gaon that the inscription on the stones consists only of a list of commandments in abbreviated form. This explanation would seem to be addressing the question of how "all the words of this Torah" could actually be written on the stones – even if they are very large stones. As Radak writes on the verse in *Yehoshua*, "He [Ibn Ezra]

would appear that the point of the writing is to emphasize that the inheritance of the land is conditional upon fulfillment of the Torah:

In order that you may come to the land which the Lord your God gives you to, a land flowing with milk and honey – as the Lord God of your fathers told you. (verse 3)

As Ramban explains:

Write upon them all the words of this Torah, to be a memorial for you, in order that you may come to the land and conquer it and take possession of all of those nations by virtue of your remembering the Torah and observing all of its commandments.^{3[3]}

However, if this were so, there would seemingly be no further need for these stones after the possession of the land; they would be relevant only for a short period between the entry into the land and the completion of the conquest. Is this indeed the intention?

It seems most likely that the writing of the Torah upon the stones is relevant for the continued existence in the land as well. This relates to what we find further on in the chapter concerning the ceremony where the categories of those who are "cursed" are set forth by the *Levi'im*.^{4[4]} At the end of that list, we find a general category of those who are "cursed":

“Cursed is he who does not fulfill the words of this Torah, to perform them.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 26)

Here, the words "this Torah" appear to refer to the Torah that is written on the stones at Mount Eval, which symbolizes the curse:

And these shall stand for the curse, at Mount Eval. (verse 13)^{5[5]}

has written well, for it is not possible that they could have written the entire Torah upon them; only that which is routinely needed." On the other hand, Ralbag, in his commentary on the verse in *Yehoshua*, writes that what is written on the stones is merely the unit of the blessings and the curses (he rejects the possibility, raised by R. Yosef Kaspi in his commentary *Mishneh Kesef*, that only the Ten Commandments were written.)

For a comprehensive discussion of the subject, see M. Bar-Ilan, "*Ha-Torah ha-Ketuva al ha-Avanim be-Har Eval*," *Mechkerei Yehuda ve-Shomron 2* (Kedumim-Ariel, 5753), pp. 29-42.

^{3 [3]} This is Ramban's second explanation. His first seems, to my mind, more distant from the plain meaning of the text.

^{4 [4]} In our *shiur* on *Parashat Ki Tavo* from 5764, we showed that the *parasha* contains two sets of curses: there is the list of those who are "cursed" in chapter 27, and there is the section on the blessings and the curses in chapter 28. Our assumption here will be that at the ceremony described in chapter 27, the *Levi'im* declare only the categories of those who are "cursed." The reader is invited to review the discussion in that *shiur*.

^{5 [5]} The well-known tradition maintains that Mount Eval symbolizes the curse because of its rocky, desolate appearance, in contrast to the greenery of Mount Gerizim – known to us as Har Berakha, the Mountain of Blessing.

In other words, this ceremony announces the curses that await whoever does not fulfill the words of the Torah that are written on the stones that lie at this mountain – at each stage in the history of *Am Yisrael*, as well as in the life of every individual. This sits well with the oft-emphasized message in *Sefer Devarim*^{6[6]} that observance of the Torah is a precondition not only for the inheritance of the land, but also for continued existence upon it.

Further support for this understanding is to be found in the fact that the stones are placed at Mount Eval, which is one of the most prominent sites in the center of the country. Had the stones been meant as a reminder only that fulfillment of the commandments is a precondition for the conquest of the land, it would have been more appropriate for them to be set up immediately after crossing over the Jordan, near the stones that Yehoshua set upon in Gilgal (see *Yehoshua* 4). However, Moshe commands that the stones be placed at Mount Eval, hinting that they are relevant for the entire period of inhabiting the land.

In summary, these stones are a monument that is meant to serve as a warning to *Am Yisrael*, thereby expressing eloquently the attribute of awe in Divine service. The inscription on the stones includes, *inter alia*, many prohibitions, and whoever transgresses these will be cursed. In order that no-one will be able to evade these prohibitions, Moshe emphasizes in the presence of *Bnei Yisrael*:

You shall write upon the stones all the words of this Torah, very plainly.^{7[7]} (verse 8)

C. "And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God"

To balance the attribute of fear that is expressed by the stones with the Torah engraved upon them, Moshe commands *Bnei Yisrael* to set up an altar of stones, also on Mount Eval, and to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings upon it. These are two different types of sacrifices, expressing two different aspects of the connection between God and man. The burnt offering is wholly for God; man has no part in it, and it expresses the attribute of fear – the distance between God and man. The peace offering, on the other hand, is partly for God, partly shared with the *Kohanim*, and partly eaten by the owners, thereby expressing the attribute of love; man has the honor of eating from God's

6 [6] See, for example, 4:25-27; 6:12-15; 11:16-17.

7 [7] Rashi adopts *Chazal's* interpretation of this expression (see above n. 2), and comments: "Very plainly' – in seventy languages." This interpretation expresses the idea that the obligation of observing the Torah, at least on some very basic level, does not belong to *Am Yisrael* alone, but rather to all nations of the world. However, this entails a practical difficulty: inscribing the Torah (in any of the different senses discussed in n. 2) on stones is difficult enough; how could this be done in 70 languages?

On the plain level of the text, it would therefore seem that the word "*be'er*" here means engraving (like the word "*be'er*" meaning a well, which is likewise bored into rock). The Torah commands that the words be engraved firmly into the rock. This idea is indicated already in the Targum Yerushalmi, which also accepts *Chazal's* understanding: "Writing engraved and well explained." This is the original meaning, while the additional meaning of clarifying and explaining, as suggested by Rashi, is secondary.

table. However, the burnt offering always comes before the peace offering, since the attribute of awe always takes precedence; it is only on that basis that there can be room for expressions of the attribute of love.

In any event, the crux of the importance of the altar is the eating of the peace offering, which entails a dimension of Divine service that is prominent in *Sefer Devarim* – joy. The entry into the land is accompanied not only by concerns and warnings for the future, but also by joy and thanksgiving for the past – the conclusion of the long, forty-year journey and the new beginning represented by the first steps of the possession of the land. This is the meaning of the altar of stones:

This is the first commandment upon their arrival – to build a new altar, to thank God for having commenced their existence in the land. (Ibn Ezra)

The two types of stones – the stones of the altar and the stones upon which the Torah is engraved – therefore symbolize the thanksgiving for the past and the commitment for the present and for the future. In other words, they symbolize the two poles of Divine service – awe and joy. This being so, the insertion of the command to build the altar in the midst of the unit about writing the Torah on the stones is a sort of "softening" of the unit, and further reinforcement of the message of combining awe and joy.

These two ideas may be symbolically expressed in the different ways in which the Torah refers to the stones. The words of the Torah are to be written upon "great stones," an expression which is associated in other contexts in *Tanakh* with the attribute of awe. For example:

God cast great stones upon them from the sky, up to Azeka, and many died.
(*Yehoshua* 10:11; 10:18)

The stones of the altar, in contrast, are "whole stones," to which no iron instrument has been applied (27:5). Upon these stones, *Bnei Yisrael* are to offer peace offerings (*shelamim*) – an expression of the attributes of wholeness (*shelemut*) and peace (*shalom*).

D. Fulfillment of the command in the time of Yehoshua

As noted, *Sefer Yehoshua* recounts the fulfillment of the commands to set up the stones and to build an altar, but with a slight change in the relationship between them:

Then Yehoshua built an altar to the Lord God of Israel, at Mount Eval, as Moshe, God's servant, had commanded *Bnei Yisrael* as it is written in the book of the Torah of Moshe – an altar of whole stones, over which no iron had been lifted. And they offered upon it burnt offerings to God, and sacrificed peace offerings. And he wrote thereupon the stones a copy of the Torah of Moshe, which he wrote in the presence of *Bnei Yisrael*.

And all of Israel, and their elders, and their officers, and their judges, stood on this side and that side of the Ark, before the *Kohanim*, the *Levi'im*, who bore the Ark of God's Covenant, the strangers along with the native born – half over against Mount Gerizim, and half over against Mount Eval, as Moshe, God's servant, had commanded, that the people first be blessed. And thereafter he read all the words of the Torah, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the Torah. There was not a word of all that Moshe commanded which Yehoshua did not read before all the congregation of Israel, with the women and with the children, and the strangers who went amongst them. (*Yehoshua* 8:30-35)

Let us examine the first three verses, which describe the actual fulfillment of the commands. This unit awards precedence – its first two verses – to the altar of stones, while the writing of the Torah upon the stones occupies only one verse. Furthermore, the description of the building of the altar parallels in full the command in our *parasha*, while the setting of the stones is described in abbreviated form, with the omission of some of the details. There is no indication that the stones are "great," nor is there any mention of the plaster. Moreover, from the description in *Sefer Yehoshua* alone we might have concluded that there is only one set of stones, with the Torah being inscribed or engraved upon the stones of the altar. The impression is that *Sefer Yehoshua* emphasizes the aspect of joy over the aspect of awe.

The same may be said of the continuation of the narrative in *Sefer Yehoshua*. While our *parasha* instructs, "These shall stand to bless the nation at Mount Gerizim, when you cross over the Jordan... while these shall stand for the curse, at Mount Eval..." (verse 12-13), in *Sefer Yehoshua*, the description is different:

All of Israel, and their elders, and their officers, and their judges, stood on this side and that side of the Ark, before the *Kohanim*, the *Levi'im*, who bore the Ark of God's Covenant, the strangers along with the native born – half over against Mount Gerizim, and half over against Mount Eval, as Moshe, God's servant, had commanded, that the people first be blessed.

There is no explicit mention of the second half of the nation standing against Mount Eval for the curse.

It would therefore seem that *Sefer Yehoshua* indeed seeks to emphasize the aspect of joy and blessing, against the background of the initial victories in the conquest of the land. The intention is to present this more prominently than the awe that is expressed in the writing on the stones and the curse that is uttered on Mount Eval. Ultimately, "both these and those are the words of the living God," and the combined message of our *parasha* together with the message of *Sefer Yehoshua* creates the whole, complete picture of the different aspects and dimensions of Divine service.

Translated by Kaeren Fish