

Torah on the Rocks **Rabbi Maury Grebenau**

Moshe relays an intriguing command immediately before the famous blessings and curses on the mountain tops. The Jewish people are told to carve the ‘words of the Torah’ into stones and cover them with plaster. The exact nature of these stones and their purpose is a fascinating topic. The Ramban quotes an opinion that the entire Torah was etched upon these stones. R’ Sadia Goan understood that the stones contained the first list of the 613 Mitzvot and not the entire text of the Torah. The Gemara (Sotah 35b) contains divergent opinions of the exact order of the application of plaster and the carving of the words. What is clear is that these stones were meant as some sort of monument to showcase the Torah. But who was this monument for?

The Mishna at the beginning of the seventh perek of Sotah (32a) discusses the incident of carving the stones and covering them with plaster at length. The Gemara there (35b-36a) seems clear that the main purpose of the stones was for the other nations to have access to the wisdom of the Torah. Following this understanding, the Gemara and Rashi explain the words ‘*be’er heitav*’ (well explained) to mean that it was carved out in all seventy languages. According to this approach as we entered the land there was a need to spread the wisdom of Torah to others, and allow access to the other nations¹.

There is another possible explanation, which the Ramban develops. The goal of the carved stones did not involve other nations, rather it was internally focused. Here the Jews are instructed to set up a reminder that the Torah is our foundation. These stones would attest to the fact that our ability to conquer and inherit the land is inextricably tied to our Torah observance. One of our first actions upon entering the land must be to set up a monument to our values to remind ourselves of the centrality of the Torah. When we remember that the Torah is our focus and foundation then we are able to move forward into new experiences and be successful.

This exercise in recollection was an integral command for the Jews to take to heart. The Jews were posed to enter their land after a failed attempt forty years before. The last time they set foot on this land they lost sight of their goals and of the larger picture. They allowed their fears of the unexpected and unknown to cloud their faith and so they failed. To make sure that this time it would be different we needed to reinvigorate our commitment to Hashem and the Torah and give ourselves a tangible reminder of our convictions.

When we enter a new arena in life we need to remember our values and keep them close. Whether it is beginning college, having our first child, moving to a new community or retiring; every new milestone in life brings new challenges and opportunities. We too need to remind ourselves of the big picture and what we value above all else. Sometime we set up very tangible reminders such as a mezuzah on our home and tzitzis on our clothes. Other times the reminders may be less noticeable, but no less potent. In any case, it is vital that we have reminders to reinforce our commitment to Hashem and the Torah. This takes on particular urgency when we venture out into a world where many do not share our values. We must constantly ask ourselves, ‘How will we remind ourselves of what we hold dear?’

¹ See Maharitz Chiyus on the Gemara in Sotah for a discussion of the issue of teaching Torah to non-Jews