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Fire from a Rock

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Haazinu

Fire from a Rock

Everyone knows the song, "Maoz Tzur Yeshuati." But that's not the only place you'll find the Hebrew word tzur. So let's start with a little bit of Jewish history.

Three weeks before the State of Israel declared its independence, they started to work on the Scroll of Independence. This was essentially based on the American Declaration of Independence.

But one thing really bothered the framers of the State's declaration. In the United States' Declaration of Independence, G-d is mentioned several times, and in several forms: "the Creator," "Lord," and so on.

The founding fathers of the State of Israel, however, believed in themselves and their own strength. They believed that it was they who were establishing the State, it was they who were fighting and it was they who were conquering the land. And so they didn't want G-d mentioned in their declaration in any way, shape or form.

On the other hand, at the time the new government was being established, there were government members, including several Knesset members, who were religious. At their head was Rabbi Maimon. He fought for including G-d's name in the declaration.

A few hours before the official announcement by the "People's Council," on the eve of Shabbos, the fifth day of the Hebrew-calendar month of Iyar, 5708, or May 14, 1948, there was a bitter dispute between the two sides.

Finally, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, made a compromise. He suggested using the words "mitoch bitachon b'Tzur Yisrael," "out of trust in the Rock of Israel," and letting everyone interpret it as they wished. The religious Zionists would interpret it as a reference to G-d, while the others would interpret it as "trust in the Strength of Israel."

In our Torah portion this week, Haazinu, we first learn that G-d is called by the term "tzur," or rock. In the parshah, G-d is called "my Rock," "the Rock," or "our Rock" exactly six times. Of these passages, the most famous is, "The Rock! Perfect is His work."

Now, why is G-d referred to as "the Rock?" The simple explanation is that just like a rock is a solid slab that you can depend on to not fall over or break, like the great Rock of Gibraltar, so too is G-d the one and only thing in the universe that one can truly depend on.

But not only is G-d called "the Rock," but even the Jewish Nation is referred to as "the Rock."

In the prophecy of Bil'am, when he came to curse the Jewish Nation but ended up blessing them, we find that he compared the Jewish Nation to a rock. The Book of Bamidbar, Chapter 23, verse 9, says, "For from the heads of rocks I see them." What did Bil'am mean by this? Rashi explains: "I see them established and strong like rocks," meaning that when one wishes to describe the Jewish Nation's nature, one says that they are stubborn and unmoving as rocks and stones.

And we find the same motif with G-d—that He is strong as a rock. At the same time, so are the Jews—strong and stubborn as a rock, which is why they stood strong throughout all their history.

But there's something deeper here.

We now stand a few days before Yom Kippur. The entire concept of Yom Kippur was created as a result of the Sin of the Golden Calf. When Moshe Rabbeinu descended from Mt. Sinai and saw the Golden Calf, he broke the Luchos, the famous Two Tablets. After that, he went back up on Mt. Sinai another two times—and finally, on Yom Kippur, G-d forgave the Jewish Nation for the Golden Calf. As we say every Yom Kippur immediately after the Kol Nidrei prayer: "And G-d said, 'I have forgiven, as you had spoken.'" Ever since then, Yom Kippur has been a day of forgiveness and atonement.

Now, when Moshe Rabbeinu saw that G-d had forgiven the Jewish Nation for the Sin of the Golden Calf, he took note of the fact that it was a moment of good will—that it was possible to use the opportunity for something else. So he turned to G-d and said, “Show me Your Glory” (Shmos 33:18). Essentially, he asked G-d to reveal to him just a little bit of what goes on in Heaven—he wanted to perceive things that human beings are otherwise not capable of perceiving.

But what did G-d answer him? No. Why? As the verse tells us, “For Man cannot see Me and live”—it is simply impossible for a human being to comprehend G-d. Still, G-d tells Moshe, if you still insist on getting a little concept of these things, then “I shall place you in the cleft of the rock.”

The simple meaning of this is that Moshe was on Mt. Sinai at the time of his request, and G-d told him to physically hide inside the crack of some giant boulder on the mountainside, and once inside the rock, Moshe would somehow be shown some small understanding of G-d.

But what does this really mean? What is the significance of a boulder, a rock, that specifically inside the crack of a rock can one possibly understand G-d? What’s the idea here?

On Motzoei Shabbos, Saturday eve, after Shabbos ends, we have the custom of performing the Havdalah ceremony. We light a small torch or braided candle, recite the Hebrew blessing “Borei Meorei Ha’Aish,”—basically blessing and thanking G-d for creating fire.

Why is this done as Shabbos departs?

As it is known, Adam and Eve (whose birthdays we just celebrated on Rosh Hashanah a few days ago) were created on Friday, on Shabbos eve. The Midrash tells us that throughout that first Shabbos of history, the world did not get dark. It was light throughout. (That’s why the Torah does not state, “And it was evening and it was morning” for the seventh day like it does for the other six days of Creation.) The first time in history that darkness fell on the world was that Saturday evening.

That’s when Adam and Eve started thinking about how to light up the darkness of the world.

The Talmud (Tractate Pesachim 54a) tells us, “G-d gave Adam knowledge... and he brought forth two stones and ground them against each other and light came forth”—which is why we thank G-d each Saturday night for the precious gift of light that He gave mankind.

What we see from here is that in addition to being firm, unbending and unbreakable, rocks have another important quality: rocks have the potential to produce sparks, which can light a fire. Unlike smoldering charcoals which have an inner fire that can be fanned with a little wind, here there is no fire. Even if the rock has been submerged in water, even for thousands of years, it still has the potential to produce fire.

Essentially, G-d gave us the greatest lesson here on how to view another Jew.

A Jew might look to you like a rock. He has a heart of stone. Sometimes you feel that talking to him is like talking to a wall—it doesn't interest him at all. And it may even be true. But G-d tells Moshe, "To truly understand what a Jew is, I, G-d, will put you in the cleft of the rock—I will put you inside a boulder, and then you will see that inside this rock, there is the potential for fire." True, at the moment you do not see fire and you do not even see coals. You only see stone.

But the truth is that from this very rock, you can bring forth fire. When you rub one stone against another, sparks come forth—and when a Jew hugs another Jew with true love of fellow Jew, then it's possible to ignite the Jewish spark within, the flame of love for G-d.

My friends, we now stand at the threshold of Yom Kippur, a time at which even stones produce fire—and it is our responsibility to bring wicks and firewood. The wicks are the study of Torah, and the wood is the mitzvos. And when we do that, the fire won't hide—rather, it will burst into an enduring flame that lasts an entire year.

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