

Stones play a significant role in Jakob's life – in our parashah three times, twice as monuments. As the sun sets on the first day of his flight from Beer Sheva to Charan, Jakob finds a place to spend the night. He gathers some stones, arranges them at his head, and lies down to sleep. Later, when he awakens from his dream, he takes “the stone that he had placed at his head ...” The many inconsistencies in our scriptures have given rise to some of our most creative commentaries, and this is no exception. Rashi, citing the Talmud (Chullin 91b) explains this discrepancy: “He formed them in a sort of border around his head, for he feared wild animals. [The stones] began to argue among themselves: One said, ‘Upon me,’ while the other said, ‘Upon me.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, made them into a single stone, and this is why it says (afterwards), ‘He took the stone (sing.) which he had placed under his head.’” Midrash Genesis Rabbah 68:11 elaborates: “Rabbi Yehuda said he took 12 stones in accordance with God's decree that he would father 12 tribes. [Jakob] said, ‘Abraham did not establish them, nor did Isaac. What of me? If these 12 stones join together, I will know that I will father 12 tribes.’” Centuries later, this is reflected in the 12 stones on the breastplate of the High Priest. The Rambam (Maimonides) explains in his *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:51, “The object of all their [Abraham, Isaac, Jakob, Moses] labors was to publish the unity of God in the world, and to induce people to love him.” The 12 tribes, in all their diversity, must be united in this one paramount endeavor. But as we know, establishing and maintaining unity is an ongoing challenge. What Jakob does with that stone upon which his head has rested during his dream is highly significant: “... and he took the stone that he had placed at his head, and he set it up as a monument, and he poured oil on top of it.” (28:17) In effect, he creates a new ritual, declaring, “Then this stone, which I have placed as a monument, shall be a house of God, and everything that You give me, I will surely tithe to You.” (28:22) His *matzeivah* (monument) at the place he names *Beit-El* (house of God) is the first of many throughout our scriptures. At the end of our parashah Jakob erects another, larger *matzeivah*, first taking one stone and then bidding his kinsmen to gather stones and make a pile (31:46) to mark not only the non-aggression pact he makes with Laban, but also the border between their territories. Another encounter with a stone occurs between these two acts, when Jakob arrives at the well shortly after his tremendous night of dreams and is able to summon the strength to roll away the enormous stone covering it. Although this stone is so large that it requires the strength of several men to move it, Jakob rolls it away with ease. Citing Midrash Genesis Rabbah 70:12, Rashi tells us that upon seeing Rachel, Jakob rolled it “as one who removes the stopper from a bottle, to let you know that he possessed great strength.” Later, when Rachel dies, he erects a monument at her burial place along the road. And still later, on his deathbed when he blesses Josef, he gathers the significance of all his encounters with stones into a new metaphor, calling Josef אָבִי יִשְׂרָאֵל (Stone of Israel). The Aramaic translation Targum Onkelos explains that אָבִי is a combination of the words אב (father) and בן (son). Indeed, upon revealing his identity to his brothers, Josef tells them that HaShem has made him “a father to Pharaoh,” (45:8), an act that ensured their – and our – survival. However, for all their significance, stones are fraught with danger. “... and do not erect monuments for yourselves, or place figured stones in your land to worship, for I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 26:1) This is reiterated even more sharply in Deuteronomy, “Do not erect a monument for yourself, which the Lord your God hates.” (16:22) Despite this injunction, Jakob is not an idolator. The three stones in our parashah represent three landmarks in his life: his relationship with HaShem, discovering his soulmate, and establishing peace with his father-in-law. All three are grounded in love and symbolize unity: with HaShem, with his family, and with his fellow human beings. But, as our stories point out time and time again, the borderline between objects intended to guide us toward worshiping HaShem and objects of worship is porous. Jakob, appearing to recognize the intrinsic danger of the ritual he has initiated, mitigates the significance of earth-bound stones by emphasizing their catalytic function. They are simply means to an end, worthy of our utmost respect, but only as accessories. The Object of our worship is not of this world.

Shabbat shalom!