

My Rock

Yizkor 5781

Every summer when there's not a pandemic, my wife Rebecca and I make time to take our family to Canada and Boston to visit our families.

One of the things that we often do on these trips is visit the graves of our grandparents who have since died.

Two summers ago, we went to the Boston area, to a town called New Bedford.

We were going to visit Rebecca's grandmother.

And at one point, we stopped at a grocery store.

Natan, my oldest, out of nowhere, said, do you have rocks for the cemetery?

I was surprised – where did this come from?

Then I noticed that across the street, there was a cemetery!

I hadn't even seen it!

Natan thought we were going to visit Rebecca's grandfather's grave, Grandpa Joe.

I had to tell him – oh, that's actually not the cemetery where Grandpa Joe is buried.

That is somewhere else.

But in that moment, I felt a morbid tinge of pride.

Natan learned the importance of going to visit the graves of our grandparents.

He appreciates that we tell stories about our loved ones who have died.

He is used to the fact that we say an *el maleh*, a memorial prayer.

But probably the most impactful moment for him is that we place stones on the grave.

This tangible action is one that he excitedly does.

In my family, we collect stones from our various travels, so that we can place them on the graves when we visit.

In addition to those stones, Natan likes to walk around the cemetery and find some more stones to place on the graves.

At one point over the last couple of years, Natan asked, why do we do this?

Why do we place rocks on the graves?

If I can expand his question:

Why do Jews, on the whole, care about rocks so much?

Why do we place them on graves at all?
And, how does it relate to this past week's parsha?

Let's start with the original question: why do we place rocks on graves?

Our tradition offers a few possible explanations.
I'll start with the answers that I did not share with Natan.

One scholarly opinion is that the stones originally served as signs for *kohanim*, for priests.
Kohanim are traditionally not allowed to enter cemeteries.
The stones served as markers, warning priests where they could, or could not, walk.

There's a different, rabbinic view that seems more like it comes from a spooky ghost story.

This view suggests that after a person dies, their soul dwells in the grave.

A stone is placed on the grave to prevent demons and golems from entering the grave and harassing our loved one.

Now, for the explanation that I shared with my son, what I always heard as a child.

I don't have a source for this, so I would call this a folk interpretation.

Unlike other faiths who place flowers by a grave, we place stones, because they last forever.

By placing a stone, we show the world that we visited our loved one.

That our love is permanent.

That we will always remember them.

And that their memory stays with us forever.

In researching this, I found a beautiful interpretation from Rabbi Simkha Weintraub, one of the world's experts in pastoral counseling.

Rabbi Weintraub suggests that "the Hebrew word for 'pebble' is *tz'ror*.

This same word also means 'bond.'

When we pray the memorial *El Maleh Rahamim* prayer we ask that the deceased be 'bound up *bitzror hachayim* - in the bond of eternal life.'

In this word play, the *tzror*, the stone, reflects how we will preserve their memory *bitzror hachayim*, in the bond of eternal life.

The stone reflects our bond with the person who has died, that we are always still connected to the person who we love.

What is interesting to me is that there is a connection between these stones for graves and the parsha that always falls among the High Holy Days, Ha'azinu.

In this past shabbat morning's portion, Haazinu, we read one long poem.

And this poem is filled with metaphors of God's relationship to Israel.

God is a parent.

God is an eagle.

But I believe the most repeated metaphor is of God as a rock. Rabbi Andrea Weiss notes that the word *tzur*, or rock, recurs eight times.

In the metaphor, God as *Tzur*, God as "the Rock," is meant to be seen as steadfast and true.

God is solid and immovable.

Haazinu impresses on us that God is unwaveringly loyal.

The rock at Israel's back.

In this parsha, the rock is a source of protection.

I can't help but notice that we read all about these metaphors of rocks in the Torah portion that leads up to the death of Moshe.

I wonder – is this the Torah's way of metaphorically placing a stone on Moses' grave, every year?

As we are about to read about his death, is this the Torah's way of having us all imagine that we are visiting Moshe's grave, right before his yahrzeit, right before the mentioning of his death?

We walk through the parsha, collecting these stones.

We gather rocks that are about strength, steadfastness, protection – all of the ways that Moshe stood up for the people.

And we place these rocks on his grave.

Just as we would physically, with our loved one.

I invite you, if you don't already do it, to consider taking up the practice that my family does.

The practice that I believe the parsha is alluding to by mentioning *tzur*, the rocks that repeat in the Torah portion.

Wherever you travel in your life – it could be to a nice scenic spot off the Lake Shore Drive path here in Chicago, or if you are able to travel beyond the confines of our great city – to pick up a rock.

When you go to visit the grave of a loved one, to place that rock on the grave.

Whether you put the rock there because you think it will protect your loved one from demons, or because it is your way of showing the world that you remember them, and that they will be with you always.

And when you place that rock, you will remember the solid, immovable, protective nature of memory.

As we begin the Yizkor service, may all of our *tzrurot*, may all of our rocks and stones, help us remember our loved ones *bitzror hachayim* – in the bond of eternal life.

Yehi zichram baruch – may their memories be for a blessing.