

A Stone for the Ages

By Ilan Ben-Ezri

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What is common to the Plaza Hotel in NYC, the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, and the Western Wall? The answer is a material that has been known historically as “Meleke,” which means “the stone of kings” or “the royal stone.” Today, we know it more simply as Jerusalem Stone; a strong, highly dense dolomite limestone. This material is quarried in Jerusalem and its surrounding mountains.



Torat Emet Synagogue, Columbus, OH

The city of Jerusalem itself is alive with this stone. Like fine wine, the material takes on various warm hues and diverse textures, and improves with time, even over millennia. The Western Wall, numerous synagogues in Jerusalem, the walls of the old city and its streets, as well as many other historic buildings serve as testimony.

Also like wine, Jerusalem Stone takes on the color of the earth from which it is gathered: white, cream, yellow, gray, blue, red and various intermediate shades.

These unique properties allow Jerusalem Stone to withstand extreme weather cycles of high heat, humidity and freeze/thaw conditions. As evidence serves, there is now a growing international spectrum of public buildings (synagogues, libraries, government and office buildings) as well as private homes and religious monuments where Jerusalem Stone has been fitted over the last several decades. In the United States, these locations include Chicago, Wisconsin, Columbus and New York City and also encompass outdoor applications such as cladding and flooring.

In contemporary synagogue design, Jerusalem Stone is often used to create a simulation of the Western Wall. Stone cuttings for this type of wall are usually coarse, and the material mainly serves as a central wall within the sanctuary space. An alternate example is the Torat Emet Synagogue in Ohio, where the stone wall is located in the lobby and extends in two “wings” to the external part of the synagogue.



Levi Chapel - US Navel Academy, Annapolis, MD

The stone's most frequent application, however, is the wall behind the Holy Ark. This wall, of central importance, is also located within the prayer area, but because it faces the congregation, it is visible at all times during the service. A prime example of this application, which contains elements reminiscent of the Western Wall, is displayed at the Levy Chapel of the US Naval Academy; an honor award winner in the 2006 Faith & Form/IFRAA International Awards Program.

Cladding the exterior of a religious building with Jerusalem Stone has both aesthetic and pragmatic appeal. The building is then wrapped in a protective material that has been the material of choice for sacred structures over the millenia. The material is expressive in different ways according to its finish: rough cut, rock-face, chiseled, or smooth-face, laid in regular or irregular rows, laid in a pattern, small stones with traditional cutting or larger stones with a contemporary appearance. The Safra Synagogue in New York uses a variety of finishes in a single facade.



Edmund Safra Synagogue, NYC, NY

In Jerusalem, one's feet tread upon a material that has taken on the wear of thousands of years of use, and of course it is still serving its original purpose, all these centuries later. The polished, textured, sun-baked walls and pavement of this holy city are a reminder that this material—very ancient, and very local—is today finding an honored place in sacred buildings around the world.

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To learn more about Jerusalem Garden Stone Works, Ltd and their program to assist OU member synagogues, please visit: [Jerusalem Garden Stone Works, Ltd.](#)