

A Stone for the Ages

By Ilan Ben-Ezri



Photo: anaulin/flickr.com



Photos: Courtesy of Jerusalem Gardens Stone

The Church of Transfiguration in Orleans, Massachusetts, designed by William Rawn Associates, uses Jerusalem Stone in its apse.



Torat Emet Synagogue in Bexley, Ohio, designed by RED Architects, uses various finishes of stone.

Pilgrims venerate the Stone of Unction at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

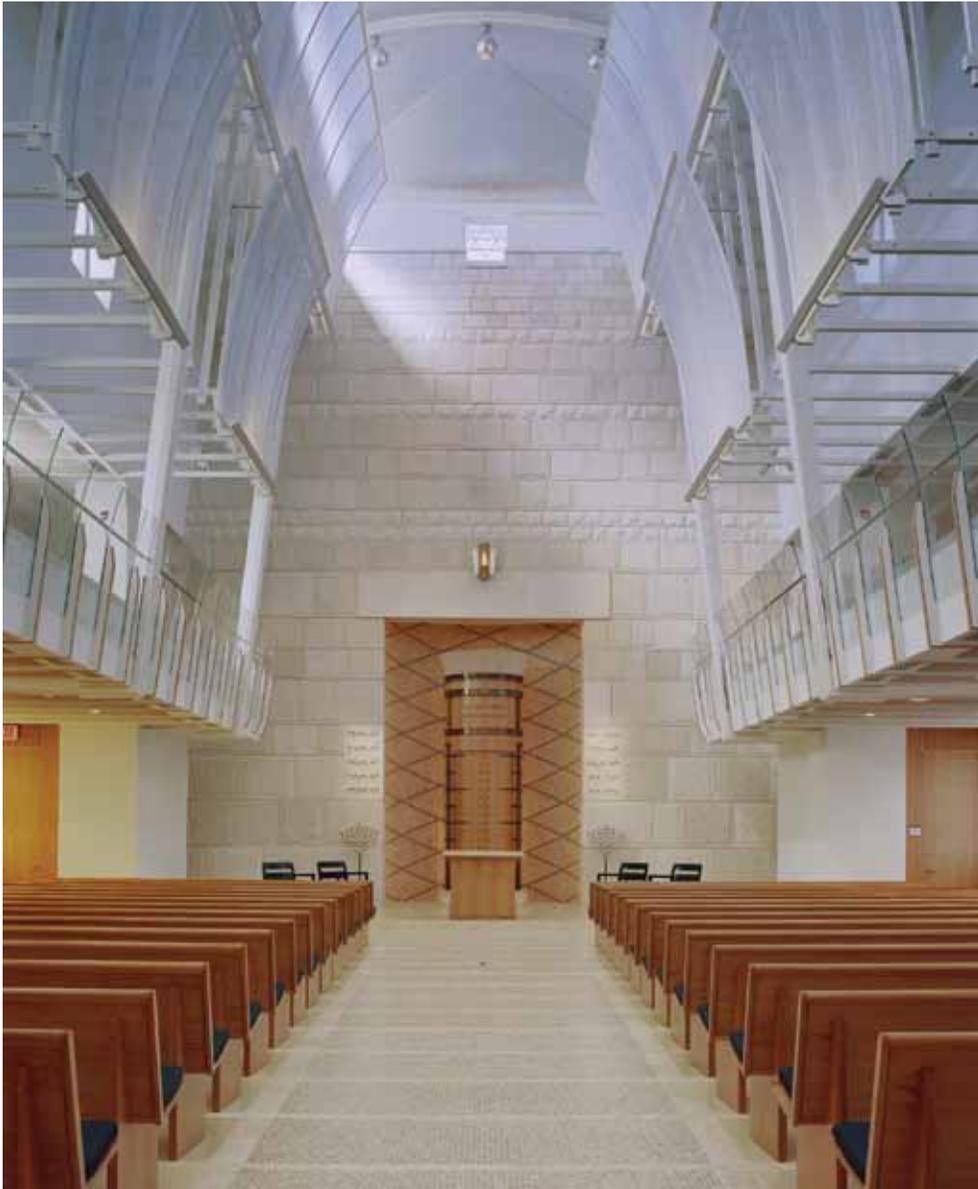
the color of the earth from which it is gathered: white, cream, yellow, gray, blue, red, and various intermediate shades. The Stone of Unction, at the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (also called the Church of the Resurrection) at the end of the Via Dolorosa within the walled Old City of Jerusalem, commemorates the preparation of Jesus' body for burial. The Stone of Unction is a type of Jerusalem Stone known as Jerusalem Red. This flame-colored slab is about six meters long and a meter wide. It dates back to 1808, when the former 12th-century slab was destroyed. Jerusalem Red is commonly used in contemporary churches, such as for the outdoor cladding on the First Baptist Church in Gainesville, Georgia, and for the indoor cladding of the Church of Transfiguration in Orleans, Massachusetts.

In contemporary synagogue design, Jerusalem Stone is often used to create a simulation of the Western Wall. The original Western Wall is, of course, constructed with Jerusalem Stone, and has been one of the supporting walls surrounding the Temple Mount for about 2,000 years. Jewish tradition assigns special holiness to the Western Wall, and for this reason a place of prayer was established in its proximity in the 14th century and is still used to this date. The Western Wall has religious, national, and historic significance, with millions of visitors, Jews and non-Jews alike, every year. Youngsters celebrating their Bar Mitzvah come with their families, as do VIPs

What is common to the tomb of Christ, the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, and to the Western Wall in Jerusalem? 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 very strong, highly dense dolomite limestone, this material is quarried in Jerusalem and in its surrounding mountains.

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

Also like wine, Jerusalem Stone takes on



Levy Chapel at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, designed by Boggs & Partners, features Jerusalem Stone on its interior wall.

from around the world. Stone cutting for this type of wall is usually coarse, and the material mostly serves as a central wall in a synagogue. An example is the Torat Emet Synagogue in Ohio, where the stone wall is found in the lobby and extends in two wings to the external part of the synagogue.

The material is also often used for the wall behind the Holy Ark; it is of great importance as it is located within the prayer area facing the congregation, and is therefore seen at all times. This wall can also contain elements reminiscent of the Western Wall. An example of this type of wall, an honor award winner in the 2006 Faith & Form/IFRAA International Awards Program, is in the Levy Chapel of the U.S. Naval Academy.

Cladding the exterior of a religious building with Jerusalem Stone wraps it in a material that has for millennia been the material of choice for sacred structures. 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.

In Jerusalem, one's feet tread upon a material that has survived the wear of thousands of years of use and is still serving its original purpose. The polished, textured, sun-baked walls of this holy city also remind us that this material—very ancient, and very local— can today take an honored place in sacred buildings around the world. 

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