

the blue light

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The Story of the Rock

I received a real rock in the mail. One cubic meter of stone. "Incredulous." A post-office slip from East Jerusalem said I had a package. When I got there, I was told by the staff that it would cost me twenty thousand dollars. "Say what?" Yes: one dollar plus another plus another to twenty thousand. I thought about walking away from this clowning around, but it occurred to me that the cost likely indicated an extraordinary content. I sold our house in the refugee camp, borrowed six dollars from my paternal uncle, five from a maternal one, sold my books etc., until I gathered the whole amount and received the rock. At first, I couldn't believe my eyes: a rock! stamped from various countries. It looked like the rock's journey began in Sydney port and from there to Marseille and from there to Pearl Harbour and on and on. For half a century the rock had been going around ports and crossing borders until, at last, it reached the port of Haifa and then the port office in Jerusalem, colourfully tattooed with stamps and stickers.

For this, I'd sold everything I owned. I put my mother and younger brother up in a cheap motel in Old Jerusalem as I waited for God's help. I still had to pay porters to deliver the rock to the motel. I wasn't too crazy to leave it at the post office after all the money I'd spent. The rock stayed in the corner of the cheap motel room. The motel was so cheap it would get less than one

star, a decimal of one. It had no water, running or still, hot or cold. "Incredulous, I mean really," my mom said as I stood in front of the rock, thinking, "We ended up in a motel because of your rock and your brain," she said, "and your brother can't go to school because of your rock?" For my mom, this was not "our" rock but mine alone.

In 1948, an uncle of mine travelled to the US and didn't come back. The rumour was he owned bars in Las Vegas, never married. I thought maybe in his old age he sent the rock to check if he had any heirs. I rang him. He said he'd never heard of me or my birth and would sue me if I ever contacted him again. Then I thought the rock had an archaeological value of some kind. I sent a piece of it to the Hebrew University. The results came back a week later: worthless. With one dollar, they said, you could purchase a cubic mile of this kind of rock.

Due to its entertainment quality, the story reached the media. Wherever I went, people asked me: "How's the rock doing?" I found a remote small cafe in the suburbs of West Jerusalem where nobody would know me. I needed to contemplate the situation of the rock. I ordered Arabic coffee from the thin Jewish Russian waitress. She served me the coffee and said, "It's on the house. How's the rock doing?"

As a last resort, I thought of renting a car to take the rock to a mountaintop and roll it down to the wadi. I was conflicted because of my guilt. I made my family suffer in a cheap motel over a rock that I rolled down a mountain. As a compromise I made a promise to myself that I'd never forget the finale: how I rolled the rock, how it rolled—all of it would dwell in my memory. But my perseverance increased. I started to have nightmares about the rock. No more nightmares. I bought paint and painted the rock with bright colours, orange, yellow, red and whatever might please an onlooker. I wanted to feel happiness when I looked at it myself. Instead, I dreamed that I was in a vast moonlight valley full of coloured rocks, rose, yellow, red, etc.,

and that I was running along the rocks like an orphaned child calling for his mother. Then another dream: a rock the size of half the Earth on my head, and me, as if a compressed sponge, breathless. Then another dream and so on and so forth. How do I get rid of the rock? At last I found a solution: I decided to worship it. I bought two candles, placed them before the rock with wine chalices, and put the mail slip on top of the rock. Piously and quaveringly, I spent hours every night on that spot. The rock clearly possessed a mysterious force beyond anyone's capacity to comprehend.

A tourist guide friend of mine came to visit me. The minute he spotted me he laughed so hard he fell into pieces. He came because he'd heard my story but didn't expect I'd reached the point of worshipping a rock. I suggested to him that he should bring his tourists to my cheap motel. "Why?" He asked. "I'll tell you why: I will write a fabricated history of the rock, that it was holy during Canaanite times before the Romans seized it in some BCE year. Eventually the rock was lost until bedouin stumbled on it during the Crusades. Let me work out the details, and I will publish them in a handsome gilded booklet that draws tourists to the rock, and we will split the profit." He gave it a long think then, suddenly, as if out of a trance said: "Deal."

For a month I buried myself in books at the Hebrew University library. I completed a brochure in which I paid attention to the accuracy of events in time and place, fortified with quotations from the works of various historians. And off to the printers. In no time everything was set on a new path. I made back all the money I'd lost, signed a contract with a Swiss publisher to turn the brochure of the rock into a book, and from one project to another I went. But one night, deep into this magnificent game, the police came and surrounded the motel. A fat officer spoke: "You're under arrest. And the rock, as you know, now belongs to the state, as do all relics and finds, You have broken the law." I was cornered so I bargained: "I'll give you the rock, but let me keep the money. Otherwise it will be a public scandal in the papers that will tarnish the state's reputation and damage tourism."

We made a deal. The police took the rock to the museum of antiquities in Jerusalem near Hebron's Gate, and the years rolled on. One day I was passing by the museum. A long line of tourists stood waiting to see "the rock," and in each tourist's hand was the brochure I'd written. I laughed and kept on moving, but after a few steps, I stopped and said to myself: "I swear to God this rock possesses a secret." I went back, grabbed a brochure, stood in line to see the rock.