

TREE AND STONES WILL TEACH YOU

BY PETER JACOBS

Gideon Sarig's natural sculpture garden casts Israel in microcosm. A fountain flowing through a flint rock pierced by 13 holes marks the entrance to a rock garden in Yarkon Park in Tel Aviv. In Hebrew each letter has a numerical equivalent, and the numbers of the letters that spell "love" (aleph=1, hai=5, bet=2, hai=5) equal 13. To celebrate Israel's natural history and culture, some 500 rocks of all sizes and shapes were, in fact, lovingly culled by landscape architect Gideon Sarig and Akiva Flexor, geology professor at Jerusalem's Hebrew University. The stones, weighing

up to six tons, represent Israel's geology from northern Mount Hermon to Elat in the south.

The park links older seaside neighborhoods to newer developments spreading inland to the main highway. Most of Yarkon Park lies east of the highway. The city plans six theme gardens there: in addition to this collection of stone, gardens devoted to cacti, tropical plants, water plants, flowers and topiary will eventually pay tribute to the Holy Land's diversity.

In the 1950s Israel's largest and most cosmopolitan city wisely set aside 800 acres along the Yarkon River as a spine of open space. The park site was first designed by landscape architect Joseph Segal in the 1950s. Now Sarig is responsible for rehabilitation of the park's older sections, a master plan for six theme gardens and design of the rock garden.

As a young student Sarig studied agriculture and horticulture in Israel. In the 1960s he went to Berkeley to study sculpture and landscape architecture. After working in Minneapolis, he returned to Israel. His first commission as a landscape architect was for an adventure playground in the older section of Yarkon Park that created as much stir then as his recently completed rock garden evokes today.

In the rock garden, Sarig underscores the connections among water (the source of life), rock (foundation of the land) and the living material of trees. As raw material, he and collaborators Mira Jacobson and Mira Ephrata of his office drew upon igneous rocks such as granites, sedimentary limestones and sandstones, and metamorphic rocks such as marble. They chose rocks employed by pre-historic, biblical and modern man to build tools and artifacts, along with the same type of stone used to build and rebuild Jerusalem's central temple, of which only the Western Wall remains.

From the entrance plaza the visitor passes through a tunnel into a narrow limestone channel. As the space grows wider, the first of many surprising views of a dozen rock groups unfolds. A path leads to grouped flintstones from Bet Huron near Jerusalem and from Arad near the Dead Sea. Tabor oaks (*Quercus ithaburensis*) and hackberry trees (*Celtis australis*) line the



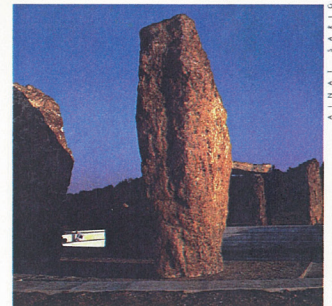
path toward a second grouping of sandstone formations from the Hermon Mountains to the eroded sandstones from Timna. Fossil imprints of leaves are visible in the stone.

The flintstone path steers the visitor toward an amphitheater built on a hill at the park's center. From there visitors can see the Yarkon River, a man-made lake and various rock groupings. The amphitheater consists of precisely cut white marble from Mizpe Ramon. It forms a perfect 16-foot circle surrounded by five steps that double as seats for performances of dance, music, art and theater. Twelve huge plates of flintstone are placed on the upper level of the amphitheater. Their striated forms contrast with the smooth marble framing the park's only pure geometric shape.

The sequence from the entry fountain and a curved white sandstone wall pierced by black volcanic blast-rock to the amphitheater focuses on the park's only dolmen (two vertical rocks capped with a horizontal rock—a way of marking an important site in many cultures), similar in form but not purpose to those at Stonehenge. The view through the legs of the dolmen orients the viewer to Jerusalem.

A counter-axis flows from the marble amphitheater to the lake, where two massive limestones from the upper Galilee are posed like Henry Moore sculptures atop a stone mound.

Above: Yarkon Park master plan calls for six theme gardens. Right: Dolmen is made from one of 12 plates of striated flintstone.



The biaxial plan will be augmented by a visitors' center that will include an area where visitors can borrow hammers and other tools to explore the properties of rock samples.

There are many places in Israel where the landscape is more important than sculpture, where one intervenes in the landscape consciously not wishing to dominate it. In other places, imaginative and sculptural compositions enhance our appreciation of landscape. Such is the case among the stones of Yarkon Park. ■