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The Ark of the Covenant

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THE ARK - THE HEART OF THE MISHKAN AND ITS PURPOSE

In his introduction to Parashat Teruma, the Ramban makes several observations crucial for a proper understanding of the role of the Mishkan (and later the Beit Mikdash). He begins by explaining the timing of the commandment to build the Mishkan - following the Divine revelation to Israel on Har Sinai and their acceptance of the Ten Commandments and the mitzvot of Parashat Mishpatim, concluding with the sealing of the covenant between God and Israel (24:1-8). Now a new relationship has been established between God and Israel: "From now on, behold, they are a nation unto Him and He will be a God to them." It is appropriate that this relationship between the partners to the covenant be expressed in the construction of "a Temple to rest His Shekhina (Presence) amongst them" as a continual expression of this covenant.

However, the Mishkan is not a static expression of this covenantal relationship, but rather a tool for its continuation and completion. Israel entered the covenant like converts who had been told "SOME of the mitzvot, which were like 'headings' for all the mitzvot of the Torah," but the covenant would be complete only when they received the entire Torah. Thus, the Torah specifies several times that the purpose of the Mishkan is to serve as a place for continued revelation to Moshe in order to complete the giving of the Torah (25:22, 29:42-43, 30:6, 30:36). The realization of this idea is also mentioned several times after the construction of the Mishkan is completed (Vayikra 1:1, Bamidbar 7:89, etc.)

Even the name "Ohel Mo'ed," which is repeated many times, means simply "the Tent of Meeting" - the tent in which God meets with Moshe and gives him commandments for Bnei Yisrael (see also Rashbam 25:8). The Torah repeatedly links the concepts of "edut" (testimony) with the concept of "hiva'adut" (meeting), e.g. "Before the covering which is upon the TESTIMONY (edut) where I will MEET (iva'ed) with you" (30:6). The luchot (tablets) are testimony to God's covenant with Israel, and therefore it is fitting that the place where the testimony is kept will serve as the place of meeting between God and Moshe, with a view to completing this covenant.

Thus we reach the Ramban's conclusion, that "the secret of the Mishkan is that the Divine Glory which rested upon Har Sinai

will rest there in a hidden manner ... and when Moshe would come there, the Divine word would come to him AS IT CAME TO HIM ON HAR SINAI." On Har Sinai Moshe was commanded with regard to the construction of the Mishkan, at Har Sinai he was shown a vision of the Mishkan and its vessels, at Har Sinai the Mishkan was built and dedicated, and when the time came to leave Har Sinai and proceed into the desert, Bnei Yisrael took with them a "portable revelation" in the form of the Mishkan.

If this is indeed the significance of the Mishkan, then it is clear that the Ark (containing the Tablets of Testimony) and the Ark's covering (with the keruvim from between which God spoke to Moshe) represents the very heart of the Mishkan, as the Ramban writes. The two related functions of the Ark - containing the Testimony and serving as a point of meeting - are reflected in the two names of the Mishkan: "Ohel Mo'ed" (Tent of Meeting) and "Mishkan Ha-edut" (Resting Place of the Testimony). In other words, the entire Mishkan is designated by the function of the Ark.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE PARASHA OF THE ARK

The critical importance of the Ark in the mishkan finds expression in the parasha devoted to its commandments (25:10-22) in a number of ways:

It is the first vessel which they are commanded to make, as the Ramban notes: "The ark and its cover are mentioned first, as they are first in order of importance."

The parasha dealing with the ark, consisting of thirteen verses, is the longest of all the parshiot devoted to the vessels of the Mishkan.

The opening of this parasha (25:10) is addressed in the plural. This is the only time that the plural is used in a command concerning a vessel of the Mishkan (even in the continuation of the parasha of the Ark, we find a switch to the singular). The Ibn Ezra explains the use of the plural in "And they shall make an Ark" as follows: "Because God said in the beginning (verse 8), 'And THEY SHALL MAKE Me a sanctuary,' therefore He likewise starts here, 'And THEY SHALL MAKE an Ark.'" The Ibn Ezra's connection is compelling in light of the fact that the Ark is the essence of the Mishkan.

The Ark is not a "useful" vessel - no service is performed with it. At the end of each parasha commanding the construction of one of the vessels of the Mishkan, its function in the daily workings of the Mishkan is mentioned (e.g. 25:30, 25:37). But the purpose of the Ark differs: "And you shall place in the Ark the testimony which I shall give you" - this is a one-time action which will turn the Ark into an "Ark of Testimony." Its regular "use" lies not in the priestly service but rather in meeting with Moshe, as we see at the conclusion of the command to build the Ark (25:22): "And I shall meet there with you and I shall speak to you from above the covering."

The Ark is one of four vessels of the Mishkan which have poles used for carrying it. But only with regard to the poles of the Ark are we told (v.15): "The poles shall be in the rings of the Ark; THEY SHALL NOT MOVE FROM THERE."

THE PROHIBITION OF REMOVING THE POLES

This verse, "The poles shall be in the rings of the ark, they shall not be removed from there," is interpreted by Chazal as a negative command:

"Rabbi Elazar said ... He who removes the poles of the Ark is punished with lashes." (Yoma 72a)

This negative command is included as one of the 613 mitzvot, and the Rambam rules thus (Hilkhos Klei Ha-mikdash 2:13).

Does a literal interpretation of this verse necessarily entail this conclusion? The Talmud already shows that R. Elazar's words were not universally accepted:

"Rav Acha bar Yaakov questioned him: Perhaps what the Torah means is, Attach the poles and place them well within the rings SO THAT THEY DO NOT MOVE."

But the Gemara rejects this explanation for linguistic reasons:

"Is it written 'IN ORDER that they do not move?'" [Rather, it states "they shall not move" as an independent prohibition, not a reason for what was written before.]

The Chizkuni offers an additional explanation of the verse, which removes the prohibition:

"...According to the literal meaning THERE IS NO NEED to remove these poles, for they involve no trouble or taking up of space, since they are in the Holy of Holies where no one but the Kohen Gadol enters and leaves... on one day of the year. But if there were poles [permanently affixed] to the altar of copper which is in the courtyard, where everyone enters and leaves, then people coming in and going out would constantly bump into them. Therefore [the poles] need to be affixed [to the altar] only at those times when they are on the move, as it is written (27:7), 'And the poles shall be on the two sides of the altar TO CARRY IT.'"

While this explanation is intriguing, it raises the question: why does the Torah add extra words and tell us something which is obvious - i.e., that "there is no need" to remove the poles? We therefore return to R. Elazar's words, which seem to be the simple meaning of the text.

What, then, is the reason for this prohibition? The Rambam (Hilkhos Klei Ha-mikdash 2:12-13) connects the prohibition to

remove the poles from the rings to the positive commandment to carry the Ark upon the shoulders and not on a wagon or an animal (Bamidbar 7:9). The gemara (Sota 35a) explains that King David forgot the law of carrying upon the shoulders, and when he put the Ark on a wagon to bring it to Yerushalayim, the priest Uzza (who reached out to steady it) was struck down by God. This is explicit in the account in Divrei Ha-Yal (15:13-15), where David tells the Leviim, "Because you did not do this at first, Hashem our God made a breach upon us, because we did not seek Him according to the law." Thereafter we read, "And the children of the Levites carried the Ark of God upon their shoulders, with the poles upon them, AS MOSHE HAD COMMANDED ACCORDING TO THE WORD OF GOD."

It would seem that the prohibition of removing the poles is meant to prevent the possibility of forgetting the obligation that the Ark be carried upon the shoulders. The continuous presence of the poles serves as a reminder that the Ark is to be carried only by means of the poles. This is not the only instance in which a biblical prohibition serves as a "fence" around another biblical mitzva (which instructs the Sages to continue to build fences around the Torah). For example, the prohibition of making a "sculpture or representation" is a fence around the prohibition of idolatry; the prohibition for the Nazir to eat grapes is a fence around the prohibition of his drinking wine.

This connection between the two mitzvot answers a question which many of the commentaries on the Rambam raise: The words "The service of the sanctuary is upon them, upon their shoulders shall they bear it" refer to the service of the children of Kehat to carry ALL the vessels of the Mishkan, and for this reason they are given no wagons. Why, then, does the Rambam limit this mitzva of carrying upon the shoulders only to the Ark? The answer is that the prohibition of removing the poles applies only to the Ark, out of all the vessels for which the children of Kehat are responsible. And it is this prohibition that demonstrates that only the Ark has the positive mitzva of carrying upon the shoulder.

The prohibition of removing the poles from the rings of the Ark and the obligation of carrying the Ark upon the shoulders (using the poles) both mitzvot have a common reason. Carrying the Ark upon the shoulders, with a direct relationship between the person and what he is carrying, expresses man's submission to the Ark and to what it symbolizes; it is the maximal gesture of honor. A vessel whose poles are permanently affixed to it and are never removed declares by its very appearance that it is carried upon the shoulder, i.e. that man submits to it.

We may take a step further and suggest the following. The poles, which are not completely joined to the Ark and are yet attached to it without any permissibility of separation, symbolize the proper human attitude towards God, who figuratively "sits upon the keruvim" of the Ark: cleaving with no compromise, assumption of the yoke, expression of admiration towards Him, and submission.

STRUCTURE OF THE PARASHA OF THE ARK

The parasha of the Ark is divided into two sections: in the first half we find the command to make the Ark and its accessories (the rings and the poles), while in the second part we find the command to make the covering and its accessories (the keruvim). The last verse, 22, seals both commands by indicating the common purpose of the Ark and its covering: "And I shall meet with you there..." The two halves correspond to each other in several ways (A represents the first half and B the second):

I. The vessel itself and its measurements:

A. AND THEY SHALL MAKE an Ark of shittim wood... and you shall cover it with pure gold (10-11)

B. AND YOU SHALL MAKE a covering of pure gold (17)

II. Its measurements

A. Two-and-a-half cubits long and a cubit-and-a-half wide (10)

B. Two-and-a-half cubits long and a cubit and a half wide (17)

III. Additions to the vessel:

A. AND YOU SHALL MAKE poles of shittim wood and you shall cover them with gold. And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the Ark... The poles shall be in the rings of the Ark; they shall not move from there. (13-15)

B. AND YOU SHALL MAKE two keruvim of gold... And make one keruv on one side and one keruv on the other side; of the covering shall you make the keruvim... Towards the covering shall the faces of the keruvim be. (18-20)

IV. Giving testimony:

A. And you shall put into the Ark the testimony that I will give you. (16)

B. And in the Ark shall you put the testimony which I will give you. (21)

V. Purpose of the complete vessel:

And I will meet with you there and I will speak with you from above the covering, from between the two keruvim which are upon the Ark of Testimony, all that I will command you for Bnei Yisrael. (22)

Let us analyze the parallel, working from the end backwards to the beginning:

IV. Giving of testimony:

Why is this repeated? The "tablets of testimony" which are placed in the Ark are connected with BOTH parts: the lower part, serving as holding vessel for them, and the upper part, which serves as a covering for them (this is in fact the meaning of the root "k-p-r" as in "kaporet" - covering). Therefore each of the two commands concludes with an indication of its purpose: to serve as a vessel for the testimony.

III. The poles and the keruvim:

The above table also teaches us that there is a parallel between the poles of the Ark and the keruvim which are upon the covering. The poles are two in number, they are made of shittim wood and covered in gold (like the Ark); the keruvim are also a pair and are made of gold (like the kaporet). The poles are located on either side of the Ark; the keruvim are on the two ends of the covering. The poles are attached to the Ark, inside the rings, and do not move from there; the keruvim are part of the covering and extend from it as part of one solid unit. To complete this parallel between the poles and the keruvim, let us cite Rambam's description of the way in which the Ark is carried:

"When they carried it upon their shoulders they carried it face to face, with their backs facing outwards and their faces facing inwards." (Hilkhos Klei Ha-mikdash 2:12)

This is clearly reminiscent of the description of the keruvim, which faced each other.

I-II. The Ark and the Covering:

Since it is obvious that the Ark and its cover must have the same dimensions, why is this repeated? It expresses equality of value and importance. The kaporet is not merely a covering for the Ark; it is part of the entirety with an importance all of its own, and therefore it is deserving of having its own measurements set out explicitly.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STRUCTURE

The tablets are testimony to the covenant between God and Israel. God's revelation to His nation is from now on recorded upon the tablets of stone, and the Ark serves as the focus for further revelation. Thus the Ark expresses the mutual connection between God and Israel, with the "testimony" at its center.

carrying of the Ark and the description of the keruvim in the Torah.

The lower portion of the Ark symbolizes the human partner in the covenant - Israel. The covenant of Sinai begins with the readiness on the part of Israel to enter into the covenant and to take upon themselves God's commandments (Shemot 19:5-8). Likewise the Ark must be built starting from the lower portion, which will serve as a receptacle for the tablets of testimony - the revelation of God and His commandments which stand at the center of the covenant.

"For man is a tree of the field" - the human partner to the covenant is symbolized by an "Ark of shittim wood," an organic substance that grew in the ground. But the covenant with God elevates this human aspect, illuminating it with some of the Divine glory, and therefore "You shall cover it with pure gold."

The poles affixed to the Ark (also made of shittim wood covered in gold), which "shall not move from it," represent its perpetually being carried upon human shoulders - man submitting himself to the yoke of the covenant and, through this method of carrying, expressing his admiration for "He who sits upon the keruvim" and Who appears to man from between them. If the Ark represents "Israel" the nation, a single unit that is God's partner in the covenant, then the poles represent the individual citizen of Israel who, in every generation, carries the Ark upon his shoulders.

The upper portion of the ark - the kaporet - represents the Divine partner to the covenant. The kaporet serves as a symbolic seat for the invisible God (Yirmiyahu 3:16-17 and Shemuel II 6:2), and it is therefore made of pure gold. "From above the covering" God meets with Moshe, and His revelation is accompanied by the two keruvim. The keruvim spread their wings heavenward, representing the ministering angels who always accompany God in His revelation to man. (Compare Yishayahu's vision in chapter 6.)

Just as the function of the Ark of shittim wood is to serve as a receptacle for the "testimony," so the function of the kaporet is to cover and guard that "testimony" from above. The testimony is what joins the two parts of the Ark - the two partners to the covenant, the human and the Divine.

And just as the function of the keruvim-angels is to accompany the Divine revelation that comes from between them, turning their faces towards the kaporet which covers the testimony (verse 20), so the function of those who carry the Ark upon their shoulders by means of the poles (which are under the open wings of the keruvim) is to accompany the Divine revelation that goes out towards His nation (see Bamidbar 10:35) and to bear the yoke of the testimony that is within the Ark. We have already noted the parallel between the Rambam's description of the

Just as the keruvim are an integral part of the kaporet, so the poles are an integral part of the Ark beneath it. Nevertheless, there is still a difference between them: the keruvim are made of a single solid unit with the covering. It is impossible to separate them from it. The poles, on the other hand, are placed in the rings of the Ark, they are independent objects and are not organically joined to the Ark - technically they may be removed. Their closeness to the Ark is based on the prohibition of removing them. This is the essence of the difference between the angels, who have no choice, and man, who is commanded to cleave to God and to His covenant, but who has the choice not to.

Despite the differences between the two parts of the Ark - and the two partners to the covenant - everything in the parasha of the Ark is of dual nature: the measurements, the parallel between the poles and the keruvim, and the repetition of the placement of the testimony at the end of each half.

At the time of the erection of the mishkan, on the first day of the first month of the second year, the Ark began to fulfill its function, and thus the order of the activities was (40:20):

(1) "And he took and put THE TESTIMONY into the Ark

(2) And he placed the POLES upon the Ark

(3) And he placed the KAPORET (covering) upon the Ark from above."

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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