

Holy Arks

About the Ark of the Tabernacle and the Holy Arks in our Synagogues

Sponsored by Aaron Elbogen le'iluy nishmas his father, Yeshayohu ben Aharon, Yahrtzeit, Adar 6. May his Neshamah have an Aliyah.

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The Torah portion of Terumah includes the G-d's instructions to Moshe as to how the Jewish people are to build the Mishkan (temporary traveling sanctuary in the desert, also called the Tabernacle). The order of the various holy artifacts of the Mishkan is significant.¹ The Torah begins with the holiest object, the Holy Ark (and its cover the Kaporet) which contained the Tablets of the Law.² The Ark was housed in the Holy of Holies. The next two sacred objects listed are the ones housed in the section called the Kodesh – just outside the Holy of Holies. These were the Menorah and the Golden Table.³ The commandment to build the walls of the Mishkan and to make the tapestries which served as the roof was next, and lastly, the area of least holiness, the curtains surrounding the courtyard.

When the Mishkan was built, the order was reversed, i.e., Betzalel and the other artisans made the walls and tapestries *before* the holy artifacts so that they would be able to house the artifacts as soon as they were fashioned. But when G-d gave the initial command, the holy artifacts were listed first since through them the Shechina (Divine Presence) would rest among the Jewish people. This was the entire purpose of the building of the Mishkan: so the Shechina could rest upon the people.

Lessons from the Holy Ark

Here are some lessons that the commentaries draw from the holy ark (the Aron):

- **Every Jew Participated**

The command for the building of the Aron was given in the plural ("*Ve'asu*"⁴) even though it was built by one man, Betzalel, to teach us that everyone was supposed to participate in the building of the Aron, either by contributing financially and donating some gold or acacia wood, by aiding Betzalel in some way (e.g., by carrying his tools),⁵ or by participating in their thoughts.

¹ Ramban in his introduction to the Torah portion

² Exodus, 25:10-22

³ Ibid, 23-40

As to why the inner altar (used for incense) is not detailed until the end of the Torah portion of Tetzaveh (30:1), see the commentaries there.

⁴ Verse 10

⁵ Penei Yerushalayim, cited in the notes on the Midrash Rabbah, Kleinman Edition by Artscroll Mesorah

(Perhaps this means that each Jew was supposed to wish that he could actually build the Aron, but knowing that this was impossible, he would appoint Betzalel as his agent.⁶) This participation would impress upon the people as to the extreme holiness of the Aron. When they realize that this holiness is due to the fact that it contains the Torah (i.e., the *Luchot*, the tablets with the Ten Commandments), they would strive to acquire some of this holiness by toiling in Torah study.⁷ It is possible that simply participating in building the Aron even without any specific realization was a *segulah* (spiritually propitious act) for being able to acquire Torah.⁸

- **Never Be Satisfied**

The Kli Yakar points out that the Aron was the only one of the holy utensils whose measurements all included half amot (cubits). (The Aron was two and a half amot long, one and half amot wide and an amah and a half tall.) This teaches us that, regarding spiritual matters, one must never be satisfied with one's present level but must always strive to reach a higher level. (A half indicates that one is incomplete.) This is why a truly wise man learns something from every person⁹ since he recognizes that there is always someone from which he can learn. As the verse says, "And wisdom shall be found from nothingness."¹⁰ This means that one can only achieve wisdom if he truly believes that he knows (nearly) nothing.

There are three main reasons why one truly knows nothing in terms of understanding G-d and the Torah. These are 1) our inadequate minds 2) the depth of the subject matter 3) the sheer quantity of the material. The three dimensions of the Aron represent these three things. The height represents the depth of the subject matter. The length represents the tremendous quantity of the material. And the width (which is narrower than the length) represents the fact that our understanding is deficient.

- **Purity on the Inside**

The Aron was a wooden box that was plated with gold on both the inside and the outside. In fact, it is described as being comprised of three boxes, an inner and outer box of gold and a central box of wood.¹¹ All of the gold in the Aron (and indeed, in the entire Mishkan) was pure gold. Nevertheless, the Torah mentions the purity of the gold more explicitly regarding the gold

⁶ See Yoma 3b that if the Jewish people are doing G-d's will, they get the credit for building the Aron (Techelet Mordechai on the Ramban by Rav Mordechai Gimpel Yaffe).

⁷ Shemot Rabbah 34:2 as explained by the Eitz Yosef and the Ramban on verse 10

⁸ Eshed HaNechalim on Shemot Rabbah

⁹ Avot, 4:1

¹⁰ Job, 28:12 (The Hebrew text reads **וְהִכָּמָה מֵאַיִן תִּמְצָא** The simple translation of this is "From where will wisdom be found?" But the word *ayin* can be translated as "nothingness" instead of as "where" so that it reads "Wisdom can be found from nothing."

¹¹ Rashi on 25:11

on the inside of the Aron. As the verse says “And you shall **overlay it with pure gold; from inside** and from outside you shall overlay it.”¹² This teaches us many things:¹³

- A greater emphasis must be placed on being pure internally – in one’s mind and heart and private actions, than on one’s external purity – the actions that one does in public. Since, when in public, people naturally put forth a greater effort in order to impress other people. But in private matters, there can sometimes be greater laxity.
- G-d considers the purity of one’s private affairs of greater significance since, one who achieves this is clearly doing it for G-d’s sake rather than in order to impress other people.
- The purity of one’s private affairs is an achievable goal since it is only G-d that can attest to this. Whereas regarding one’s public affairs it is difficult to be recognized as achieving purity. Since even the greatest tzadik (righteous man) often has detractors who will try to discredit him. Thus, we find, that the scoffers of the generation would say all of sorts of libelous claims against the greatest leader and prophet of all times - Moshe Rabeinu himself.¹⁴

The Aron Kodesh in Shul

The place in which the Torah scroll (Sefer Torah) is kept in a synagogue is called an Aron Kodesh (a holy ark). This is mentioned in the Mishnah (Megillah, chapter 4, Mishnah 1).¹⁵ The Rambam writes “In the synagogue, a *heichal* (aron kodesh), where the Torah scroll is placed, should be constructed. The *heichal* should be constructed in the direction to which the people pray in that city, so that they will face the *heichal* when they stand to pray.”¹⁶

In the Wall

It was customary in some shuls to keep the Torah scrolls in a recessed area that was built into the wall for this purpose. The Rama writes that, in this case, that area does not have the holiness of an Aron Kodesh (see below) since its primary purpose was to keep the Sifrei Torah safe rather than to honor them.¹⁷ If, within this recessed area, a box is built, or tapestries are spread out, these are considered to have the holiness of an Aron Kodesh.¹⁸

Cannot be Downgraded

¹² Verse 11

¹³ Kli Yakar. Since it repeats the words “you shall overlay it” regarding the outside without mentioning that it was pure gold it is not considered explicit.

¹⁴ See Sanhedrin, 110a and Kiddushin 33b

¹⁵ The Mishnah uses the word “Teivah” which some understand to mean the Aron Kodesh. Some commentaries explain that it was a portable Aron Kodesh where the Sifrei Torah were only kept during the prayers.

¹⁶ Laws of Tefillah, 11:3

¹⁷ O.C. 154:4. In addition, it is possible that since it is part of the building it is not considered to have a distinct level of holiness (Biur Halacha 154, D.H. Aval Aron).

¹⁸ Mishnah Berurah, 16

Since the Aron Kodesh is used to house the holy Torah scrolls, it is considered a *tashmish kedusha* – an item used for holy artifacts. As such, one may not use it for a mundane purpose nor sell it and use the funds for purchasing any item that has lesser holiness. Thus, if an Aron Kodesh is sold, the funds can be used to purchase a mantle for a Torah scroll since this has greater holiness than an Aron Kodesh but may not be used for other items needed in the synagogue.¹⁹

The Parochet

It is customary to hang a curtain (parochet) in front of the Aron Kodesh. This is reminiscent of the parochet (curtain) in the Mishkan and Bait HaMikdash that hung in front of the Aron Kodesh. As the verse says “And the dividing curtain shall separate for you between the Holy and the Holy of Holies.”²⁰

Rav Yishmael Cohen of 18th Century Italy was asked if a shul may remove the parochet so as to expose the Aron Kodesh which was very beautiful. He replied that this should not be done since having a parochet is a widespread custom of all of the Jewish people based on the abovementioned verse and on the idea of not exposing an item of great holiness.²¹ (See Numbers, 4:1-15 as to how the holy artifacts of the Mishkan were covered while they were being transported.)

Even if an Aron Kodesh is made of gold and there is a parochet inside of it, one must also hang a parochet outside of the Aron. One who changes the custom of the Jewish people in this regard is considered to have “breached a (Rabbinic) fence.”²²

Since the parochet hangs outside the Aron Kodesh, it is not considered to be as holy as the Aron Kodesh, rather, it has the same holiness as other artifacts of a shul.²³

A Parochet Inside the Aron

It is apparent from the commentaries on the Talmud that, at one point, it was customary to also hang a parochet inside the Aron Kodesh.²⁴

Nevertheless, unless a community has a custom to place a parochet within the Aron Kodesh, they should not do so, as this represents a departure from what is now customary in Shuls. The established customs of shuls need to be strengthened in today's times.²⁵

Using the Aron for Other Items

¹⁹ O.C. 153:2 based on Megillah, ibid

²⁰ Exodus, 26:33

²¹ Zera Emet, vol. 1, Siman 26, cited in Sha'arei Teshuvah, 154:5

²² Responsa of Yechave Da'at, vol. 6, number 9, cited in Piskei Teshuvot, 154 note 156

²³ Rama, 154:6

²⁴ Megillah, 26b, Rashi D.H. Prisa. See Tos. D.H. Mereish who argues on Rashi in terms of the understanding of the Gemara. Presumably, however, he does not disagree regarding the existence of the curtain inside the Aron.

²⁵ Sha'arei Halacha UMinhag of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, vol. 1, page 198

Since, as mentioned, the Aron Kodesh is considered a holy artifact, one may not use it to store items other than a Sefer Torah, not even other holy books like siddurim and chumashim. It is customary, however, to allow worn out Sifrei Torah that are no longer valid, to be stored in the Aron Kodesh.²⁶

One may not place their Tallit or Tefillin in the Aron Kodesh itself, but one may store these on top of the Aron Kodesh or beneath it, on a shelf or in a drawer.²⁷

It is customary to allow the placement of scrolls of Nevi'im and Ketuvim in an Aron Kodesh.²⁸

If a congregation has a scroll which is used for the haftorot, it should not be removed from the Aron Kodesh together with the Sefer Torah as people may mistake it for a Sefer Torah. Rather it should be taken out separately or, better yet, it should be kept in a separate, honorable area that is designated for this holy item.²⁹

In some communities, it is customary to place the *hoshanot* (willows used on the last day of Sukkot) on top of the Aron Kodesh. This is permissible (if it is done in a respectable manner) as it is considered that a condition was made regarding the holiness of the Aron Kodesh, to allow for this.³⁰

A Temporary Aron Kodesh

If one only intended to place a Sefer Torah in a box temporarily, that box does not achieve the holiness of an Aron Kodesh and may be treated as an ordinary box once the Sefer Torah is removed.³¹

Moving an Aron Kodesh

It is permissible to move an Aron Kodesh from one spot in the shul to a different area, according to the changing needs of the Shul. Some say that it is best to place a bookcase for holy books (sefarim) in the spot where the Aron Kodesh previously stood, in order to maintain holy objects in that spot.³²

May we soon merit to the rebuilding of the Bait HaMikdash and the return of the original holy ark to its rightful place, in the Holy of Holies!

Wishing you a Shabbat Shalom.

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²⁶ Mishnah Berurah, 154:31

²⁷ Piskei Teshuvot, 154:22 based on Makor Chayim and the Maharsham

²⁸ Piskei Teshuvot, ibid based on the responsa Yaskil Avdi, vol. 8, responsa 4 by Rabbi Ovadiah Hedaya of Jerusalem

²⁹ Shevet HaLevi, 8:71, cited in ibid, note 140

³⁰ Responsa of Maharsham, vol. 4, Siman 57, cited in ibid, note 57

³¹ Taz, O.C. 154:7

³² See the various sources cited in Piskei Teshuvot, 152, note 44