

THE ANTECHAMBER

by Rabbi Yoav Elan

To the west of the Altar stood the massive entrance hall of the Sanctuary Building called the Antechamber. It measured 100 cubits (150 feet) wide and towered 100 cubits above the floor of the Courtyard. Leading up to the large central doorway was a set of twelve steps which ran the entire width of the building. Like all the steps in the Temple these steps were half a cubit (9 inches) high while the lengths of the steps varied. The first two steps were 1 cubit (1½ feet) long and the third step was 3 cubits (4½ feet) long. This pattern repeated itself four times, save for the very top step which was 4 cubits (6 feet) long. Being that there were 22 cubits (33 feet) between the Antechamber and the Altar and these steps took up 21 of those cubits, only 1 cubit (1½ feet) of walking space was left between the first step and the *Yesod* of the Altar.

At the top of the steps leading up to the Antechamber was its large gateway. This gateway was the largest in the Temple, measuring 20 cubits wide and 40 cubits high (30 feet by 60 feet). Queen Heleni [the queen of Adiabene, a province in the Middle East, who converted to Judaism in the Second Temple era] donated a golden candelabra which was mounted on the roof of the Antechamber and centered in the eastern wall. Each morning the rays of the rising sun would strike this candelabra, causing it to shine and sparkle, which was the signal for the people of Jerusalem that the time of reciting the morning *Shema* had arrived. [The *Shema* prayer must be recited once each morning â at a certain time â and again in the evening.]

Inside the entrance to the Antechamber was its main hall, 11 cubits (16½ feet) long and 60 cubits (90 feet) wide. Every inch of the walls and floor was plated with brilliant gold and decorated with carvings of flowers, palm trees, and cherubs, all connected by a network of chain designs and set with precious stones.

In the north and south of the Antechamber were two chambers called Chambers of the Knives where they kept the knives used for slaughtering sacrifices. Each of the twenty-four watches of *Kohanim* had private cabinets for their knives (twelve in the north chamber and the other twelve in

the south) and these were set into the walls of the chambers. The southern chamber was also used as permanent storage of knives which became unfit for use. They would not be fixed since one operating principle of the Temple was, "there are no displays of poverty in a place of affluence."

Above the doorway of the Sanctuary, inside the Antechamber, was a large grapevine of solid gold weighing over 25 tons. Donations of gold and other precious materials such as carbuncles, sapphires, and diamonds, were presented in the shape of leaves, individual grapes, or whole clusters (some of which were as tall as a man). These additions were hung upon the vine until they were needed for repairs to the structure or to support poor *Kohanim*. The vine itself was suspended from strong cedar poles, similar to a real grapevine.

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