

# THE TREE OF LIFE

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

Moses records for us in the Torah reading of Ekev that he constructed an ark or box of wood in which to house the tablets of stone that he brought down to Israel from the mountain of Sinai. What is the import of the fact that this ark was made of wood and what lesson can we derive from knowing the material of this ark? Also, what use, if any, was made of this ark after the permanent golden ark for the tablets of the Law was constructed and actually used to house those stone tablets? Rashi is of the opinion that this wooden ark was later used as the ark of war - the ark and tablets within them that went forth to war with the Jewish army during its battles to conquer the Land of Canaan. The holy golden ark of the Tabernacle/Temple was never to be taken out to war, only this wooden container was to accompany the Jews into battle. When, in the struggle against the Philistines at the time of the High Priest Eli, the golden ark was taken into battle with them, the Jewish people were severely punished for this violation. Other commentators propose another, different interpretation of the matter. They state that this wooden ark of Moshe was incorporated and became part of the holy golden ark of Bezalel. The ark of Bezalel consisted of three boxes that fit one within the other. The first and third boxes were made of gold, while the middle box was made of wood. This middle wooden box was the very box that Moshe had fashioned to house the tablets of stone that he brought down from Sinai and this box therefore was permanently ensconced, as part of the great holy golden ark, in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. Or, alternatively, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban) is of the opinion that the wooden ark of Moshe was buried and hidden after the construction of Bezalel's golden ark, and that it served no special purpose after its original use for housing the tablets of stone until the Tabernacle was completed. And there is also an opinion expressed in Midrash that the wooden ark was kept during the sojourn of the Jews in the desert of Sinai to house the broken first tablets of Sinai.

But what is the importance of telling us that Moshe's ark was made of wood? Neither Rashi nor Ramban, nor the other sources of traditional biblical commentary comment on this aspect of the verse. I think that the idea of a wooden box, made from a tree, is in itself the symbol of Torah, the true companion of the tablets of stone from Sinai. King Solomon in Proverbs characterizes Torah as being "the tree of life." Gold is beautiful and valuable, glittering and royal. But it is also unproductive and dead. Gold is for museums and palaces, jewelry and crowns. But as the legend of old King Midas teaches us, gold rarely can succor life. Trees, on the other hand, are the basis of all life on this planet. I remember once seeing a National Geographic movie about a certain species of trees that are found in the African plains that succor and sustain hundreds upon hundreds of different forms of

animals, insects, birds and other forms of vegetation. Trees are life itself. They are renewable, productive, pleasant, awesome in their variety and inspiring in their beauty and practicality. Trees are the stuff of life itself. Is it any wonder therefore that the first home of the tablets of stone, containing the basic values of human civilization and the eternal hope of mankind for a better world, should be housed in the bosom of trees, in a wooden ark? For the Torah is greater than gold, it is life itself. The Torah encourages human variety and productivity, inventiveness and beauty. The Torah teaches us that our spirit is eternal and constantly renewable, vital and immortal. We are here to provide shade and life and fruit and benefit for others. The Torah teaches us that "mankind is as the trees of the fields." Moshe's wooden box that became the Torah's first ark remains as its symbol of holy life.

Shabat Shalom.

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