

THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In this week's parsha, Moshe tell us that he was instructed by God to craft an ark of wood in which to place the tablets of stone that he brought down from Sinai and upon which were inscribed the Ten Commandments. The major commentaries to the Bible, such as Rashi and Ramban, differ in their interpretations of the purpose of this wooden box. One opinion states that the wooden box was the ark that went out to war with the armies of Israel. Another opinion is that it was the wooden box that was inserted between the two golden boxes of Bezalel and that the three boxes together formed the great golden ark that contained the tablets of stone in the Mishkan and the Temple. There is also an opinion that the wooden box that Moshe created was merely a temporary home for the tablets of stone, until the Mishkan and the golden ark was completed to house them. It served no other purpose then and disappeared afterward from Jewish life. As with all matters of Torah, all of these different interpretations have validity and a message for our times and us. The different interpretations speak to us of the different situations that Israel faced and faces. The common message is that Israel cannot succeed without the Holy Ark of the Law and the tablets of stone from Sinai that reside within it.

Israel triumphs in war not only because of its superior weaponry and technology but also because of its human morale, spirit, faith and courage. All of these latter attributes are derived from the moment of revelation at Sinai. It is there that God told us: "Today you have become a nation!" Thus Moshe's wooden ark must always accompany us when the armies of Israel are forced to go to war. War requires an ark of wood, one of a living spirit, of trees that can bear fruit and provide comfort and shade and not an inanimate one of gold. The golden ark has its place but not on the battlefield. Spirit, tenacity and courage, all Torah virtues, are the stuff of victory and survival.

The golden ark, in order to be effective, must contain within it the wooden ark as well. Gold is royalty but it is also hubris, arrogance and a false assessment of self. To house the Torah it cannot be made purely of gold. The Torah searches for humility and a lack of ostentation, an understated home, if you will. Thus between the splendor and shine of the two golden boxes of the Mishkan and the Temple, resides a wooden box fashioned by Moshe and ordered by God as a reminder of the necessity of contriteness of spirit and a true self-assessment.

And finally, the Torah always requires a home, a place to be within Israel. Sometimes the place is great and impressive and sometimes it is small and ordinary. The rabbis taught us not to look at the container but rather at the contents. While the great golden residence of Torah is being built we are

still obligated to have it reside amongst us, even if only in a plain wooden box. Over our long history, these lessons have been impressed on our soul and psyche. Wherever we go in life and wherever our destiny takes us, the Torah accompanies us, but only if we create a container - even is only of wood - to carry it along on the journey of life.

Shabat Shalom.

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