

THE HUMAN ARK

by Rabbi Berel Wein

I have always been fascinated by the wooden ark that Moshe mentions in this week's parsha as being the place where he deposited the tablets of stone upon which the aseret hadvarim - the Ten Commandments were inscribed. The commentators to the Bible differ in their understanding of this wooden ark. Some present it as being the ark that went out to war to lead the Israelites in battle against their enemies. Others see the wooden ark as being the inner middle ark of the three "boxes" that composed the Holy Ark that resided in the Holy of Holies. The outside "box" was gold, the inside "box" was gold and the middle "box" that separated between them was made of wood. It was this wooden "box" that Moshe used as a temporary storage place for the great tablets of Sinai.

In any event, no matter which opinion we will follow in this discussion, it is obvious that this wooden ark had great significance and importance in Jewish life. It led the Jewish army into battle and victory and/or it bound together the two "boxes" of gold that housed the tablets of stone in the Holy of Holies. So what is so special about a wooden box? I appreciate the value and grandeur that the golden "boxes" must have brought to the Temple and the tablets of stone that they contained. After all, the Torah and the Temple represent the royalty of Judaism and royalty requires gold to enhance it. But why the wooden ark? What does that represent and teach us?

I think that the wooden ark represents the power of Torah in Jewish life. The Torah is compared to the tree of life - eitz chayim. Wood is a symbol of life not of an inert metal. Trees are one of the great natural wonders of God's world. Without their presence, life as we know it on this planet could not exist. The Torah itself compares human life to trees - ki haadam eitz hasedah - humans are as the trees of the field. The Torah cannot be housed only in gold. It is the symbol of life and therefore must be nurtured and protected by living things.

Even in war, with all of its technology and weapons, it is the living human being's bravery, courage and ability that ultimately decide the fray. Therefore, Moshe's choice of a wooden ark to house the tablets of stone is a most appropriate one. For in our time, when we are deprived of the Temple and of the golden Holy Ark, the Torah resides within the living organism of the Jewish people and of individual Jews. We are, so to speak, Moshe's wooden ark.

It is our living vitality that creates the commitment to Torah that ensures its continuity and eternity. The Torah does not reside within golden museums. Rather, it resides within the living Jew who cherishes its teachings and values and practices its ritual lifestyle. How important and necessary therefore is this lesson of Moshe's wooden ark. It speaks to the heart of Jewish life and practice.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com

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