

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE KERUVIM

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Terumah

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These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #714 The Beis HaMedrash Is Not a Chat Room. Good Shabbos!

The Chumash commentaries see symbolic messages in each of the various utensils that were used in the Mishkan and even in all the various subcomponents of those utensils. Certainly, a prime example of this is the discussion surrounding the Aron [the Ark, containing the Tablets of Testimony] and its subsidiary components including the Badim [poles that appeared to be used to transport the Aron] and the Keruvim [two cherubic gold angels on top of the Aron].

The Aron itself not only symbolizes Torah, it actually contains the Torah itself. The Badim symbolize those who support Torah. Just as the poles could never be separated from the Aron, so too the supporters of Torah can never be separated from Torah. We have spoken about this in the past.

Tonight we wish to focus on the symbolism of the Keruvim. What do the Keruvim that adorn the top of the Aron represent? The Chasam Sofer writes in the name of his mentor, Rav Nosson Adler, that the Keruvim represent Torah scholars, those who study Torah. Why is it that those who study Torah are represented by the child-like figures of the Keruvim?

If we had to come up with a symbol for Talmidei Chachomim, we would not pick child-like images. We would be more likely pick images of adults with long gray beards. Why did the Torah chose to symbolize Talmidei Chachomim with child-like faces? I once read in the name of Rav Shmuel Rozovsky that this teaching a lesson that a Torah Scholar must always possess a child-like exuberance to learn Torah. Typically, only children possess such exuberance. As we get older, we become jaded and nonchalant about things. If we can think back to when we were children or can think back to the way our children were or the way they are - that first time that one learns Chumash, the excitement is palpable. The first time one's child recites the Mishna of "Mah Nishtana," he is so keyed up that the excitement keeps him up for the entire Seder! Likewise, the first time one learns a blatt Gemara.

The way to become a Talmid Chacham is to make sure that our learning always maintains the symbolism of "...and I shall speak with you from atop the lid, from between the two Keruvim that are on the Aron of the Testimony..." [Shemos 25:22]. A person must try to hold onto that child-like enthusiasm, in order to become a true Talmid Chochom.

As we've mentioned in the past, the word for a sage in Hebrew is not "Chochom", it is "TALMID Chochom". Even the great sage remains a STUDENT.

There is a famous story of a Rabbi in Norfolk Virginia who told his secretary that he would not take any calls between 10:00 and 11:00 each morning, because that is the time that he sets aside to learn Torah. When the members of the Board of Directors heard about their Rabbi's blocking out this time slot each day to study Torah, they complained to him: "We thought you finished the Seminary already. Why do you need to keep on studying?"

This is a concept that is foreign to people who were zoche to learn in Yeshiva. For us, the Chochom is the TALMID Chochom, the sage who is still a student. Learning never stops. That is why Talmidei Chachomim are represented by Cherubs. In order to grow in learning, a person needs to maintain the excitement and enthusiasm of young children.

There is another component to the Keruvim beside their child-like faces. They were also facing one another: "Pneihem ish el achiv" [Shemos 25:20]. Rav Nosson Adler explains that although they were FACING one another, they were not actually LOOKING at one another. Each of the Keruvim were in reality looking downwards towards the Aron itself.

The symbolism of facing one another without looking at each other may be explained as follows: Torah scholars may sometimes disagree with one another and disagree vehemently because they are each interested in understanding what the Torah says and they may understand it differently from one another. Their focus is not with each other but with what the Luchos HoAydus [Tablets of the Testimony] say, their focus is on the Truth as it emerges from the Torah.

But even though they are focused downward and may have sharp differences of opinion on what the Truth is, they do not turn their backs on one another and they certainly do not march away from one another in opposite directions. Despite their disagreements, Talmidei Chochomim are never disrespectful of one another. They always remain facing one another with respect, with comradeship, and even with love.

The last Mishna in Tractate Sotah states that one of the signs of the era preceding the Moshiach (Ikvesa d'Meshicha) is that "Truth will become rare (ne'ederes)". The Gemara expounds based on use of the word ne'ederes that Truth will become "Adarim Adarim" - like flocks. What do Chazal mean by that? Chazal mean that in the pre-Messianic era, people will think that Truth is only found in their particular "flock" (i.e. -- sect or group). Everyone will think that anyone from a different "flock," from a different type of grouping cannot possibly have the Truth. We know that this is not true, but unfortunately we see this attitude in our own times. We have divided into different groups each of

which thinks that they have the monopoly on Emes [truth] and each of which may not feel that they need to have the courtesy to treat other groups with respect, even though they too may be totally committed and totally "for the sake of Heaven."

This is what the Cheruvim are supposed to represent. One can be focused on the Kapores and on the Aron containing the Luchos in order to gain the Emes, but one can and should remain facing (courteous to and respectful of) other Talmidei Chochomim who are also interested in that same Truth, even though they come to different conclusions of what that Truth is telling us.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Teruma are provided below:

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