

SYMBOLISM OF THE ARON

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Terumah

Symbolism of the Aron

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #802, Birthday Cakes On Shabbos. Good Shabbos!

Despite the fact that we don't have a Bais HaMikdash today or its various utensils or furniture items, all of the commentaries make attempts to derive great symbolic lessons from the description of the components of the Mishkan that are mentioned in the parsha as well as the way that they were built.

The Torah describes the Aron and its dimensions: "They shall make an Aron of Acacia wood, two and half cubits its length; a cubit and a half its width; and a cubit and a half its height. You shall cover it with pure gold, from inside and from outside you shall cover it, and you shall make on it a golden crown all around. [Shemos 25:10-11]

Various commentaries find significance in the fact that all the measurements for the Aron were given in half ammos [cubits] (2.5 x 1.5 x 1.5) as compared with the other utensils whose dimensions, for the most part, are specified in whole cubit (Amma) units.

The Baal HaTurim says that since the Aron contains the Torah, it is symbolic of the Talmid Chochom. The lesson is that the Talmid Chochom must maintain his humility and see himself in half measures (i.e. - not yet living up to his full potential). In the past, when a child was short, other children would call him using the pejorative, "half-pint." The idea is that he was only a "chatzi shiur" - half of a quantity.

The Kli Yakar comments regarding the same question in a similar vein that the lesson for the Talmid Chochom is that he should always think that his work is only half finished. Even when one finishes Shas or reaches a certain level, he should see his job as only "half done".

The Pardes Yosef cites an interesting observation in the name of the Chida. In Maseches Soferim, it is brought that the pasuk "Darosh Darash Moshe" must to be written in the Sefer Torah such that the word Darosh is written at the end of a line and the subsequent word Darash (spelled the same way in Hebrew - Daled - Reish - Shin) is written at the beginning of the next line. The Chidah homiletically

explains this very beautifully: When one expounds (Darosh) and he finds himself at the end of the line, thinking "I am already finished", we tell him "No, you are never finished. Go to the beginning of the next line and start expounding all over!" All these are representative of the symbolism found by various commentators of the half ammos mentioned by the dimensions of the Aron.

Another example of homiletic symbolism that abounds around the description of the keylim [vessels] of the Mishkan is the fact that the poles which were used to transport the Aron were never allowed to be removed from the rings which encase them [Shemos 25:15]. Even though the Shulchon [Table] and the Menorah also had rings and carrying poles to transport them, the law that the poles were never to be removed from the rings only applied to the Aron. What is the symbolism here?

The commentaries explain that by the Shulchon and the Menorah, the poles were there to carry them strictly for pragmatic reasons. The poles of the Aron however represent people who support Torah. They represent the people who pay the bills, so to speak. We should never think that there will come a time when we can discard those who support Torah. They will always remain an essential component of the eternal preservation of Torah amongst the Jewish people. The poles remain in the prestigious place in the Holy of Holies together with the Aron itself.

This is analogous to the message our Rabbis derive from the pasuk "Rejoice Zevulun in your going out and Yissocher in your tents" [Devarim 33:18]. Chazal note that Zevulun (who represents the supporters of Torah) gets first mention in this pasuk to emphasize that he is on par with Yissocher (who represents those who study Torah).

This leads us to the following question. The Torah teaches: "You shall cover it with pure gold, from inside and from outside you shall cover it..." [Shemos 25:11]. Rashi cites the Gemara [Yoma 72b] that Bezalel made three Arons, two golden and one wooden. They each had four walls and a bottom and they were each open at the top. In other words, the Aron was not really solid gold. It had that appearance but in truth it was made of wood with gold on the outside and gold on the inside. The Menorah was pure gold. Why was the Aron not made this way as well? It was certainly not because they could not afford an Aron of pure gold! What is the symbolism of this wooden interior for the Aron?

Rav Simcha Schepps, z"l, (a Rosh Yeshiva in Torah VoDaath) has a very interesting thought on this subject. There is a major difference between gold and wood. Gold is an extremely soft metal. It is very malleable. The purest form of gold is 24 carat gold. Less pure is 18 carats. 14 carat gold is less pure than 18 carat. They do not make gold more than 24 carets because it would break. It would be too soft. A 14 carat necklace is much sturdier than a 24 carat gold necklace because it has a larger percentage of non-gold alloys mixed in to give it strength.

The symbolism is as follows. The Aron represents Torah. Wood is solid and does not easily bend. The reason they strengthened the Aron with a wooden inside is to emphasize that we should not try

to mold the Torah to meet our own needs. Pure gold could be formed and twisted any which way. We are not allowed to do that with Torah.

Unfortunately, we have been witness to different movements that try to shape the Torah. If they cannot fit their lives to the Torah, they try to shape the Torah to match their lives. This is what the Torah wants us to avoid and this is the message taught by the firm solid wood inside of the Aron between the two layers of gold.

In a similar vein, I saw an observation from Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, z"l. In his eulogy for the Brisker Rav Rav Sorotzkin asked, "Why was it that in the Holy Aron that housed the Luchos haEdus [Tablets of Testimony] was kept in the Kodesh Kadoshim behind a curtain?" No one ever saw the Aron Kodesh except for one person, one day during the year. Only the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur ever had a chance to see it! "Why was that?" he asked.

Rav Sorotzkin explained that the Torah was in a vault. It is off limits so that no one should dare try to tamper with it. Rav Sorotzkin compared this concept to the Brisker Rav. He lived in Yerushalayim in a little house and did not have very much to do with the rest of society. His job was that he was the guardian of Torah. He was in the Holy of Holies with the Torah. He was untouchable, just as the Torah must be untouchable.

One final example of symbolism: The Talmud in Yoma links the fact that the Aron had gold plating on the outside and gold plating on the inside with the statement that "Any Talmud Chochom who is not equivalent on the inside with the way he appears on the outside is not a Talmud Chochom." A person who puts on an act for everybody to see on the outside but who in his essence - on the inside - is not like that is no Talmud Chochom!

Listen to a story: The Satmar Rebbe, zt"l, came to America after World War II. Rav Shraga Feivel Medelovitz, the Principal of Yeshiva Torah VoDaas invited him to come to Torah VoDaas to present a Torah lecture for the students. The Satmar Rebbe was an outstanding scholar. He gave a well-received shiur and as is customary, the students surrounded him after the lecture raising various points of analysis regarding the lecture. There were Torah discussions back and forth, it was a beautiful scene.

Rav Shraga Feivel Medelovitz was taking this all in. He was bursting with pride. He was smiling from ear to ear. This demonstrated that he had been successful in raising a generation of young Torah students in America who were capable of hearing a shiur from the Satmar Rebbe and engaging him in serious dialogue about the contents of his presentation.

After the boys left, he went over to the Satmar Rebbe and said "Nu, what did you think of that? Wasn't it beautiful?" The Satmar Rebbe responded, "Yes it was beautiful, but I wish that these young men would be on the outside like they are on the inside" (inverting the classic Talmudic comment that a Talmud Chochom should be on the inside like he appears on the outside). In other words he was impressed that inside they were in fact fine Torah scholars, but they did not wear beards and

payos on the outside which the Satmar Rebbe felt (in accordance with his own customs) was a necessary sign of a Talmud Chochom.

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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