

ועשו ארון עצי שטים

"And you shall fashion an ark of acacia wood"

By: Rabbi Daniel Fridman

The ark is the first of the vessels of the mishkan, in the chronological sense, in terms of its appearance in the text, but more importantly, in the axiological sense, as the vessel which bears the Torah, and consequently serves as the locus through which the Almighty communes with His people.

The Torah opens its presentation of this vessel with the four words which give this essay its title, denoting that the essential material of the ark was the acacia wood. In the next verse, the Torah requires that the wood should be covered with gold.

Based solely on the presentation in the verses themselves, one would have most likely conceived of a wooden structure with a gold leafing. However, Chazal rule that the ark was composed of three distinct boxes meant to be placed inside one another; the inner and outermost of were to be composed of pure gold, and only the intervening box was to be composed of wood.

Given the actual construction of the ark, one cannot help but wonder why the Torah would, in its formulation, present the wood as the primary material of composition. Quantitatively, two of the three boxes were composed of gold. Qualitatively, gold is certainly the more valuable of the two materials. Visually, gold was all that would be seen. By all rights, the Torah ought to have said זהב ארון עצי שטים.

As is always the case when it comes to the Mishkan, construction bespeaks spiritual message. If the Torah is emphasizing the wooden component of the ark, at the expense of the gold, this cannot be an accident.

There is a superficially puzzling statement of Chazal which may offer some measure of assistance in addressing our question. Given that acacia wood is obviously not indigenous to the Sinai desert, the Tanchumah argues that the wood came from trees which Yaakov instructed his children to plant in Egypt. Through his prophetic insight, Yaakov anticipated the need for these trees, and ensured that his children would have them at their disposal. The gold, on the other hand, would have been obtained from the Egyptians during the Exodus or at the Red Sea.

Operating with the premise of the Tanchumah, we can now return to our question with a completely different perspective. Obviously, the ark was quantitatively, qualitatively, and visually more gold than wood, but the Torah is stressing that for the ark to be a valid vehicle for harboring and transporting Torah, it must be defined, in its essence, by the wood, by its link to

our past, to the masorah, to Yaakov. Such is equally the case when it comes to the human 'arks', those people who are responsible for the transmission of Torah from one generation to the next. It is wonderful if they have been blessed with a golden sheen, but what is essential is that their core be composed of the firmest wood, the acacia of Yaakov. Absent this crucial sense of rootedness in the *mesorah*, there can be no secure way of transmitting our heritage to the future.