

V'Asu Aron Atzei Shitim: Yaakov's Indelible Contribution to the Aron

Rabbi Daniel Fridman

I.

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 words *v'asu aron atzei shitim*, 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 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 *v'asu aron zahav*.

II.

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 heritage, to Yaakov.

If the aron is indeed the vehicle for transmission of Torah, the sine qua non for transmission of Torah is our link to the past, our sense of fidelity to the notion of *mesorah*. It is most certainly not the gold, with all of its aesthetic appeal, which ensures the safe transmission of Torah from one generation to the next. Rather, it is a sense of uncompromising fealty to the past, to those who came before us and sacrificed, to uphold both the values and practices of Torah even as society, by its very nature, shifts and evolves.

III.

In consideration of the Tanchuma's account of the source of the atzei shitim, another element of the aron's construction comes into stark relief. As the Torah prohibits removal of the poles from the aron, numerous acharonim- R' Samson Rapheal Hirsch, the Netziv, and the Rav- all understand the deep symbolism of this issur Torah.

In slightly varying formulations, they each emphasized the notion that the prohibition to remove the poles from the aron was a reflection of the fundamental principle that Torah must always be transported, across space and time, along with the Jewish people. The Rav famously articulated this as his "fourteenth ani ma'amin", that Torah can and must thrive in any geographic, cultural, and social milieu.

In light of this insight, we may perhaps add an element to this interpretation of the lav of "lo yasuru mimenu." It is noteworthy that these poles were also, like the Aron, *atzei shitim*, with a sheen of gold. As such, what enables us to, literally and figuratively, transport the aron and all that it embodies from one generation to the next is indeed our rootedness in an eternal, immutable worldview, the *atzei shitim* given to us by Yaakov Avinu.

IV.

There is perhaps one final element of the construction of the Aron which may be revisited in light of the tanchuma's assertion that the core element of the aron was provided by Yaakov Avinu. As developed by Ramban, Chazal observed that the mandate to construct the aron was given in the plural,

v'asu aron atzei shitim, to reflect the fact that the entire Jewish people had a role in constructing the aron.

In one sense, this is reflective of a core axiom of yahadut, regarding the accessibility of Torah. Most famously articulated by Rambam, if *keter kebuna* and *keter malchut* are already spoken for, *keter Torah* is and must always be totally available, *munach, omed, v'muchan, kol mi she'rotzeh yavo v'yitol*.

Yet, if we are to move one step further along in this line of analysis, we might inquire, who generated this ethic? Who insisted upon the notion that Torah be available to all members of the Jewish people? The answer is clear: Yaakov Avinu.

It was Yaakov who first merited the *mitah shleimah*, in Chazal's term, the inclusion of all of his sons within the covenantal framework. It was Yaakov who envisioned a unique connection to Torah for all of his children, *ish asher ki'virchato berach otam*. It was Yaakov, even if, in Rambam's telling, who singled out Levi for a position of Torah leadership, was exultant, in his life's waning moments, regarding the fundamental attachment of each and everyone of his children to the covenant he had inherited from Avraham and Yitzchak.

As such, the mandate, *v'asu aron atzei shitim*, to construct an aron defined not by its gold, but by its wood, by the contribution which Yaakov made to its architecture, means to construct an edifice for Torah which reflects Yaakov's parental and educational convictions. Above all, this implies the accessibility of Torah, *morasha kehillat Yaakov*.