

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld
ASBI Congregation
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The Tablets and the Lost Ark

Which comes first: the chicken or the egg? Is this a semantic question? Is this a philosophical question? I don't know. How about this one: Do we store our Torah scrolls in an ark, or does the place where we store the Torah scrolls become an ark once we put the Torah scrolls there? This may also be a semantic question, but it's also a question of parshanut - something we need to explore in this week's Torah portion.

Parashat Ekev is the continuation of Moshe's great speeches to the Israelites prior to his death. As we've noted in past weeks, when Moshe recapitulates the episodes of his life and reminds his audience of the hard-earned lessons of Jewish history, Moshe shares a unique and distinct perspective on events that are already familiar to us from the earlier books of the Torah. There is a striking example in Parashat Ekev concerning Moshe's retelling of the second set of *luchot* - the second tablets - that Moshe brought to the us after he smashed the first set of *luchot* when he saw the golden calf. We all think we know the story. After Moshe smashes the tablets he prays for forgiveness and God grants that request. God then tells Moshe to carve a second set of *luchot* and God promises to write the same words on the second set of *luchot* that were on the first set of *luchot*.

The story is told in great detail in Sefer Shemot, in Exodus, 34 and I suspect that version is the one that we imagine when we think about this story. We also read the relevant verses of Exodus 34 on fast days which further cements them into our minds. But in Parashat Ekev Moshe tells the story with a brand new detail:

בַּעֲתָהּ הָיָה אָמַר יְהוָה אֵלַי פָּסֹלֶלֶף שְׁנֵי לוחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֹאשֵׁינִים וְעֹלָה אֵלַי הַהָרָה וְעָשִׂיתָ לָּךְ אֲרוֹן עֹץ:
בּוֹאֲכֶתָב עַל־הַלּוֹחֹת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל־הַלּוֹחֹת הָרִאשִׁינִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַרְתָּ וְשָׂמְתָם בְּאֲרוֹן:

Thereupon the LORD said to me, "Carve out two tablets of stone like the first, and come up to Me on the mountain; and make an ark of wood. I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the ark."

Into what ark was Moshe supposed to deposit the *luchot*? We know all about the ark of the covenant from Sefer Shmot. We know that Betzalel made an ark out of acacia wood. But that ark was not built until after Moshe came down from Har Sinai with the second tablets in hand. Rashi makes this clear and claims that it was a different ark for a different purpose:

וְלֹא זֶה הוּא הָאֲרוֹן שֶׁעָשָׂה בְּצִלְאֵל, שֶׁהָרִי מִשְׁכָּן לֹא נִתְעַסְקוּ בּוֹ עַד לְאַחֵר יוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים, כִּי בְרָדְתּוֹ מִן הָהָר צָוָה לָקֶהם עַל מְלָאכֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן, וּבְצִלְאֵל עָשָׂה מִשְׁכָּן תַּחֲלָה וְאַחֵר כֹּךְ אֲרוֹן וְכֻלָּם, נִמְצָא זֶה אֲרוֹן אַחֵר הָיָה

"This was not the ark that was made by Betzalel for nobody worked on building the mishkan until after Yom Kippur of the first year following the exodus for it was only when Moshe descended from the mountain on Yom Kippur were they commanded to build the mishkan..."

The function of the ark in Shemot and the function of the ark in Parashat Ekev are different. In Sefer Shemot, the ark, covered by an ornate cover called the *kaporet*, was the site from which God spoke to the Moshe and delivered instructions and guidance and commands after the Israelite camp left Har Sinai. The *luchot* inside the ark symbolizes the unique and primary revelation at Sinai. The ark then serves to connect that moment of revelation to the ongoing communication from God focused on that space above the *kaporet*.

The ark in our parasha has a much more prosaic purpose - it exists to house the *luchot*. When Moshe received the second *luchot*, it was after God had forgiven us for the sin of the golden calf. These *luchot* were built to last. The first *luchot* were carried in Moshe's own hands, which was a very convenient place for them when

Moshe shattered them. The second *luchot*, given at a time of forgiveness, were safely stored where they could be treasured forever as a symbol of the enduring and never-ending relationship between God and all of us.

As Rabbi Amnon Bazak explains, the permanence of the covenant with God, that has lasted long after Moshe was able to intercede on our behalf, is a powerful theme of this depiction in the Torah. Moshe shattered the first *luchot* and saved us from destruction by Divine wrath at the time of the sin of the golden calf. But we don't need that anymore. The covenant lasts forever and the *luchot* need a permanent home. And so it is fitting that God commanded Moshe to build an ark for the *luchot*. וַעֲשֵׂיתָ לָּהּ אָרוֹן עֹץ:

But Moshe doesn't do precisely what God commands. Rabbi Ilay Ofran, in his book of *parshanut*, points out that Moshe built an ark before the *luchot* were given to him. Moshe reverses the order. God's command was to first carve the *luchot* and then build the ark. Moshe built the ark first and then carved the *luchot*.

וַאֲעַשׂ אָרוֹן עֹץ שִׁטִּים וְאֶפְסָל שְׁנֵי לָחוֹת אֲבִנִים כְּרָאשֹׁנָיִם וְאָעַל הַלְּחָהּ וּשְׁנֵי הַלָּחוֹת בֵּינָי:

I made an ark of acacia wood and carved out two tablets of stone like the first; I took the two tablets with me and went up the mountain.

Rabbi Ofran suggests that Moshe's reversal of order reflected a pedagogical priority. If the *luchot* represent Torah and the ark represents the receptacle of the Torah, Moshe, at this crucial and pivotal moment in Jewish history, understood that preparing a container, building scaffolding, needs to happen before knowledge can be transmitted. After the golden calf, educational changes were made. Moshe built this ark first to exemplify that more than we need to devote attention to transmitting ideas, we need to invest attention in ensuring a receptive home for those ideas.

This insight is consistent with the earlier idea that was articulated by Rav Bazak and both ideas are relevant for our community at this time.

We are the great great grandchildren of the people who worshipped the golden calf, and who were forgiven, and who solidified a permanent and never ending covenant with God. There is no sin so great that it can prevent us from standing before God on Yom Kippur to beg for forgiveness. And there is nothing that can keep us away from shul for so long that we cannot return.

And when we return and when we encourage others to return - the ark comes before the *luchot*. Invest in relationships with your friends and neighbors and family. Those relationships can make one into a willing receptacle for Torah. And once we have turned ourselves and our communities into vessels that can receive and contain and preserve Torah, the Torah is here. Come and learn.