

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel — **“And the cherubs shall spread their wings on high, spreading over the kapporet, as they face one another; towards the Kapporet shall they face”** [Ex. 25:20].

Concerning the construction of the Holy Ark and the cherubs, two technical textual questions are raised by the Midrash and many Biblical commentaries. First of all, throughout our Torah portion, Terumah, the various parts of the Sanctuary are commanded to be built by Moses: “You [second person singular, *ve-asita*] shall make.” The one glaring exception is the Holy Ark, “And they shall make an ark out of shittim wood...,” which is written in the third-person plural (*ve-asu*), referring to the entire nation of Israel [*ibid.*, v. 10]. Why the distinction?

Second, there appears to be a superfluous wording in the verse. In the first instance, the Torah records: “And you shall place in the Ark the Testimony that I shall give you” [*ibid.*, v. 16]. And then, after the command of the construction of the cherubs and only five verses after the verse just cited, we find once again: “And into the Ark shall you place the Testimony that I shall give you”. Why repeat the instruction to place the tablets of Testimony into the Holy Ark?

Siftei Hakhamim (Rabbi Shabtai ben Yosef Bass, 17th-18th Century Poland and Prague) draws our attention to a detailed grammatical difference that answers our question. The form of the verb used the first time is past tense (*natata*), albeit changed to the future in meaning by the prefix *vav* but nevertheless a past-tense form: literally, “and you have placed the tablets” [*ibid.*, v. 16]. The form used the second time is pure future tense (*titein*), literally, “you shall place the tablets” [*ibid.*, v. 21].

Thus, the second verse is alluding to the second tablets that will be placed in the Holy Ark after the first tablets will be broken by Moses when he sees the Israelite worship of the Golden Calf. The midrash [Shemot Rabbah] explains that the Second Tablets will be hewn out by Moses (not by God Himself), and that the Second Tables contained the Oral Law of all the generations, the “Halakhot, midrashim and Aggadot,” the human input of the great rabbis of all the Jewish periods who interpreted Torah for all times.

Along these lines there is another apparent difference of opinion, concerning the gender of the cherubs, which certainly impacts on the particular symbolism they are meant to convey. Our Sages cite a tradition that the cherubs were in the form of two winged children, one male and the other female, locked in an embrace. The imagery of this tradition is one of familial purity, innocent love, physical and emotional

attachment devoid of erotic lust and defilement [BT *Yoma* 54], explaining that Torah may best be conveyed within the familial context.

But Rashi and Ibn Ezra [*ad loc.*] seem to have another tradition: while they accept the representation of winged children, they do not include the male-female aspect of the description. For Rashi, there are two faces of young children; for Ibn Ezra, there are two male youths (“ne’arim”). Here the symbolism is not at all familial or sexual in nature, it is rather the protection and continuity of Torah through the commitment of succeeding generations, human angels taking responsibility for the eternal Torah.

And the Oral Torah is the development of those seeds into the magnificent fruit that will provide the necessary spiritual sustenance and divine nourishment for every generation. Indeed, “every spiritual truth and religio-legal decision that a devoted student will ultimately expound in a novel fashion was originally given at Sinai” [JT, Megillah 4:1] – if not directly at least in potential.

Hence, Rabbenu Yaakov Ba’al Haturim (13th-14th Century Germany and Spain) explains that the individual called to the Torah recites one blessing over the Written Torah and a second blessing over the Oral Torah, the force of the Oral Torah being expressed in the words, “and an eternal Torah has He planted in our midst.”

It is the task of the Torah scholars of every generation – symbolized by the two winged youths, reminiscent of a dedicated havruta (Torah study partnership) or by the wholehearted Torah leaders who retain a youthful purity – to nurture the seeds of the Written Torah into a dynamic and ever-increasing fount of Torah nourishment for every period and its perplexities, every era and its exigencies.

Now our original questions can all be answered. The Holy Ark that houses the sacred Torah must be constructed not by Moses alone, but rather by the entire nation of Israel, indeed, by the most committed Israelites of every future generation. The Torah is protected by those who study it, interpret it and expound its message for all subsequent times.

The cherubs symbolize the human partners in the expansion of Torah, largely to be found in the Oral Law, primarily developed by the great Torah interpreters of each generation, individuals who soar Heavenward by virtue of their ability to extract from the Divinely-planted seeds the fruit in order to make the Torah meaningful and accessible to every Jew for every place and every time.

Shabbat shalom.