

Torah Table Talk

The Ark as an Ideal and a Symbol

Parshat Terumah Exodus 25:1 – 35:17



The Book of Exodus abruptly changes as we begin this week's Torah portion. It contains a description of the building of the Tabernacle, the materials needed for this project and its dimensions. Virtually the final fifteen chapters of Exodus focus on this important project. Yet why does the Torah devote so much space to this project? The Tabernacle was a portable house of worship which the Israelites built shortly after leaving Egypt. It served as the central place of worship up until the time of Solomon when the Temple was built in Jerusalem. Having served pharaoh for so many years, the people of Israel were excited to be called on to build a place of worship for the God who had redeemed them from the house of bondage. Every Israelite was invited to contribute the necessary resources for this monumental project. Each person is told to give "as his heart so moves him." The people were not forced to contribute their time and wealth. The right to choose to participate in this project was one of the first lessons in freedom the people would receive during their sojourn in the wilderness.

The Torah goes on to describe the furnishings of the Tabernacle as well as the structure itself. We learn about the dimensions of the ark, the types of materials that would be used in weaving the coverings of the Tabernacle, and the various furnishings that would go into this structure. The people are told "Make me a Tabernacle that I might dwell among them." The tabernacle was not a house of God but a symbol of God's presence in the midst of the community.

Exodus 25:10 –

They shall make an Ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide and a cubit and a half high. Overlay it with pure gold – overlay it inside and out and make it a gold molding round about... and deposit in the Ark the tablets of the Pact which I give you.

Exodus Rabbah 34:2

"And they shall make an Ark:" Why is it that in reference to all the other vessels (in the tabernacle) we read 'And you shall make', (in the singular) but in reference to the Ark it says, "And they shall make?" Said R. Judah b. R. Shalom: The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'Let all come and occupy themselves with the Ark in order that they may all merit the Torah.'

Rabbi Ya'akov Ben Asher –

The dimensions of the ark which Israel was commanded to build are listed in half cubits (2.5 by 1.5 by 1.5 cubits). This is a reminder that in trying to achieve (an understanding of) Torah we are only half way there; we must make an even greater effort with out stopping to reach a full understanding of Torah. With regard to the altar, on the other hand, the dimensions are whole numbers (5 by 5 by 3 cubits) as a way of reminding us that when we approach the altar with repentance in our hearts we must do so with a whole heart (we should never be "half-hearted"). (From *Parparaot Latorah*. by Rabbi Menachem Becker)

Talmud Yoma 72b –

Rava said: A student whose outer manifestation is not as pure as his inner manifestation is not truly a disciple of Torah. This is similar to the Ark which is made of acacia wood that is covered with gold on the outside and on the inside. (The true sign of a Torah scholar is not cleverness but purity of character that is manifest both within and to the outside world.)

Questions for Discussion

1. The Rabbis seem to go to great trouble to find meaning in small insignificant details about the Ark. What details do they single out? Why do you think they choose to emphasize these aspects of the Ark?
 2. Why was it important to emphasize that all of the people of Israel participated in the construction of the Ark unlike the other furnishings in the tabernacle? What can we do today in order to feel a sense of ownership and participation in the enrichment of Jewish life?
 3. What aspect of Jewish spirituality do the Ark and the Altar each symbolize in the comment by Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher? Why are their dimensions different from one another? How is a person's participation in Torah study different from their quest for a closer connection to God through Teshuvah?
 4. What personal and intellectual qualities are necessary for a person to be an ideal disciple of Torah? How can we strive to acquire these qualities in our own personal lives?
 5. If you were designing a new Ark for your congregation, how might you use these sources to design the ark? What should the ark say to us about the goals and aspirations that are essential to Jewish life?
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Glossary

Rabbi Ya'akov Ben Asher – 1270-1340 A German born scholar in Spain and author of an influential code of Jewish law called the Arba'ah Turim.

Yoma – the Tractate of the Talmud which deals with the laws of Yom Kippur. It deals with this fast as it was observed in the ancient Temple as well as the laws of fasting.

Exodus Rabbah – A sixth century collection of homiletical Midrashim and narrative material on the Book of Exodus.

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

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