

Teruma. A Torah for All Places



If you had one thing to take with you to a desert island, what would it be?

Our parsha describes the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary that Israel built for God. Each item is infused with symbolism and meaning. In its inner sanctum sits the Ark of the Covenant, a golden chest, so named because it holds the Tablets of the Law, symbol of the covenant between God and Israel.

One of the features of the Ark are its carrying poles. The Torah instructs to “insert poles into the rings on the sides of the Ark with which to carry the Ark,” but then it adds, **“The poles shall remain in the rings of the Ark, they shall not be removed.”**(25:14-15) Several other furnishings of the Mishkan also have carrying rods (see The Table - Ex 25:28, Altar - 27:6, Menorah - Num 4:10) but it is only with the Ark that poles are a permanent fixture. Why is it so vital that the Ark’s poles be permanently installed?

Hizkuni explains this from a practical perspective:

“[The Ark’s] poles did not need to be removed, since they would not obstruct movement, because the Ark stood in the Holy of holies, which only the high priest entered once a year. The poles, however, had to be removed from the other articles of furniture such as the altar, since people brushed past them frequently, and they would be obstructive. They were then inserted only during transportation...”

Sefer Hachinuch also offers a practical reason, suggesting that this is a safety protocol to ensure that the covenantal Ark cannot fall or drop during its transportation:

Since we might be called upon to go forth with the Ark in haste, and in the hurry of the moment forget to examine whether the poles are properly secured and, God forbid, the Ark might slip from our hold.

“The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

<http://www.alexisrael.org/parshadiscussion> . <https://www.facebook.com/parshadiscussion/>

But it is Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch who offers a deeper understanding:

The poles of the Ark symbolize, the ubiquitous mission of the Ark and what it housed; to be carried if necessary away from the precincts of its present position. The commandment: "The poles shall not be removed" embodied the eternal message that the Torah and its mission is in no way bound or confined to the location or existence at any time of the Temple or Sanctuary. Independence of place is an essential characteristic of the Torah. This is reflected in the fact that this prohibition of removing the poles from the Ark applies only to the Ark, but not to the other appurtenances, to the table, the lamp stand, etc. The latter symbolizing Israel's material and spiritual fulfillment are inextricably linked to the soil of the land of Israel. But this is not the case with the Torah.

For Hirsch, the Sanctuary represents permanence, it transcribes a fixed place to represent God and to worship Him. As for its furniture, the Ark symbolises the Torah and the covenant, the Table which holds bread represents the financial blessings of the nation, and the Menorah symbolises Israel's spiritual and intellectual fulfillment. For Hirsch, whereas certain aspects – the material and spiritual – flourish in a national environment, in a Jewish nation state, Torah is different. The poles which are perennially attached to the Ark testify to its mobility beyond the confines of the Mishkan; similarly, Torah is independent of land and Jewish sovereignty, it is beyond a given location.

Emil Fackenheim, writes:

“I remember a picture from my childhood: ... Jews fleeing from a pogrom... the fleeing Jews in the picture are bearded old men, terrified, but not so much as to leave behind what is most precious to them. In the view of the anti-Semites, these Jews would doubtless be clutching bags of gold. In fact, each of them clutches a Torah scroll.” (“What is Judaism?” Pg.60)

Whenever I leave for an overseas flight, if my father is taking me to the airport, his first question will always be: “Do you have your Tefillin?”

The poles on the Ark say to us that as much as the covenant forms a part of the furniture of the Tabernacle or Temple, its primary feature is its portability. It is the one heirloom that Jews carry with them every place they go; for without it, how will we be Jewish?

So let's discuss

- What does it mean that the Ark must be unbound by location?
- In what way can we take the Torah with us at all times?
- What impact should this message have on our conduct, our values and comportment?
- On the one hand, Parashat Teruma envisions the creation of a physical space to worship God. Spaces are important because they form an arena in which we can experience powerful moments, an environment that can foster a particular encounter with God. And yet, at the same time, the Ark's poles suggest boundlessness, a transcendence of physical location. What do you make of this strange dissonance?

Shabbat Shalom!