



Holy Containers

R. David Kasher – kasher@hadar.org

Parashat Terumah 5784

This week, we are introduced to what will become the holiest object in the Hebrew Bible, although it is not really so much an object as it is a container. The “*Aron ha-Edut* - Ark of the Testament” will serve as the spiritual center of the people of Israel from this point forward until it disappears—either lost or hidden—during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem.

Of course, the actual holiest object is what’s **in** the Ark: the two tablets upon which is the writing of God. But once the Ark is closed by Moshe, there is no record of it ever being opened again. So it is the box of the Ark that becomes the focal point of the community. The Ark will occupy the innermost sanctum of the *mishkan*, the “Holy of Holies,” and it is from above the Ark that God communicates with Moshe (see Exodus 25:22). The camp of Israel was centered around it at rest, and carried it with them as they marched through the wilderness.

A *midrash* in the Mekhilta,¹ however, tells us that this Ark, the *Aron ha-Edut*, was not the only *aron* the Children of Israel carried with them through the wilderness:

¹ A parallel version appears in Babylonian Talmud Sotah 13a.



מכילתא מסכתא דויהי (בשלח) א

שְׁהִיָּה מֵהֵלֶךְ אֲרוֹנוֹ שְׁלִיֹסֶף עִם אֲרוֹן חַי עוֹלָמִים, וְהִיוּ אֲמוֹת הָעוֹלָם שׁוֹאֲלִין יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאוֹמְרִים לָהֶן: וְכִי מֵה טִיבֵן שְׁלֹשֶׁנִי אֲרוֹנוֹת הֵלֶלִי? וְהֵם אוֹמְרִים לָהֶן: זֶה אֲרוֹנוֹ שְׁלֵמֶת, וְזֶה אֲרוֹנוֹ שְׁלַחֵי עוֹלָמִים. וְהֵם אוֹמְרִים לָהֶן: מֵה טִיבוֹ שְׁלֵאֲרוֹנוֹ שְׁלֵמֶת מֵהֵלֶךְ עִם אֲרוֹן חַי עוֹלָמִים? וְהֵם אוֹמְרִים לָהֶן: הַמֵּת הַמֵּנַח בְּאֲרוֹן הַזֶּה קִיָּם מֵה שְׁכָנוֹת בְּמִנַּח בְּאֲרוֹן זֶה.

Mekhilta Massekhta de-VaYehi (BeShallah) 1

The *aron* (coffin) of Yosef would travel alongside the *aron* of the One Who Lives Forever. As they passed by, people of other nations would ask Israel, “What is the nature of these two arks?” They would answer them, “This is the *aron* of a dead body, and this is the *Aron* of the One Who Lives Forever.” And they said back, “Is it the nature of the *aron* of a dead body to travel alongside the *aron* of the One Who Lives Forever?” They replied, “The dead body lying in this *aron* fulfilled what is written on what is lying in this *aron*.”

This is surely a hearty tribute to Yosef: his life was an expression of the ideals in the Ten Commandments, so his remains are worthy of traveling alongside the tablets that record them.² But what is motivating the *midrash* to make the connection between these two *aronot*? It turns out that there was one—and only one—other *aron* in the Torah before this week’s *parashah*. In the very last verse of Genesis, after Yosef has adjured his brothers to bring his bones out of Egypt, his life comes to an end:

בראשית נ:כו

וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף בֶּן מֵאָה וָעֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים וַיַּחַנְטוּ אוֹתוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם בְּאֲרוֹן בְּמִצְרַיִם.

Genesis 50:26

And Yosef died at one hundred and ten years and he was embalmed and placed in a **coffin** (*ba-aron*) in Egypt.

² The Mekhilta goes on to attempt to demonstrate from facts and quotations from Yosef’s life that he kept all of the Ten Commandments.

Here we tend to translate *aron* as coffin (or the much more exciting Greek word, “sarcophagus”). We can understand how one Hebrew word would cover both terms. A coffin is like the ark in which a body is placed, because the meaning of an *aron* is, fundamentally, “a container.”³

These are the only two uses of the term *aron* in the entire Torah. The primary use by far—in fact, every instance but one—is the *Aron ha-Edut*,⁴ the *Aron* from this week’s *parashah*. The only other use—just one time, but the first in the Torah—is that second to last word in Genesis, the coffin that contains Yosef’s bones. The context of that first usage, then, serves to infuse the successive images of the *aron* with a trace of death.

Indeed, the Ark will often be associated with death. When it is taken captive by the Philistines (in 1 Samuel 5), it brings death and destruction wherever it is stored.⁵ When David eventually attempts to bring the Ark to Jerusalem, they load it onto a cart and head back with great fanfare, singing and dancing in front of it. But when at one point the oxen pulling the cart stumble, and Uzzah reaches and grabs the Ark to save it from falling, God immediately strikes him down for touching the Ark, and: “וַיָּמָת שָׁם עִם אֲרוֹן הָאֱלֹקִים - [Uzzah] died there with the Ark of God” (2 Samuel 6:6). Even after the Ark is installed in the Great Temple, every year during the Yom Kippur ceremony, when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, the people waited with baited breath to see if he would emerge “בלי פגע - unharmed.” There is a third-rail

³ In Modern Hebrew, an *aron* is usually a “closet.” In Tanakh, another use of the word is a “chest” for money collection (see 2 Chronicles 24:8).

⁴ Later called the “אֲרוֹן בְּרִית ה' - the Ark of the Covenant of the Eternal” (see Deuteronomy 31:9).

⁵ The Philistines first take the Ark to Ashdod, and place it next to an idol of the god Dagon, but during the next two nights the idol is first knocked down and then decapitated, while the citizens of Ashdod suffer an outbreak of hemorrhoids. So they move the Ark to Ekron, where then the Ekronites begin to die and suffer hemorrhoids. Finally, the Philistines seek to return the Ark, and they bring it to Beit Shemesh. The people there celebrate its arrival with sacrifices, but to no avail: God kills 50,070 men for “looking at the Ark of the Eternal” (1 Samuel 6:19). Only when it is taken to Kiryat Ye’arim to be watched over by Elazer ben Avinadav does the Ark cease from its path of destruction.



quality to the Ark; its power can be annihilating to anyone who comes too close—even with good intention.

That is why the *midrash* conceives of two arks, one named for “חי עולמים” - The One Who Lives Forever,” and one named for a “מת” - a dead person.” The forces of life and death are both contained in the Ark. It brings connection to the Life-force of all worlds, and can provide protection and abundance to people. But that power, if misused or mishandled, can also become a force for death. The Ark thus becomes a fitting metaphor for our relationship to God and to Torah, these powerful forces that can sustain or destroy. As the Talmud in Yoma (72b) says, “If one merits, the Torah becomes a serum of life, but if not, it becomes a serum of death.” The Ark can contain either potion.

In fact, according to another image from our Sages, even the *aron* containing life had within it remnants of brokenness and death. In a saying quoted several times in the Talmud, but most notably (for our purposes) by Rav Yosef (Menahot 99a):

לוחות ושברי לוחות מונחות בארון.

[Both] the [second] tablets and the [original,] broken tablets were placed in the ark.

If that is so, then not only does the source of all life travel alongside the dead bones of Yosef, but the whole and functional tablets themselves are traveling with the lifeless “bones” of the old tablets. In fact, Rav Yosef goes on to say that the broken tablets are there to teach us that Torah scholars who have forgotten their learning (due to circumstances beyond their control) still deserve honor. That scholar, who also once embodied the Torah in its fullness, now is



merely a vestige of what was. But like the broken tablets, the body that once carried Torah still retains its holiness.⁶

This is also the function of burial in a coffin. The human being was once the embodiment of the divine image. In the fullness of its power, that image manifests the presence of God on earth. But our lives are eventually fleeting as well, our containers become broken, and all that remains are our bones. They are not the human life itself, but like the tablets, they are a testament to what once was.⁷

That is what the Ark represents for Israel: not an object, but a container; not an essence, but a vessel. It can contain life and death, holiness and brokenness. It is powerful not because of what it is but what it can hold. The *aron* is very much like a human being in that way. We are all vessels, capable of containing the most sacred things: Torah, holiness, the Image of God. We carry these things only temporarily, but even after they depart, how can we not honor the vessels that once held them?

This may provide a clue to understanding the never-explained name of one of our most sacred “vessels”: the original High Priest himself. For it may have occurred to you by now that the word *aron* (ארון) sounds a lot like the name of the one person who was to visit it yearly: Aharon (אהרן). It is as if the Ark had the letter ה added to its name, to indicate that it contains some extra connection to God.⁸ That makes the name “Aharon” (אהרן) comprised of the same letters as “*ha-Aron*” (הארן): **The Ark**. The *Aron* they carried through the desert was a box that

⁶ In a sense, even the whole tablets themselves are just a vestige, a reminder of the words that were spoken in real time, from the mouth of the Almighty. No written words can capture the fullness of that experience. But we preserve the tablets as a memory of an experience that was powerful but fleeting.

⁷ Indeed, we stand before both the deceased’s casket and the Torah scroll; see this connection in Talmud Yerushalmi Bikkurim 3:3 / 65c.

⁸ This is like Avram and Sarai becoming Avraham and Sarah—each of them gets a name-change that includes a ה (Genesis 17:5, 15). See also Vayikra Rabbah 19:2.



contained stone tablets in it, records of God's speech. But Aharon—a living human being—was the real sacred vessel, the one who had actually spoken to God, and tried to live out the message he had received.

Like Aharon, like Yosef, we are all “כלי קודש” - sacred vessels,” containing an imprint of the Divine. We carry it around with us until our journey comes to an end. Then we, too, are placed into a box, and our memory is carried forward by the next generation.

