

Readers of the Lost Ark

Parashat Terumah, Exodus, Chapters 25-27 | February 13, 2021

Ludwig Friedman had a challenge. A survivor of the Holocaust in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp, he had met and become engaged to another survivor named Lilly, whose dream was to be married in a white wedding dress. But how could such an object be procured? The writer Helen Schwimmer tells us:

Fate would intervene in the guise of a former German pilot who walked into the food distribution center where Ludwig worked, eager to make a trade for his worthless parachute.

In exchange for two pounds of coffee beans and a couple of packs of cigarettes, Lilly would have her wedding gown.

The wedding of Ludwig and Lilly parallels those of other survivors: astonishing affirmations of life and continuity after experiences of nothing but death and destruction. But this Jewish wedding in the 1940s in what was formerly the Third Reich would also, in its own way, exquisitely embody the value system of a tiny tabernacle created in the desert by the ancestors of this bride and groom millennia before.

Following the delineation of the laws known as *Mishpatim*, and Israel's assent to the Covenant, we are informed of Moses being told by God of the Tabernacle—the portable Temple—that was to be created through the voluntary gifts of the Israelites. Let us understand its basic blueprint, which would eventually be imitated when a permanent sanctuary was created in Jerusalem.

A series of beams, sockets, hooks, and hangings are to create a large courtyard in the desert in the center of Israel's encampment. In the courtyard is to be found a wooden object coated in brass, atop which much of Israel's cultic rites will occur:

And thou shalt make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long, and five cubits broad; the altar shall be square, and the height thereof shall be three cubits. (Exodus 27:1)

Another series of hangings and furs inside the courtyard create a cordoned off area, an enclosed room, what is known as the *Kodesh*, the Holy Portion, entered only by the *kohanim*, the priests. Later, in the Temple, this area will be called the *Heichal*. Three objects dominate this space. One is the *Shulchan*, the Table, described in Exodus 25:23, which is intended to bear twelve loaves, known as the *lechem hapanim*, shewbread, a symbol of our reliance on the Almighty for material wellbeing. The next object in this area is the golden candelabra, the *Menorah*. The third object is a smaller altar used for incense.

Let us focus on the part of the *Kodesh* that is furthest from the entrance, cut off from the rest of it by a curtain known as the *Parochet*. This room is known as the *Kodesh HaKodashim*, the Holy of Holies. The fact that this is the holiest section of the Tabernacle tells us that there the Almighty's presence is most profound, and inside the Holy of Holies sits only one object, the locus of the Divine indwelling:

And they shall make an ark of acacia wood; two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and half the breadth thereof, and a cubit and a half the height thereof.

And thou shalt overlay it with gold, within and without shalt thou overlay it, and shalt make upon it a crown of gold round about. (Exodus 25:10-11)

The Ark, or in Hebrew, the *Aron*, is created to contain the two tablets, which are a symbol of the forged bond between Israel and the Almighty. It is known therefore as

the *Aron HaB'rit*, the Ark of the Covenant. A cover, called the *Kaporet*, sits atop it, upon which stand two angelic figures facing each other. Over them God is enthroned, and from there, God speaks to Moses:

And thou shalt make two cherubim of gold, of beaten metal shalt thou make them, at the two ends of the ark cover...

And there I will meet with thee, and I will speak with thee from above the ark cover, from between the two cherubim...
(Exodus 25:18, 22)

What are these two “cherubim”? Why do they serve as the site of God’s presence?

For the Talmud, these angelic figures were made in the image of a male and female figure respectively, and their wings extended in an embrace of one another. They are thereby an embodiment of the romantic relationship between Israel and the Divine. The rabbis report that when Israel would pay pilgrimage on holidays, the curtain to the Holy of Holies would be thrown open, and the priests would announce as they saw the cherubim, “see your love before the Almighty is akin to the love of a man for a woman.”

The Holy of Holies, in other words, is where God dwells, because it is there that His love between Himself and his people, Israel, is revealed.

Now of course, this is a great mystery that is impossible to truly understand: how can an infinite God dwell atop an Ark? The enigma was eloquently expressed by the greatest poet in Jewish history since King David, the Sephardic rabbi, Judah Halevi. Here is a selection from Hillel Halkin’s translation:

An ark was your home, but so is
heaven’s dome,

The spheres cannot hold You, but a
room can.

As Halkin notes, Halevi highlights the intellectual

obsession of his life, the heart of his great work, the *Kuzari*: How are we to understand the relationship of love between a universal God and one particular people, and the striking connection between the Creator of heaven and earth and one small slice of land, one sacred city, in the Middle East?

Halkin further describes his journey to Córdoba in Andalusia. The city now has one tiny synagogue, now restored—beautiful but small. Meanwhile in Córdoba, the *Mesquita*, the massive mosque turned into a cathedral, testifying by architecture to Islam and by its artistic adornments to Christianity, towers over Córdoba, bespeaking the great world powers that once ruled there. Halkin describes his reflecting that Spain, once the site of one of the most important Jewish communities in history, now has no remnant that matches the *Mesquita* in its grandeur. He writes:

All over Andalusia are churches
that once were mosques, the airy
lightness of whose minarets now
support the weight of Christian bells.

And Judaism? A room in Córdoba, a
doorway in Seville.

Suddenly, Halkin writes that he remembered Halevi’s words that “the spheres cannot hold You, but a room can.” And he concludes that the *Kuzari* is a:

grappling with the question of why the
infinite creator of all things would choose
to limit His revelation of Himself to a
particular people such as the Jews, in a
particular place such as the Land of Israel,
in a particular form such as Judaism.
Indeed, the omnipotent and omniscient
Lord of the universe not only entered
all that was small, He preferred it. The
synagogue on Calle de los Judíos was
just His size.

This is what the Ark of the Covenant represents. God is discovered often not in the massive, but the tiny, and ultimately in one tiny people’s eternal tale. And if the Jewish people, however small, continued to endure, it

was precisely because they believed that if God dwelled among them out of love in the Tabernacle, then He could continue to do so in the future.

After all, unlike the Temple, the Tabernacle traveled. Could not the Almighty also accompany Israel through its many exiles into the wildernesses of the world? It is therefore no surprise that Ashkenazic Jews ultimately took the Hebrew word for the Ark, *Aron*, and bestowed it upon the space in the synagogue in which the Torah scroll is placed; Sephardic Jews, in turn, utilized another rabbinic word for the sacred sphere of the Temple, *Heichal*. All this is to express the devout belief that the God who dwelled among Israel in the desert did so out of love, and therefore He dwells among us still. Exodus informs us that the poles used to carry the Ark in the wilderness must remain attached to the Ark forever:

The staves shall be in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it.
(Exodus 25:15)

Interpreted symbolically by the commentaries, this embodies our ability to take the essence of the Ark throughout our exile and to sustain ourselves with all that the cherubim embody. Israel, Michael Wyschogrod writes, “knows that it is loved, and it is this awareness that has enabled it to survive thousands of years of persecution without internalizing the anti-Semites’ image of the Jew.” For rabbinic tradition, the Ten Commandments—and the larger set of biblical commandments that they embody—are not only a series of covenantal obligations; they are the *ketubah*, the marital contract, between Israel and God. That is why they are placed beneath the embracing cherubim.

This is why the Tabernacle may well be the inspiration for the most famous feature of a Jewish wedding: the *chuppah*, the tent-like structure beneath which bride and groom are joined as husband and wife. While some have seen it as a reminder of the tent of Abraham and Sarah, others, such as Rabbi Shlomo Edels, see a symbol of God’s tent in the desert, the very Tabernacle that we are describing. Israel’s wedding, its marriage to God, occurred at Sinai, and its *chuppah* with God was the Tabernacle in which

the Divine Presence dwelled. What this means is that standing under the *chuppah*, the Jewish bride and groom, facing each other, become themselves the cherubim atop the Ark, exquisite embodiments of the romance between Israel and the Almighty. Every Jewish wedding is an Ark of the Covenant. Every Jewish wedding is the Ark restored.

We are now able to understand why Jews would be so driven to mark a wedding after experiencing the Holocaust, and why, when Lilly Friedman created a wedding dress out of a parachute, so many of her fellow survivors were so excited to celebrate with her. And yet we are further informed by Helen Schwimmer that those Jews did not want to mark the occasion in Belsen itself. So they sought a synagogue—a site of Jewish prayer, where centuries of hopes and dreams were tearfully expressed, a site that had a holy ark of the Torah—where Lilly could be married. Of course, these Jews knew that any synagogue in the area would have been ravaged and destroyed by the Nazis. But they were undeterred, and as one reads of the travels taken for this wedding one can only think of the original Israelites faithfully marching with the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle in the desert. Helen Schwimmer writes as follows:

Four hundred people marched 15 miles in the snow to the town of Celle on Jan. 27, 1946 to attend Lilly and Ludwig’s wedding. The town synagogue, damaged and desecrated, had been lovingly renovated by the DPs with the meager materials available to them.

When a Torah scroll arrived from England they converted an old kitchen cabinet into a makeshift aron kodesh (holy ark).

Schwimmer quotes Friedman as saying, “My sisters and I lost everything. Our parents. Our two brothers. Our homes. The most important thing was to build a new home.” And she further writes that,

Six months later, Lilly’s sister Ilona wore the dress when she married Max

Traeger. After that came Cousin Rosie.

How many brides wore Lilly's dress? "I stopped counting after 17, she said. With the DP camps experiencing a tremendously high marriage rate, Lilly's gown was in great demand.

So long as Jewish weddings are celebrated, Judaism lives; so long as God's love for Israel is seen in husband and wife, the Ark endures as well.

Decades later, Lilly Friedman journeyed with her children and grandchildren back to Belsen, but they wished to focus not only on death but also on life, to see the site of Lilly's wedding. Helen Schwimmer describes the experience:

Lilly's family, who were all familiar with the stories about the wedding in Celle, were eager to visit the synagogue.

They found the building had been completely renovated and modernized. But when they pulled aside a handsome curtain, they were astounded to find that the aron kodesh, made from a kitchen cabinet, had remained untouched as a testament to the profound faith of the survivors.

As Lilly stood on the bima once again, she beckoned to her granddaughter, Jackie, to stand beside her where she was once a kallah, a bride. "It was an emotional trip. We cried a lot."

Two weeks later, the woman who had once stood trembling before the selective eyes of the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele returned home and witnessed the marriage of her granddaughter.

So concludes her story. But Lilly's story is, in a certain sense, the Jewish story. To many, the cultic aspects of

the Bible, including the laws of the Tabernacle, are seen as outmoded and irrelevant. But the truth is that the Tabernacle speaks profoundly to us today.

Lilly Friedman's wedding dress was given to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and it is preserved in a glass case that Schwimmer tells us will allow it to last 500 years. And her marital memento testifies to something sublime that has lasted longer than that, to a marriage between God and His people, whose source is in Sinai and which sustains the Jewish people still.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does God's love for the people of Israel need to be embodied in a physical location through a physical structure? What does this tell us about how human beings can relate to the Almighty?
2. What are the implications of conceiving of God as a Divine Spouse, in contrast to conceiving of Him as a Parent or King?