

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XIX: Terumah (Ex. 25:1–27:19)

Essay 10. Was there one Ark of the Covenant, or three arks?

"וַעֲשׂוּ אֲרוֹן עֲצֵי שֵׁטִים", פֶּרֶשׁ רַש"י שְׁלֹשָׁה אֲרוֹנוֹת עֲשָׂה בְּצִלְאֵל נָכוֹ. מִקְשִׁים הָעוֹלָם אִם הַקַּב"ה לֹא צִוָּה לוֹ אֶלָּא אֶחָד שֶׁל עֵץ מְצוּפָה זָהָב, כְּדִכְתִּיב "וַעֲשׂוּ אֲרוֹן עֲצֵי שֵׁטִים . . . וְצִפִּיתָ אֹתוֹ" נָכוֹ "מִבֵּית וּמְחוּץ תְּצַפְּנֻהוּ", לָמָּה עֲשָׂה הוּא שְׁלֹשָׁה אֲרוֹנוֹת.

“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. Cover it with pure gold—from within and from without you shall cover it—and make upon it a gold molding round about.” (Ex. 25:10–11). Rashi explains:

Bezalel made three arks, two of gold and one of wood, each having four walls (sides) and a bottom, being, however, open at the top. He put the wooden ark into the larger golden one and the smaller golden one into that of wood and covered its upper rim (that of the wooden ark) with gold; consequently, it can be said that the wooden ark was covered with gold within and without.

- Rashi to Ex. 25:11

Everyone asks: If the Holy One, Blessed be He, only commanded [Bezalel] to make one covered with gold, as it is written, “They shall make an ark of acacia wood . . . Cover it with pure gold, from within and from without you shall cover it,” why did he make three arks?

וְיִשׂ לֹאמַר דְּבִפְרָק ה' דְּיוֹמָא אֲמַרְיִנְנָא כֹּל תַּלְמִיד חֲכָם שְׂאִין תּוֹכוֹ כְּבָרוּ, אֵינּוּ תַלְמִיד חֲכָם, שְׂנַאֲמַר "מִבֵּית וּמְחוּץ תְּצַפְּנֻהוּ". וּבְצִלְאֵל הִנֵּה יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁהָאֲרוֹן שֶׁהוּא הַכֹּלִי שֶׁבְּתוֹכוֹ גְּנוּזִים הַלּוּחֹת הֵיךְ דּוֹגְמָא וּמְשַׁל לַתַּלְמִיד חֲכָם שְׂבוּ גְּנוּזָה הַתּוֹרָה, וּמִשּׁוּם הֵכִי רָאָה בְּחֻמְתּוֹ שְׂאִינּוּ מִן הָרְאוּי לַעֲשׂוֹת אֲרוֹן עֵץ וּלְצַפּוֹת אוֹתוֹ זָהָב, דְּהוּאִיל שְׂצַפּוּי הַכֹּלִים הוּא בְּטַל לְגַבֵּי הַכֹּלִי כְּמוֹ שְׂפִסְק הַרְמַב"ם בְּפֶרֶק ד' מֵהַלְכוֹת פְּלִים, הֵכִי נְמִי הֵינּוּ אוֹמְרִים שְׂצַפּוּי הֵזָהָב בְּטַל לְגַבֵּי הָעֵץ. וּבִתְלִמִּיד חֲכָם נְמִי יִהְיֶה מוֹתֵר לוֹ לְהַמְשִׁיךְ אַחַר הַהֲנָאוֹת גּוֹפְנִיּוֹת, שְׁהַרִי הַגּוֹף הוּא הָעֵקֶר וְהַצִּיפּוּי הוּא הַטֶּפֶל.

It can be said that in the fifth chapter of tractate Yoma (72b), it says, “Rava said: Any Torah scholar whose inside is not like his outside [i.e., his apparent holiness is not sincere], is not [to be considered] a Torah scholar, as it is said, ‘From within and from without you shall cover it.’ ” Bezalel knew that the ark, which is the vessel in which the two tablets of the Ten

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Commandments are stored, was an example and allegory for a wise student in whom the Torah was stored. Because of this, [Bezalel] saw, by his wisdom, that it was not proper to simply make a wooden ark and cover it with gold, such as directly applying gold leaf to the inside and outside of the wood, since the gold covering of the vessels, if in direct contact with the wood, would be completely invalidated because of the wooden vessel. For as the Rambam ruled in the Mishneh Torah, in chapter 4 of the Laws of Vessels, “if the wood serves the metal, it is susceptible to impurity; if the metal serves the wood, everything is pure.”¹ I.e., a wooden vessel covered with gold leaf would be wood serving the metal, because the wood would be providing the sole support, and the gold would just be decorative. Because of this, we say that the gold covering, if in direct contact for the wood, would be completely invalidated because of the wood. For a Torah scholar, too, if a hypothetical wooden ark covered with gold leaf would have been acceptable, then by analogy it would be permitted for [the Torah scholar] to continue pursuing physical pleasures, for just as a wooden ark would be the principal thing and the golden covering would be subsidiary, if such would not have been against the halacha, then one could say that the human body would be the principal thing and the covering, i.e., how he presents himself to others, would be subsidiary.

ואם כן היתה פוננת הכתוב, הנה לו לומר "ונעשו ארון עצי שטים . . . וצפית אתו" וכו' "מבית ומחוץ" ותו לא, ומדכתב "תצפנו" שמע מינה שהציפוי הוא דבר בפני עצמו ויש לו שם בפני עצמו ואינו בטל לגבי הכלי, ולכן עשה שלשה ארונות. שלפעמים התלמיד חכם צריך שיחגיף לרשע מתמת איזה הכרח, ואז הוא זקב מבפנים ולא מבחוץ, והזקב שבפנים עומד לבדו ואינו מחובר עם אותו של חוץ. אי נמי אמרו ז"ל לעולם יעסוק אדם בתורה ומצות אפילו שלא לשמה, ואז הוא זקב מבחוץ ולא מבפנים. ולפעמים הוא טוב ונעים בפנים ובחוץ כדרך כל החכמים והצדיקים ואדרבא העץ דהיינו הגוף חד בתרי בטיל לפי שמחשבותיו מבפנים ומעשיו מבחוץ טובים ונכוחים וממשיכים הגוף שיבטל הנאותיו מחמת עידון הנשמה.

If this were the intent of the Scripture, it would have said, “They shall make an ark of acacia wood Cover it with pure gold, from within and from without” and not say anything more. But from the fact that it’s written also “you shall cover it,” we hear from this that the covering is a separate element, and had a name of its own, and it was not invalidated by the wooden vessel, and therefore [Bezalel] made three arks. For sometimes a Torah scholar must flatter a wicked man for some necessity, and then he is as one golden within but not without, and the gold within stands alone and is not connected with that gold that is without.

¹ Mishneh Torah, Vessels, 4:5, “The following rules apply when a person makes a utensil partially of wood and partially of metal. If the wood serves the metal, it is susceptible to impurity. If the metal serves the wood, everything is pure.” See also Mishneh Torah, The Chosen Temple 1:18, “The Menorah, its vessels, the Table, its vessels, the Incense-Altar, and all vessels of the Divine Service may only be made out of metal; they are invalid if made out of wood, bone, stone or glass.” (Wood was allowed for the Ark of the Covenant only as a special exception to this general rule.)

Alternatively, [the rabbis] of blessed memory said, “A man should always engage in Torah [study] and [performance of] mitzvot, even if [he does so] not for their [own] sake,”² and thus he is golden without but not within.

Sometimes, he is good and pleasant inside and out, as is the way of all the wise and righteous men, and to the contrary, the wood, which is the body, “is nullified one in two,”³ i.e., when the majority of the mixture is permitted, as his thoughts within and his actions without are good and straight, and the body continues to cancel its pleasures due to the refinement of the soul.

ומשום הכי עשה שלושה ארונות מובדלות זו מזו כדי שלפעמים על צד ההקרה לשתמש באחד מהן לבד, שהרי אף בשל עץ צריה לפעמים להשתמש בו לבדו. ד"גמל נפשו איש חסד", וחיב אדם ליתן את הדין על מה שראה עיניו ולא אכל, וכן מתחלה בשלומד האדם אינו עדיין שלם במידותיו ובמעשיו, כדאמרינן מעקרא פי עביד איניש, אדעתא דנפשיה קא עביד, אבל כשנתחכם וקנה חכמה ומוסר, אז אינם ארונות מובדלות זו מזו, אלא כל השלשה הן נחשבות לאחד, והעץ בטל לגבי הנהב והגוף בטל לגבי הנשמה.

Because of this, [Bezalel] made three arks separate from each other, so that sometimes, as necessary, he would use one of them alone, for even the one made of wood needed sometimes to be used alone. That is, they were never used alone in the Tabernacle or Temple, but by analogy, as discussed above, we can view an inside of gold as relevant in one case, and an outside of gold as relevant in a second case, and both an inside and outside of gold relevant in a third case. As a fourth case, the wood alone, is an allegory for following the needs of the body. For “the merciful man benefits his soul” (Prov. 11:17), and Rabbi Chizkiah and Rabbi Cohen said in the name of Rav, “Every person will have to justify himself for everything he saw and which he did not eat.”⁴ I.e., we’re not supposed to be ascetics, but we’re supposed to enjoy kosher and permitted things.

Similarly, when a man begins to learn, he is not yet complete in his virtues and deeds, as it is said, “at the outset, when a person [learns Torah], he does it for himself,”⁵ but as he becomes wise and acquires wisdom and morals, then the arks are not separated from each other, rather all three are considered as one, and the wood is nullified in light of the gold, and the body is nullified in light of the soul.

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² Pesachim 50b: “Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: A person should always engage in Torah [study] and [performance of] mitzvot, even if [he does so] not for their [own] sake, as through [the performance of mitzvot] not for their [own] sake, [one gains understanding and] comes [to perform them] for their [own] sake.”

³ Gittin 54b.

⁴ Yerushalayim Kiddushin 4:12.

⁵ Pesachim 68b.