

Shouldering the Burden of the Tabernacle

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Parshat Teruma

A moving Tabernacle leading up to a permanent Temple.

Until the Temple is built in Yerushalayim, the Tabernacle, which served as the temporary spiritual center of the Jewish people, moves from place to place. The Talmud interprets a Biblical verse as reflecting this progression from impermanence to permanence.

Megilla 10a

(Devarim 12:9) "For you have not as yet come to the 'Menucha' (rest) and the 'Nachala' (inheritance)..."

"Rest" here means Shilo (see Yehoshua 18:1), and "Inheritance" means Yerushalayim...¹

i.e., when Moshe addresses the Jewish people in the desert where at times they would stay in one place for no more than a day (see BaMidbar 9:17-23), he alludes to them that while there will be a future period when the Tabernacle will be relatively stable and remain in a single location for 369 years (Shilo), nevertheless the ultimate goal is when all aspects of impermanence will be removed and the portable Tabernacle is replaced by the permanent Temple.²

¹ Shilo was only one stop, albeit the longest one, for the Tabernacle, prior to its being permanently established in Yerushalayim. (Based upon Eliezer Shulman, The Sequence of Events in the Old Testament, Ministry of Defense, 1993, p. 127.)

2449-2488	Desert		39 years.
2488-2502	Gilgal	Yehoshua 5:10	14 "
2502-2871	Shilo	Yehoshua 18:1	369 "
2871-2884	Nov	I Shmuel 21:2	13 "
2884-2935	Givon	I Divrei HaYamim 16:35; II Divrei HaYamim 1:3	50 "

² While the Temple was permanently built on the Temple Mount, its destruction first by the Babylonians and then by the Romans, removed its physical structure; however the location for both the Second as well as the Third Temples remained and remains permanent. R. Yitzchak in Megilla 29a interprets Yechezkel 11:16 as indicating that synagogues and houses of Tora study are mini-Temples particularly during the periods of the Temples' destruction, thereby seeming to resurrect, at least temporarily, the earlier role of the Tabernacle during the Jews' wanderings in the desert. Furthermore, the following Talmudic passage even suggests that when the Jewish people are in exile, a situation comparable to the total lack of a permanent spiritual center (at least in Gilgal, Shilo, Nov and Givon, a semblance of permanence existed) that was experienced in the desert is recreated not so much in terms of particular buildings and places for prayer and Tora study, but rather by the assurance that God will Remain with them no matter where they find themselves:

Megilla 29a

It has been taught: R. Shimon bar Yochai said: Come and see how beloved Israel is in the Sight of God. To every place where they were exiled, the "Shechina" (Divine Presence) went with them. They were exiled to Egypt and "Shechina" was with them as it is said, (I Shmuel 2:27)... They were exiled to Babylon and "Shechina" was with them as it is said, (Yeshayahu 43:14)... And when they will be redeemed in the future, the "Shechina" will be with them, as it is said (Devarim 30:3) "VeShav' the Lord your God your captivity and He will have Compassion upon you..." It does not say here "VeHeishiv" (and He will Cause to return) but rather "VeShav" (and He Returned). This teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, will return with them from their places of exile.

Designing a moveable Tabernacle.

Due to the necessity to move the Tabernacle from place to place, the overall structure was designed to allow for some of its parts to be readily disassembled—e.g., the curtains and beams described in Shemot 26—while some of the Tabernacle vessels, while not intended to be taken apart, nevertheless lent themselves to being respectfully transported to new locations by means of long poles, allowing the designated carriers³ to avoid directly coming into contact with the holy artifacts themselves.⁴

Shemot 25:13-15 (see also 37:3-5)

And you will make **poles** of Shittim wood and overlay them with gold.
And you shall bring the poles into the **rings** at the side of the “**ARON**” (Ark) that the “Aron” may be carried therewith.
The poles shall be in the rings of the “Aron”, they shall not be taken from it.

Ibid. 25:26-28 (see also 37:13-15)

And you will make for it four **rings** of gold, and put the rings on its four corners that are on its four legs.
Over against the borders should the rings be for place for the **poles** to carry the “**SHULCHAN**” (Table).
And you will make the poles of Shittim wood and overlay them with gold, and they shall be for carrying the “Shulchan”.

Ibid. 27:6-7 (see also 38:5-7)

And you shall make **poles** for the (outer) “**MIZBE’ACH**” (Altar—upon which animals, flour and wine were sacrificed), poles of Shittim wood and overlay them with brass.
And the poles shall be put into the **rings**, and the poles shall be on the two sides of the “Mizbe’ach” to carry it.

Ibid. 30:4-5 (see also 37:27-28)

And two golden **rings** shall you make for it (the inner “**MIZBE’ACH**”, upon which incense was offered) under its rim on its two corners upon the two sides of it shall you make it. And they should be for places for the **poles** by which to bear it.
And you shall make the poles of Shittim wood and overlay them with gold.

Scrutinizing the descriptions of the “poles” and accounting for an apparent inconsistency.

While the practical benefits of such poles are obvious, some commentators subject the description of the Tabernacle to homiletic scrutiny, and try to identify symbolic themes that its structure and artifacts might suggest. The Talmud discovers an apparent inconsistency with regard to the poles associated with the “**Aron**” and comes to an interesting conclusion as to how to reconcile the contradictory verses.

³ According to BaMidbar 4:15, the covering and carrying of these objects was assigned to the descendants of Kehat.

⁴ The frightful story of Uza, who improperly comes into contact with the Aron and dies as a result, is recorded in II Shmuel 6.

Yoma 72a

R. Yosi bar Chanina pointed out a contradiction: It is written (Shemot 25:15) “The poles shall be in the rings of the ‘Aron’, they shall not be taken from it”, and it is also written (27:7) “And the poles shall be put into the **rings**...” (this verse is describing what is done with respect to the outer “Mizbe’ach”, implying that the poles do not have to remain permanently as part of the vessel, but rather could be inserted for travel and then removed once the journey to a new location was completed). How is this possible? They were moveable, but could not slip off. (The commentaries explain that the poles at their ends were thicker than they were in the middle, allowing movement, but never complete removal.)

It does not necessarily follow that every instance of “poles” in the Tabernacle should be governed by identical rules.

The Talmud’s view, based upon its intertwining verses dealing with two different Tabernacle vessels, i.e., the “Aron” and the outer “Mizbe’ach”, reflects the approach that all aspects of rings and poles with regard to these objects are identical, and therefore a total picture can be developed based upon the qualities of all of the instances where poles are involved. However, it could be just as easily maintained that whereas the poles of the “Aron” must permanently be left in place, this is not necessarily the case with respect to the rest of the vessels, i.e., the “Shulchan”, the outer “Mizbe’ach” and the inner “Mizbe’ach”, where there is no explicit insistence that the poles never be removed.

Contrasting the symbol of the Aron with other aspects of the Tabernacle.

One biblical commentator develops a hypothesis to account for this inconsistency:

R. S.R. Hirsch on Shemot 25:12-15

...The poles, the means of carrying the “Aron”, symbolically represent the command and mission to carry the “Aron” and its contents, if it becomes necessary, away from the precincts of its present position. The Command that these means of transport may never be lacking is to emphasize in our minds the fact that from the very beginning it must be made clear that this Tora and its mission is in no way bound or confined to the place or existence of any time of the Temple and Sanctuary.

This meaning of the constant presence of the poles, as proof of the independence of the Tora of any place, receives further emphasis when it is contrasted to the other appurtenances of the Tabernacle, especially to its “Shulchan” and “Mizbe’ach”,⁵ both of which had to be supplied with poles, but

⁵ In R. Hirsch’s commentary (Judaica Press, Gateshead, England, 1976, pp. 434-5), he pits “Shulchan” and “Menora” against “Aron”. However a careful reading of where the orders were given to construct the “Menora” and the verses describing its fabrication, make no mention of rings and/or poles. On the other hand, the two “Mizbehot” do contain descriptions of the rings and poles. This leads to the conclusion that there was some sort of oversight on R. Hirsch’s part, although I am more than happy to be shown otherwise. It would appear that the error has been brought forward in the newly issued edition of R. Hirsch, translated by Daniel Haberman and issued by Feldheim Publishers (Jerusalem, 2005, Shemos, p. 548:

The constant presence of the Poles testifies that God’s Tora is not bound to or dependent on any particular place—testimony that is boldly underscored by the contrast between the Ark and the other furnishings of the Sanctuary, especially the Table and the Menora, which do not have

the poles did not have to be permanently in place, but only inserted when actually used. The thought immediately jumps to one's mind:—Israel's Table...⁶—its material life in its full completeness,...is bound to the soil of the Holy Land; Israel's Tora is not.⁷

permanently attached poles. The following idea immediately presents itself: Israel's Table and Israel's Menora—the fullness of its material life and the flowering of its spiritual life—are bound to the soil of the Holy Land; Israel's Tora is not.

⁶ Here is the omitted text of R. Hirsch concerning his understanding of the symbolism of the "Menora"'s not having a requirement that poles be permanently affixed to it, which as indicated in the previous fn. 5, I believe to be an error (poles are not mentioned at any point with respect to the "Menora").

...and Israel's "Menora"...and its spiritual and intellectual life in complete clarity and brightness... Let us speculate about the implications of R. Hirsch's apparently mistaken speculation regarding the spiritual and intellectual life of Israel. **Bava Batra 158b** R. Zeira states, "The land of Israel makes one wise." While it could be maintained that a Jew is able to reach his full intellectual potential when he resides in Israel, it is interesting that one of the leniencies regarding a person legitimately being able to leave Israel in order to relocate in the Diaspora is in order to study Tora!

Avoda Zora 13a

A Kohen is allowed the risk of becoming ritually impure by leaving the Land of Israel...for the sake of studying Tora or getting married.

Said R. Yehuda: This only applies when he cannot find a place elsewhere (in Israel) to study, but when one can find a place elsewhere, one must not defile himself.

But R. Yosi said: Even when one can manage to study elsewhere (in Israel), he may risk defiling himself, for no man is so meritorious as to learn from any teacher (i.e., there may be a particular teacher from whom you can learn the things that you need to know; there is a certain person to whom you are attracted and who can have a profound influence upon you to an extent that no one in Israel can, and for such a purpose, leaving Israel is permitted).

There is the case of Yosef the Kohen who followed his teacher to Tziddon (a Phoenecian city outside of Israel).

Whereupon R. Yochanan said: The "Halacha" is according to R. Yosi.

RaMBaM attaches an interesting caveat to the Gemora's apparent siding with R. Yosi's leniency:

RaMBaM, Hilchot Melachim 5:9

It is forever forbidden to leave Israel and go to the Diaspora, except to study Tora, to marry or to save oneself from a non-Jewish oppressor, **and to then return to Israel**. So too one can leave to engage in business (which would thereby allow the person to spend that much more time in Israel proper), but to live in the Diaspora is not permitted unless it becomes so difficult to obtain food that something worth a Dinar, can only be acquired with 2 Dinaram.

RaMBaM apparently feels that the leniencies can only be temporary rather than permanent, i.e., learning will eventually come to an end, once you are married you can resume residing in Israel, persecution does not have to occur indefinitely and even famine does not have to be a permanent condition. Just as Yaakov and his family came to Egypt as a result of a famine in Canaan, and expected to be only temporary sojourners, RaMBaM insists that the same apply to our more contemporary situation.

It would seem difficult to argue that it is proper for the Tora to relocate to the Diaspora, as symbolized by the permanent affixing of the poles to the "Aron", but that true intellectual wholeness can only be achieved in Israel—if so then why ever assert that Tora can be effective in "Chutz La'Aretz". Perhaps a response would entail something similar to what R. Akiva tells his acquaintance Piphus ben Yehuda in **Berachot 61b**, i.e., that if Tora is not studied by a Jew, he will die, figuratively, if not literally. However, the quality and quantity of learning that merely keeps one "alive", cannot be confused with one's total intellectual perfection and wholeness, which can only be manifested by learning Tora in Israel.

⁷ While I would contend that the text attributed to R. Hirsch should have substituted "Mizbe'ach" for "Menora" (as NeTzIV does and who will be discussed later in this essay), what is implied by the version of R. Hirsch that we have? Is only Tora "transportable" but not "Avoda", whose manifestation today is Tefilla? Would R. Hirsch claim that while Tora studied in "Chutz LaAretz" is at least somewhat in the same spirit and has similar effects to such study in Israel, would he claim that prayer in a synagogue or "Beit Midrash" can never aspire to anything approaching the Temple Service? Would that imply that R. Yochanan ben Zakai, who was very much involved in trying to identify substitutes for the Temple Service that was lost by the Roman destruction, did not truly achieve his goal, at least with respect to replacing the sacrificial service? Is this because prayer is so much more internal than the sacrificial rituals that most people do not pray meaningfully or successfully (see my 2006 paper on "Yirat Shamayim and Tefilla" http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/728737/Rabbi_Jack_Bieler/Fear_of_God_and_Prayer) or should we conclude that even the most serious and heartfelt prayer by definition cannot in the least approach the effects and impressions of contributing and offering sacrifices in the Temple? Naturally if this all was just an error, than the entire reflection is moot. On the other hand, it is interesting to consider all sides of the question.

R. Hirsch's interpretation is expanded by NeTzIV.

NeTzIV proposes that the vessels of the Tabernacle can be grouped into two separate categories, based upon characteristics of the poles associated with each.

HaEmek Davar on Shemot 25:14

The Commandment is given to Betzalel at the time of the fabrication of the "Aron" to bring the poles so that it would be fit for carrying. The same (the placing of the rods into the rings) is written concerning the outer "Mizbe'ach" (see 27:7). By contrast, no such language is used with respect to the "Shulchan" and the inner "Mizbe'ach", but only that the poles and rings are to be made, rather than assembled. This distinction is repeated in Parshat VaYakhel.⁸ For this reason, even later in Parshat Pekudei, at the time when the Mishkan is completed and being presented for approval, it is written, (Shemot 39:35) "The 'Aron' of the testimony, **and its poles**, and its cover"; (Ibid. 39:39) "And the brass 'Mizbe'ach', its brass grate, **its poles**, and all its vessels." By contrast, concerning the "Shulchan" and the inner "Mizbe'ach", there is no mention that the poles were brought along.

...With regard to the reason for this, the Tora is coming to teach us that the power of the "Aron", which is the Tora, and the power of the outer "Mizbe'ach", which is "Avoda" (the Divine Service, specifically sacrifices, but today prayer), are carried throughout every generation to every place, wherever the Jews are exiled. This is not the case with respect to the "Shulchan" which represents kingship⁹ and the inner "Mizbe'ach" which symbolizes the priesthood, as is maintained by Yoma 72b.

Yoma 72b

R. Yochanan said: There were three crowns (a reference to the filigreed borders on some of the vessels associated with the Tabernacle): That of the (inner) "Mizbe'ach" (Shemot 30:3), the "Aron" (Ibid. 25:11) and the "Shulchan" (Ibid. 25:24). The one of the "Mizbe'ach" Aharon deserved and he received it. The one of the "Shulchan" David deserved and he received it. The one of the "Aron" is still lying and whosoever wants to take it, may come and take it. Perhaps you might think (the latter) is of little account, therefore the text reads (Mishlei 8:15) "By me (wisdom) Kings reign" (i.e., one who acquires Tora wisdom becomes a king in a manner different from that of a descendent of the Davidic dynasty)...

And these two powers are relevant only when Israel is in their place, in the land of Israel, and the vessels are engaged in holy activity.

⁸ "Aron" Shemot 37:5 outer "Mizbe'ach" Shemot 38:7
"Shulchan" Ibid. 37:15 inner "Mizbe'ach" Ibid. 37:28

⁹ RaShI on Yoma 72b explains that a table filled with food is associated with royalty. There is even the colloquial expression, fit for "a king's table". A criteria for determining which vessels require immersion in a ritual pool is whether they would be allowed to take their place on the "Shulchan Melachim" (the king's table)

NeTziv appears to parallel R. Hirsch's approach. However, whether or not "Avoda" should be included within the analysis would seem to constitute a major difference between them.

An approach that focuses upon the Aron itself, rather than comparing it with other Tabernacle artifacts.

Finally, Ta'am VaDa'at makes use of another Gemora to question why the "Aron" needed poles at all.

Sota 35a

The "Aron" carried its bearers and passed over the river (Jordan), as it is said, (Yehoshua 4:11) "And it came to pass when all the people were passed over (the river and inside the land of Israel) that the "Aron" of HaShem passed over, and the priests, in the presence of the people." (The assumption of this interpretation is that if the priests were carrying the "Aron", they would be mentioned first.)

On this account Uza was punished, as it is said, (I Divrei HaYamim 13:9) "And when they came to the granary of Chidon, Uza put forth his hand to hold the 'Aron'." The Holy One, Blessed be He Said to him: Uza, the "Aron" carried its bearers; must it not all the more so be able to carry itself?

Ta'am VaDa'at on Shemot 25:13

It would seem that the "Aron" had no need for the poles, since the "Aron" could carry its carriers, as is explained in Sota 35a. However in the interests that the miracle not be obvious to all, the poles were used. Furthermore this was a way to give merit to those who engaged in "carrying the 'Aron'".

Similarly in future generations, where the fulfillment of the Tora seems downright miraculous, and in fact the Tora is strengthening those who study it and strengthen it, the miracle is apparent that after our long Exile, the persecutions and oppressions, our Tora has not been forgotten, Heaven Forbid. This cannot be a natural thing, but rather God Wished to bestow upon us merit by "carrying the 'Aron'"...

Nevertheless, those who wish to "carry the 'Aron'" have to identify themselves, have to make the effort to be associated with learning and Mitzvot, before any of this merit can be connected to them. Perhaps the necessity of not only carrying the "Aron" but also having to insert the poles into its rings each time it is to be transported, conveys the necessity of active involvement and support of the Tora and its contents. Once again, the means by which a person strengthens and is strengthened by Tora is by his/her will—if there is a desire for spiritual growth, Assistance will come from without, particularly from Above, to help make that wish into a reality.