

Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.

Series III: The Temple Tifereth-Israel, 1946-1993, undated. Sub-series B: Sermons, 1950-1989, undated.

Reel Box Folder 61 19 1213

The Mystery of the Ark, 1981.

The Mystery of the Ark Daniel Jeremy Silver December 13, 1981

This service dedicates this beautiful portable Ark which Allan and Phyllis Levine designed and donated to The Temple for use by our Religious School at their worship when the ship in the All-Purpose Room, for any our institutes and our campers when they re outside of the Temple building, in fact for little and our campers when they re outside of the Temple building, in fact for little as were beautiful piece of wood sculpture and the fact that the Torah mantle which Phyllis needlepointed matches the design, the tree of life, on the outside, who was killed in an automobile accident a year ago, so that the whole as an integrated piece of art which will long and lovingly be used by The Temple and used always in momora of a young man and always are short.

An Ark is dedicated by its use, There are two way brief prayers of controlline which are appropriate to the moment. The first is this: praised art Thou O Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us by His commandments and commanded us to labor over the works of the Torah; and the other is: praised art Thou O Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has kept us alive and Who has sanctified us, Who permits us to rejoice in the meaning of this material.

It's not often that a moment like this takes place in a congregation's life, and so I'd like to devote these few minutes to talk over with you what the Ark represents in our religious tradition, how it came into being, what estaman in we know of its history, how it came to be the most significant of all synagogue. And the first point, I think interior architecture of ARE THE HARE IS need to keep in mind is simply this, that the synagogue and the Ark came into being Elements in EVER TO TAKE FLUGO ene of the most revolutionary and radical changes in the religious life as part of our people and the of Israel was at high places, shrines, not unlike those of their WEST ASIAN ite neighbors. The high places were

in the Judean hills, There was an altar place there for sacrifices. There usually several monumental pieces of stone which were believed to have some kind of religious significance, they were called materials, and prayers and sacrihero because refeel wono believed the es, the place which was nearest fices took place out in the con-MAN LULLY 609 supposedly to the abode of the gods. OF CAMBAN LAR ELABORATE and the city states of Canaan the richer communities built temple shrines. These Warn by had a contact building surround 6 were usually a series of courtyards, one to which anyone could come, one into which ENTEN. only men could come, another near one into which only the priests could come. Var-The contert ious rites and sacrifices took place in each of these courtyards, and then in the building STAULTURE this place there was a tall, thin, rectangular building fronted by two suchel seles sincle columns to usually was faced east to west, and the interior room was divided at coroles and in Other bunns about half my by a great curtain. In front of the curtain, in the forepart of the room, rites and sacrifices, income burning took place. The room behind the hame of the cults curtain was usually the place where the sacred objects, the most sacred THAT PHAINS TO CENTER OF that particular community a cult were kept. In the case of our people and during the first Temple wears the portable Ark of the covenant warmings there.

AND WALKER

DONE LEGITALIT New long before the Second Temple was destroyed in the wear 70 ce of this era our people began to develop in all of their communities places called synagogues, in Hebrew bet am, and the places were simply rooms or a series of come together, and the community met for a variety rooms where the community could nono held and Hent for town meetings, to continue bunt stopico, on hold mys and at subbith the for study of the word of God. The congregation the community, met for public worwen no occassion was functioned ship, and I'm sure there were momen he most i-function poems is not a maderia impentation. We don't know very much about the forms of worship conten which took place in these early syn . We know that they had no particular distinctive architectural form. There has never been a single form like the cross so important in the architecture of the church which determined the form that the synagogue should have. The synagogue has taken any form because essentially it

centrentities and struct no whole amost of community. But we do know that in addition to there being a community center where study, worship and public business took place, the communities tended to have a library, They tended to have a library which we kept not on shelves as our books are kept but kept not on shelves as our books are kept but in chests. They wrote most of their material on parchment scrolls and these scrolls would be kept in chests on shelves, in bins, laid lengthwise, and these chests were a became the custom or became the y tavot, a cust by the third or second century BCE that when worship took place in the particular room of this center which the Jews had built, they would bring this chest of scrolls into the synagogue room, it was portable, and they would take, obsiously, from the shest the scroll from which they would read. And the first name that this ark, the ark which holds our Torah scrolls, ever had was simply the word diese, And the earliest reference to a tarah occurs in the Mishnah, the earliest collection of rabbinic law which was compiled in the early third century of the Common Era but reflects the laws of the first and second century, and in it we are MAN MANHERE TEN teld that on fast days, on special days when the community would order special worship, worship brought about because of fear, fear of plague, fear of drought, fear of enemies, and the community would want to redouble their prayers to God and make it clear that there was some kind of special concern, hoping to change God's anger into mercy. The Mishnah tells us that on these fast days they would take out this chest from the synagogue rooms into some public square, that they would put wood ash on the top of the chest as a sign of mourning. In ancient times in mourning you sat on sackcloth and ashes. And the leaders of the community would also put wood ash as a sign of mourning on their clothing and they would plead with God to understand that they knew they were guilty, that they really should be punished, that their lives were forfeit, but they hoped that He would have mercy. And they would quote from the last lines of the little book of Jonah in which the people of Ninevah, recognizing their sin, put on the garments of mourning, put on

the wood ash, and God sees their mourning and forgives them their sins and repents of the decision and the decision to destroy Ninevah is not carried out. So we know from this reference that these chests were used as a center, as a focus of the worship of the people, and that they represented somehow the presence of God in the midst of Israel.

Now, once the Temple was destroyed, once there was no longer in Israel a place which was associated with the presence of God, because in the great Temple in Jerusalem there had been just as in the shrines of ancient Canaan this long rectangular shrine room divided in hald, half separated the front court, the place where public acts of worship, the back court the holy of holies, a devir. In the synagogue the sense of the holiness, the place where God was, even Jews knew that God was everywhere, the whole world was full of His glory, nevertheless we are people of the senses, we tend to associate space and presence, and there has always been in our tradition some place which was the holy of holies, which was associated with God, and these once simple chests which held the most sacred of our literatures, God's word, the revelation, became in the synagogue once the Temple had been destroyed, the holy of holies. And this was signified by the fact that they put in front of the chest which had simply originally been a wooden box, a curtain called the parochot, exactly like the curtain which had once hung in front of the holy of holies. The curtain hides the mystery, hides the presence, and throughout the ages Jews have placed in front of the Ark some kind of covering which signified that behind this was somehow the presence of God, specifically the Torah, the word of God. And these beautiful parochot, the beautiful curtains, have always been the features of synagogue architecture.

And, interestingly, just about the time when the Temple was destroyed, what we know of ancient synagogues, their floor plans and some have been excavated, changes. Instead of having simply a series of rooms with one room slightly larger than the other room, clearly, where the worship took place, a

room without any distinguishing architectural features, we now find that the floor plan, what remains of these ancient synagogues in the second, third and fourth centuries, now have a niche in the eastern wall and the tavah was placed in that niche and it becomes in a sense a permanent feature of the synagogue room. It was placed there, the curtain was hung before, God was in His place, that made it a fit place for our worship.

Now the tavah lost its original name. It was too ordinary, too mundane a name, box, for this kind of object. And among the Oriental Jews the name which was applied to the Ark was hahach which means palace or temple, but the word was taken over largely from the Kabbalistic literature of our people where hachal represented the heavenly palace of God. And according to the early speculations God was somehow in that palace behind the curtain in front of which the angels held court and God and the angels conversed in a sense through this curtain and this sense of the holy of holies was signified by the name that the sephardic Jews gave to and often still use for the ark, hahal, palace, or temple.

Then among European Jews, among our ancestors somewhat later, this ark developed the name of arun, arun akodesh, holy ark, a name which hearkens back to Biblical times to another object which was believed to hold the presence of God, a portable shrine which I'll describe to you in a minute which, according to the Torah, was built at Moses' command by the great artisan, Batsalel, and which the Israelites carried with them wherever they went and which represented to them the power and the presence and the mystery of God.

Now, the development of the synagogue and the ark, our knowledge of that development, has increased remarkably just in the last year. Two archeologists from Duke University, who were working at a site not far from Svat in the Galilee in Israel two years ago, and they found below the floor of a fifth century synagogue the top piece, the stone top piece of a hahal of a Torah shrine from an earlier synagogue which had been taken down when the refurbishment had

taken place and been put under the floor of the rebuilt synagogue to be protected. It's a stone of lime, limestone, about half a ton in weight. It's the capital which sat on two columns, the Torah shrine was between the columns, and what you see is like the shell, the design of a shell in the center and a rosette above that, a gabled roof and two lions, the lions of Judah, rampant on this roof and there's a hole in the middle of the rosette through which an iron rod of some kind came down and that iron rod held the light, the eternal light, ner tamid, which we know is to be a feature of the synagogue arks as they are to this day. That's the earliest physical evidence we have of an actual ark, but we have from the floors of a number of synagogues of the Byzantine period, fourth and fifth century, designs in the floors of these arks, and one of these designs, interestingly, has an identical pediment to the one which was found in Navatine, in Svat, just two summers ago. And what these shrines must have looked like was this. They were narrow and rather tall, about twelve feet tall, capped by this limestone pediment, two columns identical, supposedly, to the columns which stood in front of the Temple in Jerusalem, and between the columns they would put the chest into which the Torah scrolls were placed, and in front of the whole would be hung a curtain rod the parochet and this was always placed in the east wall. And Jews were accustomed to show great reverence to the Torah shrine. Usually the door to the synagogue was on the west wall and when you entered the synagogue you faced directly the Torah shrine and the custom was to bow; and in Europe, as a matter of fact, in the Middle Ages the custom was whenever you passed inside of the rooms where the Torah shrine was you turned and you bowed three times very much the way Catholics kneel and make the sign of the cross when they pass in front of the crucifix. It was treated with reverence. It was believed to be a representation of the holy of holies in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Now I mentioned to you that European Jewry in the Middle Ages associated the Ark with the ancient Ark of the testimony, the ancient portable shrine of the Israelites. And I'd like to draw that analogy out for a moment both

to dissuade you from the fact that there is a direct link between the two and because in a very bad movie which has appeared in the last few months that ancient Ark has been resurrected and given incredible mystical powers, the movie I believe is called The Raiders of the Lost Ark, and if any of you are tempted to go see it please don't. Besides being having bad theology and worse archeology and research involved in it, it's just a bad movie, but, in any case, it has intrigued many because it portrays the ark of the covenant as a great magical piece whose power was never dimmed, which was hidden away at some time in ancient times when the Egyptian pharoah conquered Israel, and taken back to his pyramid, buried with him in the ground, and now when it's disturbed by modern archeologists it still has the power to destroy those that would take it and use it for purposes other than the purposes God intended. And let me tell you a little bit about the real Ark.

The Torah tells us that when, during the first year after the Jews left Egypt, they set about making a desert sanctuary. Very specific instructions were given by God to Moses to be given to the craftsmen of Israel, particularly Batsalel, the master craftsman whose name is given to one of the great art institutes and museums of Israel today, and Batsalel has given somehow all the jewelry, all the gold, all the silver he needs to guild every piece of this particular sanctuary, and the sanctuary is in fact a retrospection of the glory of the First Temple. Somebody had seen the First Temple and claimed that its design was identical to that which the Jews had when they left Egypt. In any case, history aside, the center piece of this desert sanctuary was a portable ark, a portable acacia wood box which was probably six or seven feet long and two feet high which was quilded with silver inside and out, which was hung with silver rings through which stades were placed and which was carried by porters who carried the Ark on their backs. And wherever the Hebrews went this Ark went with them. In the Ark, presumably, were placed the stone tablets on which Moses had inscribed the Ten Commandments. Some claim that the Ten Commandments, the second of the Ten Commandments, the ones that were not broken were placed there. Others claim that

both sets of Commandments, the broken stones and the stones which were still full and complete, were placed there. And when the rabbis developed a beautiful little sermon out of that idea, that why should broken pieces of the Commandments, broken pieces of God's revelation, of God's wisdom, be placed in the Ark he said this is to teach us that even when a scholar, a man of repute, has lost his ability to control his life, has lost his learning, we should still respect him for the learning which was once there. We should still respect these pieces of rock, in a sense, because of what they once were.

In any case, it is clear that the ancient Hebrews had some kind of portable shrine to which they associated the miraculous powers. We still have in the Torah the chant, the very brief chant, which the Israelites, the Levites, whoever carried the Ark used as they took out into battle. It was used as a sign of the presence of God in the battlefield and the very brief chant which they used when they brought it back, hopefully with victory, from the battlefield. Book of Numbers we read this chant: Arise O Lord, put your enemies to flight, may those who hate us or hate you flee from before you. And somehow, in some kind of chant when they returned from the battle they said: Return O Israel with the tens upon tens of thousands of those who are of Israel. Now, the Bible is full of miracle stories about this Ark. When the porters took the Ark across the Jordan River to begin the conquest of the Holy Land the river dried up under their feet. We all learned when we were young the old negro spiritual, Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumblin' down. Well, according to the Bible Joshua didn't fit the battle of Jericho, the Ark did. The Levites carried this Ark on their shoulders seven times around the city and then the shofar, the trumpet, was blown and because of the presence of the Ark and because it had done its magical work the walls of Jericho presumably came tumbling down.

The Ark was taken frequently into battle, but it wasn't a guarantee of victory because we're told in the Book of Kings that a place called Aphek, in the wars between Saul and the Philistines, the Philistines defeated the Hebrews and captured the Ark and took the Ark to their cities in the south, Ashdod, but the Ark was not to be defeated. Israel might be defeated, but not the Ark, and no sooner had the Ark been brought to Ashdod then a great plague broke out in the city and, finally, the wise men of the Philistine king told the king that this Ark was the cause of it all and the Philistines quickly dispatched the Ark back to the Jews so that they could have the plague because they certainly did not want it in their own house.

And then the Ark slowly makes a rather carefully described passage which takes some twenty-five years from the Philistine city of Ashdod until finally David, who has now come into power, brings the Ark into Jerusalem with great pomp and circumstance and Solomon builds there a shrine temple and the Ark is placed in the Holy of Holies inside the shrine. Now, the Ark was believed to have these special powers. It was believed also to have such power that none might approach it and touch except the porters who held it through the stavs. And the story is told then that in this final procession to Jerusalem the Ark was being carried on a cart, for some reason, and the cart began to teeter, as if it might fall, and a priest named Usiah, concerned that the Ark might fall off the car, reached up to push the Ark back to even up, to balance out the load, and he touched the Ark and he immediately dropped dead.

Now, there are those in every generation who consider themselves scientific and modern who like to try and find all kinds of scientific explanations for the miracles of the Bible. You've heard the explanation, you know, that there must have been some kind of tidal wave to allow the Jews to go to the Reed Sea, that there was some kind of white dropping from a cactus flower in the desert that produced the manna and so on. Well, there's a similar theory to explain the electrical power, the destructive power of the Ark. In the eighteenth century as men and scientists began to play with electricity they developed something which was

called the Leiden jar. The Leiden jar was a simple glass jar which they would coat inside and outside with some metal foil and they would take a rod and attach it to the foil that was on the inside of the jar and if they held the jar at a place where there was some natural source of energy, lightning, an electrical storm of some kind, a positive negative differential would build up in these two pieces of metal which were separated by blass which is a non-conductor and and often the difference in voltage would cause a spark to move between the two pieces of metal inside and outside of the jar.

Remember that famous scene of Benjamin Franklin flying the kite into the storm clouds? Well, that was a Leiden jar he was holding in his hand and he got such a jolt through this Leiden jar that he was supposed to have dropped down in a faint. Now, the "scientific" theory about the Ark is that the Ark was built of wood which was heavy, acacia wood, that the silver plating of the Ark created these two pieces of metal and that somehow one piece or another jutting from the Ark made it a natural receptacle for the electricity in the atmosphere and, therefore, those who would touch it would get a shock and out of that developed a theory that the Ark had lethal powers. Believe it, if you will. Believe it, I don't. The ancient peoples tended to have all kinds of sacred objects which for one reason or another they attached great power to. We need to sense in physical shape the power which we associate with the gods and for our people it's interesting that after the Ark gets placed in Jerusalem in the Ark it almost completely disappears from view. We don't know what happened to the Ark even. The Bible makes no attempt to tell us how it was taken away, when it was destroyed, whether the Egyptians conquered it during one of their conquests, whether one of the kings who put other idols in the Temple took it out when he put up his own idol or his wife's idols in the Holy of Holies, whether it was simply one of the objects that Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians took with them when they took away all the utensils of the Temple in Jerusalem when they conquered Jerusalem

in the sixth century. We seem to have, in a sense, lost, our people lost the sense that this Ark was as central as it had once been. It belonged to their prehistory, almost to their pagan history, and what was important in the Ark, they said, was not the Ark itself but the tablets, the stele of stone on which the covenant is written, the content, not the box itself. It was the content which has power, the content which has meaning, and in that sense the aran ha kodesh is a good term for the modern ark because for all of its beauty and all of its significance we would not be without it, for all that it symbolizes to us of our tradition, that is, the fact that it symbolizes in a concrete and effective and beautiful way the teachings which are within the Torah kept within it.

There was a very lovely custom in medieval Europe, that if the Ark was ever emptied of all the Torah scrolls that were in it, usually they kept a number of Torah scrolls but often on a holiday like Simhat Torah they would take all of the scrolls out to process around the Temple, if they took all of the scrolls out they would make sure that they lit a candle and placed it inside the Ark while it was still open and so the Ark should not be empty because it is what is within, the light that is within, which is significant and basic and has been basic to the arona kodesh, to the hahal, to the tava, to the Ark as long as it has been part and parcel of our tradition.

And there you have what we know of the history of the Ark. It has sometimes been built into the architecture of the interior of the synagogue as it is in the Main Temple. It has sometimes been a portable piece that is in the one that we built for this room, as it is in this Ark which we dedicate this morning. It does not matter whether it is fixed or portable. It was originally portable, it became fixed only when our people sensed, I suppose, their security in a particular place. What it represents is our reverence for what is within. What it represents is a way of showing reverence for the Torah in a physical and obvious way, and so we beautify the Ark and we face it with the kinds of symbols

which signify to us in a particular generation life, teaching, God, faith, learning, and with reverence take out the Torah when it is appropriate to do so and read from it.



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