

TERUMAH (EXODUS 25:1-27:19)

Heavy Metal

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Most synagogues are quite similar in terms of interior decorating. They all have Menorahs and arks and curtains. Much of the decor in synagogues is modeled after the Temple.

The Temple construction is described in great detail in this week's Torah reading. Among the required pieces of furniture is the wooden/golden Ark:

*"Make an ark of acacia wood, 2 1/2 cubits **long**, 1 1/2 cubits wide, and 1 1/2 cubits high. (Approximately 3 3/4 feet x 2 1/4 feet x 2 1/4 feet) Cover it with a layer of gold on the inside and outside...Make two carrying poles ... Place the poles in the rings on the sides of the ark so that that ark can be carried... In this ark you will place the testimony (the Tablets of the Ten Commandments) that I will give you." (Exodus 25:10-16)*

This gold-coated "wooden" Ark was actually a system of three successively smaller boxes. The inner and outer boxes were made of gold, while the middle one was wooden. The three boxes fit inside each other like little Russian dolls.

The end result was a box that was golden on the inside and outside. The Talmud (Yoma 72b) compares this movable "Torah container" to another "moving Torah container" -- a Torah scholar. Just as the Ark was golden on the inside and outside, so too must a scholar (and everyone else!) be impeccably honest; what you see on the outside is what you get on the inside.

Why, then, is the Ark made of wood? If the Ark should be the same, inside and out, why not make the ENTIRE container out of gold, solid through and through?

The Daas Zekainim answers that there was a very practical reason for this. The Ark was transported by Levites who carried it on their shoulders. A box of pure gold that would be strong enough to hold the Tablets would have to be quite thick, and, therefore, very heavy. In order to lighten the load of the carriers of the Ark, it was made of wood, with thin gold inside and out. In consideration of the Levites, G-d made their job manageable.

Have you ever heard the Yiddish expression, "*Es iz shver tzu zein a Yid* -- It is hard to be a Jew?" Many Jews in previous generations tolerated great challenges when they came to America. Kosher food was expensive and jobs that allowed Saturdays off were few and far between. Many people looked for new jobs every Monday, having been fired for not showing up on Saturday.

They endured these difficulties and withstood the temptations to compromise their beliefs. However, they did so with a sigh of, "*Es iz shver tzu zein a Yid* -- it's so difficult!"

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, of Blessed Memory, used to complain that this attitude of "*Es iz shver tzu zein a Yid*" turned off a whole generation of young Jews. "If it's so difficult," they reasoned, "who needs it?! Why bother? Why should I work as hard as my parents and be so different?"

What the parents SHOULD have told their children, said Rabbi Feinstein, is that it is GOOD to be a Jew; that it is rewarding and exhilarating to be a Jew!

The Levites were given the job of transporting the Ark. It was a challenging job that demanded great care and responsibility. However, G-d wanted to keep the Mitzvah achievable. He could have miraculously made the Ark move, as it did when it lifted its carriers over the Jordan River. But He preferred to have the Levites do it themselves, so He made sure that the Ark didn't weigh too much.

There is no such thing as a Mitzvah that is too great a burden to bear. G-d does not give us situations that we can't handle. We have to maintain the proper attitude and rise to the occasion.

Does the Torah sometimes seem to be too heavy? Do some Mitzvahs appear to be too much of a burden?

Let's look at it this way... if someone gave you a 50-pound bag of scrap metal and told you to take it home, you would probably complain that the bag was too heavy...until you looked inside and saw that the "scrap metal" was pure gold. Then you would probably wish it was heavier!!

Perhaps this is what King Solomon meant when he wrote, *If you seek it like silver, and hunt for it like treasures, then you will understand the fear of G-d, and you will find the knowledge of G-d. (*Proverbs 2:4)

Have a great Shabbos.

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