

## “You Shall Make For Yourself an Ark of Wood”

By Rav Tamir Granot

### Introduction

In our *parasha*, Moshe recalls at length the episode of the Golden Calf. In many of its details, the story as recounted here is similar to the account recorded in *Sefer Shemot* (32:1-43:35), but there are also a number of discrepancies, and even contradictions.

In this *shiur* we shall compare the command to fashion the second set of tablets, as described by Moshe, and the original narrative in *Sefer Shemot*. This comparison is addressed by the early commentators.

To my mind, the differences between the two versions are fundamental in nature, and point to the essence of each of the two accounts, as we shall explain below.

### a. Analysis of the differences between *Sefer Shemot* and *Sefer Devarim* in the story of the second set of tablets

Omission of the Ark in *Sefer Shemot*:

For the purposes of comparing the account in *Sefer Shemot* with that in our *parasha*, let us first examine each of them:

*Sefer Devarim*:

At that time God said to me: Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones, and come up to Me, to the mountain, and make for yourself an ark of wood.

And I shall inscribe upon the tablets the things that were upon the first tablets - which you broke, and you shall place them in the ark.

So I made an ark of shittim wood and hewed two tablets of stone, like the first ones, and I went up to the mountain, with the two tablets in my hand.

And He wrote upon the tablets according to the first writing, the Ten Commandments which God spoke to you at the mountain, from amidst the fire, on the day of the assembly, and God gave them to me.

And I turned and came down from the mountain, and placed the tablets in the ark which I had made, and they were there, as God had commanded me. (10:1-5)

Description in *Sefer Shemot*:

God said to Moshe: Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones, and I shall inscribe upon the tablets the things that were upon the first tablets, which you broke.

And be ready in the morning, for you will come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to Me, at the top of the mountain.

And no man shall come up with you, nor shall any man be seen throughout the mountain; neither shall the herds and the flocks be led to pasture before that mountain.

So he hewed two tablets of stone like the first ones, and Moshe arose early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai, as God had commanded him, and he took two tablets of stone in his hand.

And God came descended in a cloud, and stood with him there, and he proclaimed the Name of God.

And God passed before him, and he proclaimed: The Lord, the Lord – mighty, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in loving kindness and truth,

Keeping loving kindness to thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the children’s children, to the third and to the fourth generation.

And Moshe made haste and bowed down towards the earth and prostrated himself.

And he said: If I have then found favor in Your eyes, O God, then let my Lord, I pray You, go in our midst, for it is a stiff-necked nation, and forgive our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your inheritance.

And He said: Behold, I make a covenant: before all of your people I shall perform wonders, such as have not appeared in all of the earth or amongst any of the nations; and all the nation amongst whom you are will see the acts of God that I will do with you, that they are awesome.

Observe for yourself that which I command you this day: behold, I shall drive out from before you the Emori and the Canaani and the Chitti and the Perizi and the Chivi and the Yevusi.”<sup>[2]</sup> (34:1-11)

What is common to both descriptions is the command for Moshe to hew new tablets, the fact that the tablets are inscribed by the hand of God, their acceptance upon the mountain, and bringing them down (as we shall presently see) to Bnei Yisrael.

There are sections where there are differences between the two accounts, but the discrepancies – either additions or omissions – are not problematic. For instance, the command to Moshe to “be ready in the morning,” which appears in *Sefer Shemot* (verse 2), does not appear in *Sefer Devarim*, but it is not a detail of fundamental importance to the story, and hence it seems that Moshe sees no need to repeat it in our *parasha*. The same applies to verse 11 in *Sefer Shemot*, which is omitted from *Sefer Devarim*. This verse introduces a list of commands. Since Moshe’s objective in *Sefer Devarim*, at this stage of his monologue, is to teach a lesson and give rebuke, rather than to convey commandments, it is not mentioned here.

The underlined sections are those in which there are significant discrepancies in fundamental details of the story, which we would expect to be identical.

One subject that is glaringly absent from the description in *Sefer Shemot* is the command to build an ark of wood, and the recounting of its fashioning, which occupies a central position in the narrative in *Sefer Devarim* (verses 1,2,3 and 5), but appears nowhere in *Sefer Shemot*. This omission stands out prominently once again in the continuation of the story

in *Sefer Shemot* (chapter 34), where Moshe descends from the mountain:

God said to Moshe: Write for yourself these things, for it is according to these things that I have forged a covenant with you and with Israel.

And he was there with God for forty days and forty nights; he ate no bread, nor did he drink water, and he wrote upon the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Words. And it was, when Moshe descended from Mount Sinai - and the two tablets of testimony were in Moshe's hand when he descended from the mountain – that Moshe did not know that the skin of his face shone when He spoke to him. And Aharon and all of Bnei Yisrael saw Moshe, and behold – the skin of his face shone, and they feared to come near to him. And Moshe called to them, and Aharon and all of the princes of the congregation returned to him, and Moshe spoke to them. (27-31)

This description of Moshe's descent from the mountain makes no mention of the location of the tablets once he had returned. In contrast, our *parasha* tells us, "And I placed the tablets in the ark which I had made" (verse 5). While *Sefer Shemot* does tell us that the tablets are placed in the ark (25:16; 40:20), this establishes their permanent location, within the framework of matters pertaining to the *Mishkan* and its vessels, not in the context of the Sin of the Golden Calf or the ascent to Sinai; in *Sefer Shemot* there is no mention whatsoever of the ark of wood.

### **Purpose of the second ascent in *Sefer Shemot* and in *Sefer Devarim***

The question of the ark of wood in the description in *Sefer Devarim* is addressed by the commentaries (which we shall review presently), but another difference between the two accounts – one which, to my mind, is no less important – is almost entirely ignored, or merely addressed indirectly, as part of the chronological analysis. I refer here to the lengthy description of the revelation upon the mountain, which occupies center stage in the description in *Sefer Shemot*.

Admittedly, both *Sefer Devarim* (verse 3) and *Sefer Shemot* (verse 2) mention Moshe ascending the mountain, but in *Sefer Shemot* God goes on to command, "Present yourself there before Me, at the top of the mountain; and let no man ascend with you...." In other words, this is not a merely "functional" ascent for the purposes of writing the tablets, [3] but rather an ascent for the purpose of revelation. The revelation is the reason for Moshe "presenting himself" and the prohibition of anyone else ascending the mountain.

Indeed, in the description in *Sefer Shemot* (verses 5 onwards), after Moshe ascends the mountain, we read only of the revelation; the matter of writing the tablets appears to be entirely "forgotten":

"God descended in a cloud, and stood with him [4] there, and he called in the Name of God. And God passed before him, and he proclaimed...."

We recall that the matter of the inscription on the tablets appears in *Shemot* only at the end of the unit, after the revelation – which is the primary purpose of Moshe's ascent. In *Sefer Devarim*, the writing is the main – and, in fact, sole - subject.

The purpose of the second revelation in *Sefer Shemot* is to give over the thirteen attributes of mercy. But why does God choose to do this specifically at this point? Moshe answers this question explicitly immediately after God passes before him (verse 9): "And he said, If I have then found favor in Your eyes, O God, then let my Lord, I pray You, go in our midst, for it is a stiff-necked nation, and forgive our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your inheritance." By means of the thirteen attributes, God has granted complete pardon to *Am Yisrael*, and it is even possible for the Divine Presence to dwell once again amidst the camp ("Let my Lord... go in our midst").

Let us go back for a moment to the chain of events following the debacle of the Golden Calf in *Sefer Shemot*. [5] Following the sin, God wants to destroy the nation, but Moshe entreated Him in prayer, recalling the covenant with the forefathers and the desecration of God's Name that this would bring about, broke the tablets, and killed the sinners, with the help of the Levi'im, thereby calming God's anger. However, after all of this, God says to him (32:34):

"Now go, lead the nation to [the place] of which I spoke to you. Behold, My angel will go before you, but on the day when I punish, I shall punish them for their sin."

These words suggest that the forgiveness is not complete. Indeed, God immediately goes on to explain (33:2-3):

"I shall send an angel before you, and I shall drive out the Canaani... to a land flowing with milk and honey, for I shall not go up in your midst, for you are a stiff-necked nation, lest I consume you on the way."

The nation, understanding the limited nature of their pardon, reacts accordingly (4):

"And the nation heard this evil thing, they mourned...."

In other words, while God does retract the destruction that He had intended for His people, and even announces that He will fulfill His promise to bring the nation to their land, He abandons the original plan to go up in their midst and to dwell among them; since the attribute of strict justice has already been stretched, and if the nation sins, they may, heaven forefend, be "consumed on the way."

Moshe does not suffice with this pardon, bound up as it is with the attribute of strict justice. He beseeches further (chapter 33):

... See, You say to me, Bring up the nation – but You have not told me whom You will send with me; still, You have said, I know you by name, and you have found favor in My sight. Now, if I have then found favor in your sight, show me, I pray You, Your ways, and let me know You, that I might find favor in your sight; and see that this people is Your nation. And He said, My Presence will proceed, and I will give you rest. And he said to Him: If Your Present will not proceed, do not take us up from here. For how shall it then be known that I have found favor in Your sight – I and Your nation? Is it not in that You proceed with us, such that I and Your nation will be distinguished from every nation that is upon the face of the earth? (12-16)

Even without a detailed explanation of every stage of the conversation, the point is clear: Moshe asks of God that He not only fulfill His promise or send an angel, but that He Himself proceed with *Am Yisrael*. This is the meaning of God's expression, "My Presence shall proceed."

Seemingly, then, Moshe's request has been accepted. But then he asks to renew the covenant that he himself had previously annulled, by shattering the tablets. The covenant is always connected to revelation (see *Shemot* chapters 20 and 24), and therefore Moshe asks that God reveal Himself to him and confirm the renewed forging of the covenant:

God said to Moshe: I shall do also this thing that you have spoken, for you have found favor in My eyes, and I know you by name. And he said: Show me, I pray You, Your glory. And He said: I shall pass all My goodness before you, and I shall proclaim the Name of God before you, and I shall be gracious to whom I shall be gracious, and have mercy upon whom I shall have mercy. And He said: You will not be able to see My face, for no man can see Me and live. And God said: Behold, there is a place by Me, and you can stand on a rock. And it shall be, when My glory passes by, that I shall place you in a cleft of the rocks, and cover you with My hand until I pass by. And I shall remove My hand, and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen." (17-23)

The meaning of the request, "Show me, I pray You, Your glory," is – "Renew the covenant with me by means of revelation." [6] God acquiesces to Moshe's request, even though He explains that it is not "His face" that Moshe will perceive, but rather only His glory. [7]

From God's words we understand already at this stage that revelation of His glory is connected to handing over the key to complete pardon and forgiveness: "I shall be gracious to whom I shall be gracious, and have mercy upon whom I shall have mercy" (19).

Attention should be paid to the fact that nowhere in this entire dialogue is there any mention of the tablets being conveyed: Moshe asks for revelation, which for him will be a confirmation and covenant concerning God's complete forgiveness and His agreement to accompany the nation of Israel and to dwell in their midst. God acquiesces to his request and adds the manifestations of His glory through mercy. Thereafter, God commands Moshe in practical terms what he must do in order to fulfill that which has been agreed:

"God said to Moshe: Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones..." (34:1).

This clearly suggests that the command concerning the tablets is not the primary issue. Moshe is invited to ascend the mountain in order to earn a revelation of God's glory and a renewal of the covenant. As an expression and as a result of the revelation and the renewal of the covenant, God commands him to fashion the second set of tablets.

In light of this, it is clear that Moshe's description in *Sefer Devarim* turns that which is "secondary" into the crux of the story: he makes no mention at all of the request that God proceed with the nation, nor of the revelation and the renewal of

the covenant. According to Moshe's description, the purpose of the ascent was to receive the second set of tablets.

The purpose of the ascent, then, is completely different in these two narratives.

### Moshe's prayer

If we trace the description in our *parasha* (*Devarim* 9), we discover the broader context of the difference between the two accounts. The beginning of Moshe's description is the general statement to the effect that the nation rebelled against God many times in the desert:

Remember, do not forget, how you provoked the Lord your God to anger in the desert. From the day you came out of the land of Egypt until to come to this place, you have been rebellious against God. (7)

Moshe launches into a description of the Golden Calf episode as a major example of his claim. He describes his first ascent; the writing of the tablets; the nation's sin, of which God informs him atop the mountain; the shattering of the tablets; and then his prayer to God:

I fell down before God, as at first; for forty days and forty nights I ate no bread, nor did I drink water, for all of your sins which you sinned, in performing evil in God's sight, to anger Him. For I was afraid of the wrath and the fury with which God was angry at you, to destroy; but God listened to me at that time, too. (18-19)

According to Moshe's account, his prayers were effective in nullifying the decree of destruction, as recounted in *Sefer Shemot* (32:11-14): "And Moshe besought... and God relented of the evil which He had intended to do to His nation." Later on in his speech, in chapter 9 of *Devarim*, Moshe goes back to a description of his prayer, following a list of further sins (at Tavera, Masa, and Kivrot ha-Ta'ava), in keeping with the main purpose of his speech:

I fell down before God forty days and forty nights, as I fell down (the first time), for God had intended to destroy you. And I prayed to God and I said: Lord God, do not destroy Your nation and Your inheritance, whom You redeemed in Your greatness; whom You brought out of Egypt with a strong hand. Remember (the covenant) unto Your servants – Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov; take no heed of the stubbornness of this nation, or of its wickedness, or of its sin. Lest the (people of the) land from which you brought us out say: It was because God was unable to bring them to the land of which He had spoken to them, and out of His hatred for them, that He took them out, to slay them in the desert. But they are Your nation and Your inheritance, whom You brought out with Your great strength and with Your outstretched arm. (25-29)

Here it seems that Moshe is coming back to a detailed description of the content of his first prayer. This we deduce from the expression, "As I fell down (the first time)" (25), and especially from the background to it – "For God had intended to destroy you" (ibid.) Moshe recalls the merit of the forefathers and avoiding desecration of God's Name as his primary arguments before God, as in the prayer in *Shemot* 32:13 – "Remember unto Avraham, Yitzchak and Yisrael, Your servants..." as well as, "Why should the Egyptians say,

saying..." (ibid. 12). All of this tells us that we are still busy with Moshe's first prayer, requesting a nullification of the decree of annihilation.

Moshe has already noted that God heard his prayer, and we now expect to hear of the "second stage" – i.e., the request that God proceed amongst the nation, along with a request for a renewal of the covenant by means of revelation. Instead, however, Moshe immediately goes on to recount (10:1) how, "At that time, God said to me: Hew yourself two tablets of stone..." In other words, the stage of limited pardon – disappointment on the part of the nation, God's declaration that "I shall not go up in your midst," and Moshe's lengthy prayer for complete forgiveness and for the Divine Presence to rest in their midst – are altogether omitted from Moshe's account in *Sefer Devarim*.

Let us turn our attention for a moment to the closing verses of the unit, before summarizing our review thus far. After Moshe has already completed his description of the episode of the Golden Calf, and has begun describing the journey from Mount Sinai and the selection of the Levi'im, he once again comes back to the story of the Golden Calf (ibid.):

And I remained atop the mountain, like the first time, for forty days and forty nights. And God heard me this time, too, and God would not destroy you. And God said to me: Arise, take up the journey before the nation, that they may come and take possession of the land which I promised to their forefathers to give to them. (10-11)

This repetition – seemingly the third presentation of Moshe's forty-day prayer – is difficult to understand, and many commentators have attempted to explain it. Some (such as Rashi) maintain that the reference here is to Moshe's third ascent, and the words "like the first time" refer to the time of the first prayer, rather than "the time of the acceptance of the first tablets"; therefore, this is an important addition. However, if the text is indeed talking about another prayer, distinct from the previous one, then why is it not mentioned earlier, as part of the description of the chain of events?

The more probable interpretation seems to be that of the commentaries who maintain that Moshe is talking about the same prayer that he recalled previously, in order to summarize the result of the story as a whole. This summary includes the declaration, "God would not destroy you" (10), and the command, "Take up the journey before the nation, that they may come and take possession of the land" (11). Moshe's main objective is to steer his monologue back to its original track – the preparation for entry into the land – and to say that following Moshe's prayer, the main mission – entry into the land – now reassumed its primary importance. Indeed, these verses state only that God relents of the destruction which He had meant to bring upon Israel, and that He commands that they continue on their journey. There is no mention that God did allow His Presence to rest in their midst, or that He revealed Himself to Moshe, or that He renewed the covenant.

If we try to locate these verses in the account in *Sefer Shemot*, we find that they belong at the end of chapter 32, following the partial pardon: "Now, go, lead the nation..." (verse 34), as Moshe recounts here: "Arise, take up the journey before the nation..." (verse 11). All of chapter 34 in *Sefer Shemot* is omitted from Moshe's speech – and, in fact,

from all of *Sefer Devarim*, except for the command concerning the second set of tablets, as noted above.<sup>[8]</sup>

Summary thus far:

In *Sefer Shemot*, the narrative centers on Moshe's request for complete forgiveness, the crux and purpose of which is the request that God dwell amongst the nation and lead them Himself to the land. The second tablets are given as part of the complete pardon and as an expression of the renewed covenant.

In *Sefer Devarim* there is only the issues of forgiveness, and the original intention to destroy Israel. The purpose of the second ascent of the mountain is to receive the second set of tablets, and here we also find a command to fashion an ark of wood in which to house the tablets. This command has no parallel in *Sefer Shemot*.

## b. Exegetical approaches to the issue of the "ark of wood"

### Rashi

Many of the commentators have centered their discussion around the matter of the ark of wood. Let us start by looking at Rashi's approach (*Devarim* 10:1):

This is not the same ark that was [later] made by Betzalel, for there was no involvement in the *Mishkan* until after Yom Kippur, for when [Moshe] descended from the mountain he commanded them concerning the building of the *Mishkan*, and Betzalel made first the *Mishkan* and afterwards the ark and the vessels; thus, this was a different ark. This was the one that went out with them to war. The one that Betzalel made did not go out to war except in the days of Eli, and they were punished for it, and it was captured.

Rashi explains that the "ark of wood," as its name suggests, is not the well-known Ark of Testimony from the *Mishkan*, which was coated inside and outside with gold and therefore could not be referred to in this way. His explanation implies that the wooden ark was made in order to keep the second set of tablets inside it from the time that Moshe brought them down until the building of the *Mishkan* and the Ark of Testimony. Thereafter the tablets were transferred to the Ark of Testimony (coated with gold) that was in the *Mishkan*, and the first ark then served alongside it. What did it contain? Rashi does not address this question here, but from the teachings of *Chazal* we learn that, according to one opinion, the broken first tablets were placed in this ark.<sup>[9]</sup> Indeed, Rashi adopts this view in a different place (*Bamidbar* 10:33):

The Ark of God's Covenant journeyed before them at a distance of a three-day journey – This was the ark that went out with them to war, and in which the fragments of the tablets rested; it went before them at a distance of three days in order to prepare the stations of encampment for them.

According to Rashi, Moshe spoke about the temporary ark of wood that he built because it would serve future generations, too. In the context of *Sefer Devarim* this is of special significance, since Bnei Yisrael were about to commence a series of journeys into battle.

Rashi explains here, in accordance with his approach in *Sefer Shemot* (31:18), that the command concerning the *Mishkan* was later, chronologically, than the Golden ~alf, and was the result of it. (The *parashot* of *Teruma* and *Tetzaveh* are not in their proper chronological place, in accordance with the principle that the Torah narrative does not necessarily follow chronological order.) For this reason, when Moshe ascended the mountain to receive the tablets, the possibility of the tablets resting inside the *Mishkan* did not exist; hence the need to command the fashioning of a temporary ark in which the tablets would be placed.

Why, according to Rashi, is the ark of wood not mentioned in the narrative in *Shemot*? Rashi would seemingly explain that the account in *Shemot* emphasizes the building of the *Mishkan* and the Ark of Testimony at its heart; therefore, its main message is that the tablets were ultimately placed in the *Mishkan*. The description in *Devarim* is directed more to the nation's journey towards the land; therefore, it places more emphasis on the ark that goes out to war.

### Ramban's first approach

Although there is no direct rebuttal of Rashi's view, and his basic premise that Moshe is talking here about an ark that is distinct from the Ark of Testimony in the *Mishkan* is quite logical in the context of *Sefer Devarim*, the problem is that the most important part of the story is missing: nowhere in the Torah is there any indication that the fragments of the original tablets were preserved; there is certainly no mention of them being placed in the ark of wood. Rashi's exegetical construction is based on a Midrash of *Chazal* concerning the fragments of the tablets, with no support in the literal text. Obviously, this is problematic.

Ramban (*Devarim* 10:1) rejects Rashi's interpretation of *Chazal's* teaching and proposes two other explanations.<sup>[10]</sup> The first (which he refers to as "the good and straight one," as well as "that which accords with the view of our Sages") accepts part of Rashi's opinion while omitting another part:

The reason for [the command], "Make for yourself an ark of wood," is "so that you can place the tablets in it when you descend." This ark was made entirely of wood – it and the cover that was over it, in the manner of all boxes. And the tablets were there until the *Mishkan* was made, at which time they made the ark covered in gold, and the covering above it, which was of pure gold.

Ramban asserts that this ark served as a temporary solution for storage of the tablets until the Ark of Testimony would be made.

This explanation, too, raises difficulties, especially because it renders the story superfluous: if the ark of wood is simply a technical matter – a temporary storage solution – then there is no need for it to be mentioned; certainly not as part of Moshe's speech of reprobation.

Likewise, the verse that reads, "And they were there, as God had commanded me" (*Devarim* 10:5), is likewise out of place in this interpretation, since it suggests that the tablets were placed there in perpetuity.

### Ramban's second explanation

Ramban also offers another explanation, which takes an altogether different direction:

According to the plain meaning of the text, it is possible that [the words,] "Make for yourself an ark of wood," hints at the ark that was [later] made by Betzalel. This is because Moshe was commanded concerning the *Mishkan* and its vessels from the start, and the first command was, "They shall make an ark of shittim wood" (*Shemot* 25:10), since this was the crux of the intention behind all of the *Mishkan* – that God would rest [as it were] between the keruvim. After this they made the golden calf, and when God was appeased by Moshe and told him that He would write upon these tablets like the first writing, He commanded him in brief that he should make for these tablets an ark of wood; this was commanded to him for the first tablets. Now He reminds him of the original command concerning the *Mishkan*, upon which everything [else] depends, and from this Moshe deduced that he should make the *Mishkan* and its vessels as he had originally been commanded. The meaning of the words, "And they were there as God had commanded me," is that they were there forever, as God had originally commanded (*ibid.* 21-22): "And in the ark you shall place the testimony which I shall give to you, and I shall meet with you there, and speak with you...."

In this interpretation Ramban proposes that the ark mentioned in *Sefer Shemot* be identified with that in *Sefer Devarim*. The absence of a command concerning the ark in *Sefer Shemot*, explains Ramban, is illusory; it arises from a reading that is too closely localized. The ark that is mentioned here is the Ark of Testimony from the *Mishkan*, and Moshe, in his words about the ark here, is hinting at the *Mishkan*. The command concerning the *Mishkan* is set out at length and in detail in *Sefer Shemot*, and is not Moshe's main interest in recalling the Sin of the Golden Calf. Moshe chooses to make brief mention of the Ark of Testimony, and to hint at the building of the *Mishkan* specifically before the second tablets, since they already existed.

Ramban's explanation here accords with his understanding (*Shemot* 35:1, *Vayikra* 8:1) that the command concerning the *Mishkan* preceded the Sin of the Golden Calf; thus he is led to suggest that the command here to make an ark of wood is simply an abbreviated reference to the ark mentioned in the context of the *Mishkan*. It is clear, according to this explanation, why Moshe includes the ark in his discussion: he is talking about the Ark of Testimony that was in the *Mishkan*, and the purpose of building the *Mishkan* was so that God would rest His Presence between the keruvim that were upon the Ark, inside which were the tablets. Thus, the command concerning the ark is not a temporary or merely technical solution for storage of the tablets, but rather a command that concerns the purpose of the entire revelation at Sinai – the creation of conditions for God's glory to dwell amongst Bnei Yisrael.

This explanation also provides a solution to the second problem concerning the relationship between the unit in *Shemot* and that in *Devarim*. We saw above that at the center of the second ascent of the mountain was God's revelation and His promise to dwell amongst Bnei Yisrael. Indeed, according to Ramban's explanation, the command concerning the ark implies this Divine promise, since the Divine Presence will rest in the *Mishkan*, upon the Ark.

Nevertheless, despite the advantages of this interpretation, it is difficult to accept – for several reasons:

Firstly, why is the command mentioned only in relation to the second set of tablets? Ramban's explanation here is somewhat forced.

Secondly, further on (10:3) we read, "So I made an ark of shittim wood and I hewed two tablets of stone..." In other words, the ark was made by Moshe before ascending the mountain. But the Ark of Testimony was made by Betzalel, after Moshe's descent from the mountain. Here again, Ramban's explanation is forced.

Thirdly, the very crux of Ramban's explanation is problematic, since it seems extremely improbable that Moshe's reference, in recalling the ark of wood, is to the Ark of Testimony that was covered in gold, to the *Mishkan* as a whole, and to the idea of the Divine Presence resting in its midst, when he makes no mention of any of these.

To summarize the interpretations that we have reviewed thus far: all three attempt to resolve the two units, either by identifying them as the same (Ramban's second explanation) and ignoring the contradictions between the two descriptions, or by means of exegetical supplementation that assumes that there were two arks, and the ark of wood has its own function.

Each of these options presents its own difficulties, as explained above. We shall now propose a new approach for addressing the contradiction between the two descriptions.

### c. The ark of wood as representative of *Sefer Devarim*

#### The central point of *Sefer Shemot*

We recall that the difference between the two units is a two-way matter. The unit in *Devarim* has at the heart of Moshe's ascent the tablets of the covenant and the ark of wood, while the unit in *Shemot* is about the revelation, the renewed covenant, and God's promise to dwell amongst the nation and to journey with them.

To my view, in order to understand the significance of Moshe's description in our *parasha* vis-à-vis the description in *Shemot*, it must be viewed within the overall context of the story and of the two *Sefarim*.

The story of the Golden Calf in *Sefer Shemot* is located<sup>[11]</sup> in between the command concerning the *Mishkan* and its construction, in the middle of the second part of *Sefer Shemot*. The central idea of the second part of the *Sefer* is the dwelling of the Divine Presence, and this is the purpose of the *Mishkan* being built: "Let them build Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (*Shemot* 25:8), as we are told also concerning the purpose of the Exodus from Egypt: "That I may dwell amongst them" (*Shemot* 29:46). *Sefer Shemot* also concludes with this description: "The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of God filled the *Mishkan*" (*Shemot* 40:34).

*Sefer Vayikra* in its entirety continues to discuss this fundamental ideal of the presence of God's glory in the *Mishkan*, amidst the camp of Israel. The first part of the *Sefer* deals with the sacrifices that are offered before God in the *Mishkan*, as part of the service of Him Who dwells there, and prohibits sacrifice in any place other than where His

Presence dwells. Thereafter the *Sefer* deals with ritual purity and impurity; concepts that apply principally within the context of the "camp of the Divine Presence," which cannot be approached in a state of impurity. Finally, the *Sefer* concludes with the covenant, whose central promise is, "I shall make My dwelling place in your midst, and I shall not abhor you" (26:11). In other words, God says, "If you follow My statutes" (ibid. 3), then "I will dwell in your midst."

It is easy to understand, then, that even once God had relented of His intention to destroy the nation of Israel in the wake of the Sin of the Golden Calf, so long as He had also retracted His intention to dwell in their midst, the situation was unbearable for Moshe and for the nation. This was no marginal matter, no mere bonus; rather, it was the very purpose of the Exodus from Egypt and the essence of the covenant between God and Israel. The dispatch of an angel to lead the nation, with God Himself absent from their midst, would be like a parent giving over a child to a legal guardian and paying for his upkeep. In the formal sense, the parent is still taking care of the child, but what kind of relationship is this? What kind of connection is there between them?

#### Central point of *Sefer Devarim*

The fundamental idea of God's Presence resting in the *Mishkan* is entirely absent from *Sefer Devarim*: not only our *parasha*, but the *Sefer* as a whole omits any mention of the building of the *Mishkan* and of God's Presence dwelling there. Hence, the command concerning the ark of wood cannot be understood as an "abbreviated reference," as Ramban would have it, because nowhere in the *Sefer* is there any reference to the *Mishkan*, its vessels, or the idea of God dwelling amongst the nation. The sole mention of the "Tent of Meeting" (*ohel mo'ed*) in *Parashat Vayelekh*, in the context of the appointment of Yehoshua (31:14-15) after Moshe's speech, refers to Moshe's private tent of meeting, and not to the *Mishkan* that was located in the midst of the camp.<sup>[12]</sup> In *Sefer Devarim* there is also no treatment of the obligatory or public sacrifices, which represent the focus of the discussion in *Vayikra* and *Bamidbar*; nor is any attention devoted to the various forms of ritual impurity. Finally, in the covenant forged on the plains of Moav (*Parashat Ki Tavo*), nothing is said about God causing His Presence to rest amongst the nation; all that is set down is, "God will establish you unto Him as a holy nation, as He has spoken to you."<sup>[13]</sup>

Admittedly, *Sefer Devarim* makes extensive reference to "the place which God will choose": is the intention not to the place that He will choose in order to dwell there? The answer is that the purpose of the place that God chooses is not actually for His Presence to rest there – but more about this next week.

If there is no *Mishkan* and no dwelling of the Divine Presence, then there is obviously also no reference to an ark containing tablets. In *Sefer Devarim* there is no room for Moshe mentioning any request for revelation, for God's Presence to rest amongst the nation, etc., because nowhere is there any mention of God's intention in this regard, or for a *Mishkan* to be built for this purpose.

At the heart of *Sefer Devarim* is Torah and the commandments: "See, I have taught you statutes and judgments" (4:5); "And it shall be, if you diligently fulfill My commandments..." (11:13); "These things, which I command you this day, shall be upon your hearts" (5:6); "What does the

Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord... to guard all of His commandments..." (10:12).

While in *Sefer Shemot* the function of the Ark was mainly to serve as a location for God's revelation, in *Sefer Devarim* the function of the ark is to be a receptacle for the tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments, which are the essence of the entire Torah. According to *Sefer Shemot*, the ark did not exist alone, but rather was part of a structure in which God dwells. According to *Sefer Devarim*, in contrast, the essence is the tablets with their commandments, and for them just an ark will suffice. Whereas in *Shemot* the essence of Moshe's request is that God dwell amongst the camp of Israel, with the tablets merely a secondary expression of the renewal of the covenant, in *Devarim* the most important part of the story is the renewal of the covenant through the renewed giving of the commandments – the tablets.

### Theological difference between the two Sefarim

What arises from all of the above is that the contradiction between the two descriptions of Moshe's second ascent of the mountain to receive the tablets is an expression of two different theological approaches that are reflected in *Sefer Shemot*, on one hand, and *Sefer Devarim*, on the other.

*Sefer Shemot* describes the Divine Presence within reality, within a space, amongst Bnei Yisrael, and in a constant manner; God dwells in the midst of the world. This is what is usually referred to in theological terminology as the "immanent" view.

In *Sefer Devarim* there is no reflection of this view. *Sefer Devarim* appears to represent a different theology, according to which God is found "in the heavens," or beyond our world and its reality; this is the "transcendental" view. Thus, for example, the expression in *Devarim* (26:16), "Look down from Your holy dwelling, from the heavens," or the expression from the end of our *parasha*: "A land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are upon it..." (11:12) – His eyes are upon it, rather than "He is in it." God's dwelling is in the heavens –i.e., above and beyond space.

### Root of the controversy between Chassidim and Mitnagdim

The difference between these two views represents the root of the historical controversy between Chassidim and Mitnagdim.

In a letter dispatched by Rabbi Shneuer Zalman of Liadi, the "Admor ha-Zaken," to his followers in Lithuania, he explains that the Vilna Gaon contended against the Chassidim because he understood the idea of "*zimzum*" (Divine contraction), in the teachings of the Ari z"l, in its plain sense, while the Chassidim understand it differently than its plain sense.

The Vilna Gaon understood that the story of Creation, in the Kabbala of the Ari, according to which the infinite Divinity contracted itself in order to "make place," as it were, for the world, means that the space thus created is not Godly; rather, it is the opposite: it is devoid of Godliness, and therefore we cannot speak of the world, or something in the world, as having Divine content. As R. Chaim of Volozhin – a disciple of the Vilna Gaon – explains in his work, *Nefesh ha-Chayyim*, Godliness manifests itself in this world only through God's speech – i.e., through Torah and the commandments. Therefore, according to the view of the Mitnagdim, it is possible to cleave to God only

through study of the Torah and observance of the commandments.

According to Chassidism, the Infinite is not absent; it is not removed from the world; rather, it is manifest in "miniature" – through the attributes, or "*sefirot*." Hence, all beauty in the world is Godly – since it is a manifestation of "*tiferet*"; all kindness in the world is Godly, etc.

*Sefer Devarim* is the root of the view adopted by the Mitnagdim, according to which God is present in the world not in the tangible sense, but rather through Torah and the commandments.

The ideal of the *Mishkan* facilitates "cleaving," in the plain sense, to the Divinity that is revealed before me, as well as in every tree and flower, etc. This is the Chassidic view of "cleaving," of "having God before me always."

### Conclusion – but not the end

According to what we have said, our *parasha* should be viewed against the broader background of the theological approach of *Sefer Devarim*. Obviously, moving the question from its local context to the broader and more generation dimension does not absolve us of the need to answer it, and perhaps the question is thereby even intensified: how is it possible for the Torah to present two different theological approaches? Is it possible that there can be a *Sefer* of the Torah that represents a view nullifying the importance of the *Mishkan*, or the central ideal that it expresses, of God's presence in the world?

I hope to address these questions in the *shiurim* to follow, starting with an exploration the theological approach of *Sefer Devarim*, the matter of "the place that God will choose," and the ramifications of both of these issues.

### Postscript

Where, according to *Sefer Devarim*, is the ark of wood which Moshe made?

I suppose that since *Sefer Devarim* mentions only Moshe's tent of meeting, the ark of the tablets was probably placed there.

According to *Sefer Shemot*, it is appropriate that the Ark be within God's *Mishkan*, since the ark is a place for the Divine Presence and it must be at the center of God's "house."

According to *Sefer Devarim*, the ark should remain in the tent of Moshe, since he is the greatest of the Torah scholars, the giver of the law. It is appropriate that the ark that eternalizes the revelation of the Torah and the commandments should remain with Moshe.

Translation by Kaeren Fish

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[1] Apologies to readers for the length of the *shiur*. The subject requires a thorough discussion; I hope that you will not be disappointed!

- [2] These verses are followed by a unit of commandments including the prohibition on idolatry, maintaining a distance from the nations of the land, and the obligations of serving God, specifically in everything related to the yearly festivals.
- [3] It should be pointed out that from the verses cited above it appears that Moshe, rather than God, writes on the tablets (“God said to Moshe: Write for yourself these things...” – verse 27). In addition, it is not entirely clear what it is that is written, since “these things” would seem to refer to the previous unit – which includes the laws of the pilgrim festivals and the prohibition on idolatry (11-26), rather than to the Ten Commandments. This difficult question is addressed by some of the commentaries, but the scope of this *shiur* does not allow for a review of their interpretations.
- [4] Since Moshe was also standing there.
- [5] Below I shall attempt to explain most of the development of the story in *Sefer Shemot*. Many famous verses which are difficult to understand may be illuminated through this description; hence it is recommended that readers follow the discussion with a *Chumash* at hand, since for the sake of brevity we shall not be able to deal with the entire story.
- [6] The commentators adopt a wide range of interpretations of this request. A review of *Shemot* 24 shows that the covenant is completed by revelation, and it therefore makes sense for Moshe to seek God’s revelation for a completion of the pardon and a renewal of the covenant.
- [7] God tells him, “I shall pass all My goodness...” (18), and later on, “And it shall be, when My glory passes by” (22); the implication is that God’s “goodness” is itself His “glory.”
- [8] Even from the perspective of Rashi’s approach, maintaining that Moshe describes here a third ascent for the purpose of receiving the tablets, our main argument is still valid, since the encounter here describes only the relenting of the intention to destroy the nation and the command that the nation journey on.
- [9] Rashi’s explanation is based on the *Midrash Tanchuma* here. Rabbi Yehuda bar Ilai maintains that the broken tablets were placed in this ark, and the Sages are divided in this regard. See *Yerushalmi Shekalim* 6:1.
- [10] Ibn Ezra also proposes them here briefly (on verse 1).
- [11] We refer here to the order in which the events are recorded in the Torah, not to the chronological development of events, concerning which (as noted above) Rashi and Ramban disagree [editor’s comment].
- [12] I hope to elaborate on this in one of the *shiurim* to follow. In any event, it is clear that while God revealed Himself to Moshe in Moshe’s tent of meeting, He did not dwell there.
- [13] We shall hopefully discuss this further in the *shiur* on *Parashat Ki Tavo*.