

Our Passport

Rabbi David Gutterman - David Gutterman. The symbolism of the poles of the ark and why they may not be removed

Our Passport

The following may be indicative of what sociologists have termed, galus mentality. Galus is the Yiddishized pronunciation of a Hebrew word meaning, "the Diaspora." This mentality bespeaks a certain, though often barely perceptible attitude of not-quite-feeling-at-home. I'm guessing that you might very well have a similar family story to share.

Now, I am not suggesting that my grandmother invented it - but she certainly insisted on it. She religiously believed that everyone had to have their passport in force and up to date. Why? I once asked her. Her response - cryptic but perhaps wise, "just in case." As an elder and venerable rabbinic friend of mine put it, "I always have one valise packed." This notion plays itself out somewhat with a detail of which we read this Shabbat.

Professor Yeshaya Leibowitz in his commentary, Notes and Remark points out that the Torah dispatched with the Creation story in a mere 34 verses, but spends more than 400 verses describing the construction, building and outfitting of the Tabernacle in the desert. In the vast array of details of the building of the Tabernacle, the Torah makes clear that the central object, the Ark, which held and transported the Tablets of the Law, had a special mandate. Listen to the verses:

"They shall make an Ark of acacia wood...You shall cover it with pure gold...You shall cast for it four rings of gold and place them on its four corners...You shall make poles of acacia wood covered with gold and insert them into the rings with which to carry the Ark."

And now - a strange requirement: "The poles must remain in the rings of the Ark - they may not be removed from it."

The two poles that were affixed on either side, which facilitated its being carried, were not to be removed - even when the Ark was stationary.

The 13th century work, Sefer HaChinukh, attributed to Rabbi Aharon HaLevi of Barcelona posits, "the Jewish community might have to move unexpectedly and quickly, and it wouldn't be proper to carry the Ark tentatively and potentially have its contents fall." In other words, the Jewish community might find itself in motion requiring it to travel extemporaneously. Were I to translate this to a modern, sociological category, I would be tempted to invoke, galus mentality. I am not, G-d forbid, disparaging or repudiating this approach. G-d knows that it has been historically borne out more times than we care to acknowledge. And did not the German Jewish writer, Heinrich Heine call the Torah, "the portable homeland of the Jew?!"

The Ark is a salient symbol of Jewish life because contained therein is the Torah. Indeed, the aron hakodesh - the Ark - prominent in temples, batei k'nesset, synagogues and shuls of today, is a linkage to this motif. And it is the Ark containing the Torah that grants sanctity to the

synagogue. Otherwise it is merely a meeting place.

Allow me to be bold and to suggest another approach. Why must this special object have permanent bars and poles to hold on to? Because - simply put - we must always have access to her and engage with her. There must always be something to hold on to, to grasp and take ownership of. The Torah, and by extension, Jewish life, must be accessible.

Ethnicity may be nostalgic, but it cannot command. Only when one feels a part of a living people and a party to her history and narrative can there be viability and vivacity.

I just recently returned with colleagues and friends from Israel. As some of us went to daven (pray) at the Kotel, the Western Wall of the Temple - whose layout, accoutrements and activities were patterned after what we learn this and next week in the Torah - I encountered a group of Buddhist monks. They obviously realized that this Wall of the Jewish Temple was special and sacred and they came to offer prayers. Never having been accused of diffidence or timidity, I approached them. They said that they were part of the entourage that came with the Dalai Lama to Israel that week. I reminded myself of the book, *The Jew in the Lotus* where this Tibetan Buddhist leader, Tenzin Giatsu, the Dalai Lama, questions Jewish scholars about the sheer perplexity and improbability of Jewish survival, "You people who have known so much wandering and exile and yet survive. Teach me," he implored.

The simple answer is, the Ark with the Torah. Though often exiled from our land and too often displaced and disconnected from our heritage, it is the Torah of Moses which has sustained us and kept us alive. "The poles must not be removed." They are there for us to grab hold of. And does not our tradition and liturgy record: "Etz chayim he lamachazikim ba -She is a tree of life to those who grab hold of her?!"

Wherever we are at as a community or as individuals - in times of movement and anxiety or in times of rest and repose, the permanence of the poles holding the Ark and Torah vividly remind us that if we carry her she will carry us. After all, the Torah is our passport to survival and thrival and, to quote my grandma - must always be in force and up to date.

Shabbat Shalom,
David