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The *Mishkan*, *Aron* and *Mizbeach*  
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In this week's *parasha*, the Torah commands the building of the Tabernacle, the *Mishkan*. Immediately following this command, the Torah describes and commands the building of a set of religious objects that will inhabit the *Mishkan*. The first of these objects described by the Torah is the *Aron HaEdut*, "Ark of the Covenant." The command to build the *Aron* is related as follows:

And they shall make an *Aron* of acacia-wood... And make one cherub at the one end, and one cherub at the other end; of one piece with the *Aron*-cover shall ye make the cherubim of the two ends thereof. And the cherubim shall spread out their wings on high... **and in the *Aron* thou shalt put the testimony that I shall give thee [the Ten Commandments]. And there I will meet with thee, and I will speak with thee from above the *Aron*-cover**, from between the two cherubim which are upon the *Aron* of the covenant... (25:10, 19-22).

In popular culture, the *Aron* has become a symbol of the mystery and intrigue of the holy. What is the significance of the *Aron*? What lessons can be gleaned from its occurrence in narrative and *halachic* literature?

Since entering the land of Israel in the book of Yehoshua, the *Aron* has played a central role in the narrative history of Bnei Yisrael. When Bnei Yisrael crossed the Jordan river into the land, the prophet describes the *Cohanim*, or priests, carrying the *Aron* into the river and stopping the river from flowing downstream:

...And when they that bore the *Aron* came unto the Jordan river, and the feet of the *Cohanim* that bore the *Aron* were dipped in the water... the waters which came down from above stood, and rose up in one heap... and those that went down toward the sea of the Arabah, even the Salt Sea, were wholly cut off; and the people passed over right against Jericho. And the *Cohanim* that bore the *Aron* of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, while all Israel passed over on dry ground, until all the nation were passed clean over the Jordan (3:15-17).

Additionally, when waging war against the city of Jericho, the *Cohanim* carrying the *Aron* encircle the city of Jericho seven times and the city walls collapse before Bnei Yisrael. Given the narratives in the book of Yehoshua, one might be inclined to think of the *Aron* as a source of supernatural militaristic might- the ultimate talisman. A gripping narrative in the beginning of the book of Shmuel I glaringly rejects this notion:

And the Philistines put themselves in array against Israel; and when the battle was spread, Israel was smitten before the Philistines; and they slew of the army in the field about four thousand men. And when the people came into the camp, the elders of Israel said: 'Wherefore hath the Lord smitten us today before the Philistines? Let us fetch the *Aron* of the covenant of the Lord out of

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This essay was inspired by a *Dvar Torah* published in last year's "*Perot Haaretz*," by my *chavruta* Sammy Steiner.

Shiloh unto us, so that He may come among us, and save us out of the hand of our enemies.' So the people sent to Shiloh, and they brought from thence the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who sitteth upon the cherubim; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the *Aron* of the covenant of God. And when the *Aron* of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said: 'What is the meaning of the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews?' And they knew that the *Aron* of the Lord had come into the camp. And the Philistines were afraid, for they said: 'God is come into the camp.' And they said: 'Woe unto us! For there was not such a thing yesterday and the day before. Woe unto us! Who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods that smote the Egyptians with all manner of plagues in the wilderness...**And the Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten**, and they fled every man to his tent; and there was a very great slaughter; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen. **And the Aron of God was taken**; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain. (4:2-11).

In the aforementioned narrative, Bnei Yisrael bring the *Aron HaEdut* with them to battle against the Philistines with the hope of gaining a militaristic edge. Despite the Philistine's initial fear, drafting the *Aron* into battle proves futile. The battle is lost and the *Aron* is taken as the spoils of war. The message of the narrative is clear and polemical. Victory comes to those who are deserving, not to the army with the most keen knowledge of relevant superstitions and rituals. Judaism demands that we forge an authentic relationship with our Creator, not that we try to exploit His services by manipulating religious objects or incantations. The story in Shmuel I continues: In possession of the *Aron*, residents of the associated Philistine city begins to die of a plague (6:4) and suffer a painful tumorous growth (often translated as hemorrhoids) (5:12). After seven months (6:1) the Philistines return the *Aron* to Bnei Yisrael. Finally, the *Aron* is given over to Avinadav from Kiryat Yearim (7:1) where it stays for the forty years of King Saul's reign .

With respect to the *halacha*, or Jewish law, there is dispute regarding the relationship between the *Aron* and the *Mishkan*. A comment by Ramban on the beginning of this week's *parasha* (25:2) maintains that the *Aron* is the central and most significant part of the *Mishkan*:

Therefore, Bnei Yisrael were first commanded the [building of the] *Mishkan* which is intended as a house within Bnei Yisrael for the sanctity of God's name, and there God speaks to Moshe and commands Bnei Yisrael. **And the central item of the *Mishkan*, which is the place where the *shekhina* [divine presence] resides, is the *Aron*.**

Bnei Yisrael's commandment to build the *Mishkan* immediately follows their receiving of the Ten Commandments at Har Sinai. According to Ramban, these two events are not only linked chronologically, but thematically. According to Ramban, the *Mishkan* is essentially a continuation of the Har Sinai experience. In the Holy of Holies, the heart of the *Mishkan*, lies the *Aron HaEdut*. Hidden away therein, are the Ten Commandments that Moshe brought down from Har Sinai. In a sense, the *Mishkan* is a portable version of the revelation at Sinai.

HaRambam argues on this presentation of Ramban. According to HaRambam, the center piece of the *Mishkan* is not the *Aron* but the sacrificial alter, the *Mizbeach*, which is also commanded in this week's *parasha* (27:1-8). In the first *halacha* of Hilchot Bet Habechira, the laws related to the Jewish Temple, HaRambam describes the religious significance of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, the *Bet HaMikdash*: "It is a positive commandment to build a house for God that is established for the

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The apathy toward the *Aron* during the reign of Saul is captured by a verse in Divrei Hayamim I 3:13: "וְנִסְבָּה אֶת-אֲרוֹן יְהוָה בְּיָמֵי שָׁאוּל אֲלֵהֶינּוּ, אֲלֵינוּ כִּי-לֹא דָרְשָׁנָהּ, בְּיָמֵי שָׁאוּל."

sacrificing of the sacrifices... as it says 'And you shall make for me a *Mikdash*' (Shemot 25:8)."

It is clear from HaRambam's presentation of the commandment to build a *Bet HaMikdash* that he sees the purpose of the *Mishkan* as housing the *Mizbeach* for the bringing of sacrifices. According to Ramban, the significance of the *Aron* is inextricably linked to its position in the *Mishkan*, while according to HaRambam, the significance of the *Mishkan* is not derived from the *Aron*.

This dispute between HaRambam and Ramban is parallel to a textual ambiguity in the Torah. In this week's *parasha*, the *Aron* is presented in the specific context of the building of the *Mishkan*. Immediately preceding the section about the building of the *Aron*, the Torah articulates the underlying motivation of the chapters that follow: "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (25:8). Based on the presentation in Shemot, it seems that the *Mishkan* and *Aron* are inextricably linked. In the book of Devarim however, the *Mishkan* is presented in a wholly different context. In the tenth chapter of Devarim Moshe retells:

At that time the Lord said unto me: 'Hew thee two tablets of stone like unto the first, and come up unto Me into the mount; and make thee an *Aron* of wood. And I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets which thou didst break, **and thou shalt put them in the *Aron***' (10:1-2).

In the book of Devarim, the *Aron HaEdut* is depicted without any mention of the *Mishkan*. It seems from here that the *Aron* was designed for the sole purpose of housing the Ten Commandments that Moshe received at Mar Sinai. Based on the presentation in Devarim, the *Aron* seems to be a stand-alone religious object .

This dispute between Ramban and HaRambam, about whether the *Aron* is significant as the centerpiece of the *Mishkan* or has significance independent of the *Mishkan*, impacts our understanding of the Shmuel II chapter six narrative. In this chapter, David Hamelech decides to take the *Aron* from the propriety of Avinadav in Kiryat Yearim and bring it to Jerusalem. It is unclear what motivates David to bring the *Aron* to Jerusalem. Some commentators assume that David's movement of the *Aron* to Jerusalem reflects his idealistic desire to establish the *Bet HaMikdash* in Jerusalem. This assumption is consistent with Ramban's position that the *Aron* is representative of the *Bet HaMikdash* as a whole. An alternative reading of Shmuel II chapter six assumes that David's bringing of the *Aron* to Jerusalem was driven by purely political motivations and had nothing to do with David's aspirations to build the *Bet HaMikdash*. In fact, it is likely that David had no idea that the *Bet HaMikdash* would eventually be built in Jerusalem. The Torah tells us that a *Bet HaMikdash* will eventually be built in the land of Israel, but nowhere does it say that it will be built in Jerusalem. Instead, the Torah only tells us about a "place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put His name there" (Devarim 12:5). In fact, David only asks God about building a *Bet HaMikdash* in the following chapter of Shmuel II, chapter seven. The narrative of Goren Arnon, Arnon's threshing floor, in Shmuel II chapter twenty-four and the parallel narrative in Divrei Hayamim I chapter twenty-one, suggest that David didn't know that

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We note that Ramban's comment about the centrality of the *Aron* is addressed toward the *Aron* in the *Mishkan* whereas, HaRambam's comment about the centrality of the *Mizbeach* is addressed toward the *Mizbeach* in the *Bet HaMikdash*. It would have been conceivable that HaRambam agrees with Ramban about the centrality of the *Aron* in the Tabernacle and only with regard to the *Bet HaMikdash* does he maintain that the most central item the *Mizbeach*. However, we notice that the source HaRambam brings for his *halacha* is from the commandment to build the Tabernacle. From here we conclude that HaRambam's treatment of the *Mizbeach* as the center piece of the *Bet HaMikdash* applies to the Tabernacle as well.

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The discrepancy between these two sources is stark enough to give the impression that the Torah is describing two different Arks. This impression of multiplicity may be the thematic motivation behind the beautiful *midrash* Chazal quoted by the Gemara Tractate Sotah 13a: "וכל אותן שנים שהיו ישראל במדבר היו שני ארונות הללו אחד של מת ואחד של שכילה...מהלכין זה עם זה"

Jerusalem would be the grounds of the future *Bet HaMikdash* until well after he brought the *Aron*

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there . This reading of the Shmuel II chapter six narrative is consistent with HaRambam's assumption that the *Aron* is a stand-alone religious artifact and is not intended to be representative of the entire *Bet HaMikdash*.

Furthermore, this dispute between HaRambam and Ramban about the most essential part of the *Mishkan* impacts our understanding of the role of the *Mishkan* and by extension, the *Bet HaMikdash* as a whole. The *Aron-Mizbeach* dichotomy is characteristic of the religious lifestyle. This dispute between HaRambam and Ramban captures two unique and essential perspectives on being Jewish. The *Aron*, as described by Ramban, is the resting place of God's *shechina*, or divine presence. It is a locus of divine intimacy and spiritual revelation. The *Aron* represents humankind's desire to connect with their creator in a meaningful and authentic way. The *Mizbeach* on the other hand, is the mechanism of the Torah's commandment to bring daily sacrifices and is an embodiment of recurring religious ritual. The *Mizbeach* represents our obligation to be consistent in our day-to-day observation of the *halacha*. Judaism is characterized by these two elemental experiences. As Jews, we are bound by the Torah to strive for exacting observance of God's commandments. We shoulder a covenant of accountability, which demands excellence in our religious routines. However, our yearning for meditation with our creator is equally integral to our religious experience.

Like the *Mishkan HaEdut*, housing both the *Aron* and the *Mizbeach*, may we merit to contain both these aspects in our own lives.

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The view that David's bringing of the *Aron* to Jerusalem was motivated by a political agenda may be useful in explaining why the procession was marred by an unsettling tragedy (Shmuel II 6:6). It seems that David eventually redeemed his decision to bring the *Aron* to Jerusalem and reestablished a purity of motive in the narrative of his running away from his son Avshalom. In that narrative he has an opportunity to use the *Aron* for his political advantage but refuses to do so (Shmuel II 15:24-29).