The *Sugya* of the *Aron / Ark of the Covenant*-chs.4-7

Although the main events of the ’travels and travails’ of the *Aron* are easily seen from the text, I will concentrate on a number of general points which I believe enhance the understanding of this difficult historical tragedy in the life of *Am Yisrael* at that time.

1. Why did the *zekenim / elders* make the error of taking the *Aron* out to battle without being commanded to do so?

The key to answering this point is found in the following section of *Talmud Yerushalmi*:

**תלמוד ירושלמי מסכת סוטה פרק ח דף כב טור ב /מ"ז**

ר' יודה בן לקיש אומר שני ארונות היו מהלכין עם ישראל במדבר אחד שהיתה התורה נתונה בו ואחד שהיו שיברי הלוחות מונחין בתוכו זה שהיתה התורה נתונה בתוכו היה נתון באהל מועד הדא היא דכתיב וארון ברית יי' ומשה לא משו מקרב המחנה וזה שהיו שברי הלוחות נתונין בתוכו היה נכנס ויוצא עמהן ורבנן אמרי אחד היה ופעם אחת יצא ובימי עלי נשבה ……………

‘ Rabbi *Yuda Ben Lakish* said: 2 arks went with Israel through the desert; in one of them was placed the *Torah* ( and the 2nd *luchot/tablets*) and in the other one the broken tablets of stone. The ark with the *Torah* remained in the *Mishkan* whereas the other ark went out with them (to war).

The Rabbis said: there was only one ark and it went out to war only once, in the days of *Eli* and was captured……….’

According to Rabbi *Yuda ben Lakish*, the tragedy of the events here was that the messengers of the elders took out the wrong ark, that is, the golden ark, and not the plain ark, and it was captured. Some suggest that this was *mida keneged mida* (‘measure for measure’) for the abuse of the *Mishkan* by the sons of *Eli* as discussed previously.

According to the Rabbis, the one ark was taken out in error and again, as a retribution for the negative attitude of the family of *Eli,* the ark was captured. The very fact that we are dealing with a mistake of the elders and their *shlichim/*agents, shows us the weakness of the generation and how necessary the rise of *Shmuel* really was to restore the holiness of *Am Yisrael*.

1. Why were the men of *Bet Shemesh* punished so severely?

A suggestion to answer this question can be taken from a wonderful piece of the *Kuzari* written by Rabbi *Yehuda Halevi* (11th century-Spain).

**ספר הכוזרי מאמר ב אות נח**

נח. אמר החבר: העדה שצופה ועונשה לעתה בתוכה, ר"ל השכינה, הלא תראה מה שאמר יהושע: +יהושע כ"ד י"ט+ "לא תוכלו לעבוד את ה' כי אלהים קדושים הוא", וזה עם מה שהיה בעדתו מן החסידות והזהירות………………………………………………………..

והיה מעניש לעתו על כל מה שהיה, ומה שהיה מעונש מרים בצרעת ועונש נדב ואביהוא ועונש עוזא ועונש אנשי בית שמש כי ראו בארון ה',

‘The *Chaver* responds: (He was asked how such a large congregation, such as the Jewish people are able to keep all the commandments given to them by God). The ability comes from their increased spiritual awareness as they see the *shechina / God’s divine presence* the whole time and from this awareness comes the ability to appreciate the rewards for keeping God’s laws. At the same time, the responsibility is awesome and if they fail to live up to the required standard their punishment can be instantaneous, as seen in the story of the men of *Bet Shemesh*….’

The great spiritual level and holiness of the nation led to these frightening instant punishments, even for sins which don’t seem to us as so severe.The men of *Bet Shemesh* realize this when they say:

**שמואל א פרק ו פסוק כ**

ויאמרו אנשי בית שמש מי יוכל לעמד לפני ידוד האלהים הקדוש הזה ואל מי יעלה מעלינו:

‘And the men of *Bet Shemesh* said: Who can stand before this holy God, and who will take up (the ark) from upon us’.

They realized that they had not honored the ark as was befitting and were being sorely taken to task for this lack of *kavod* (respect). However, even at a time of weakness, the potential for greatness could be seen and the scene was being set for the appearance of true greatness in the form of *Shmuel Hanavi* in the next few chapters.

1. Why was the Ark left in *Kiryat Yearim* and not returned to the *Mishkan* which was now in *Nov* (or later in *Givon* in the early days of King David)?

A number of answers can be found to this perplexing question:

1) *Midrash*

**מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בשלח - מס' דויסע בשלח פרשה ו**

אמרו הארון הזה של פורענות הוא הוא הכה את עזא שנא' ויחר אף ה' בעזא (ש"ב =שמואל ב'= ו ז) הכה באנשי בית שמש שנא' ויך באנשי בית שמש (ש"א =שמואל א'= ו יט) לכך ידעו ישראל של ברכה הוא

‘They said: the ark is a source of punishment, as *Aza* was smitten and the men of *Bet Shemesh* were also afflicted…..therefore Israel should know that the ark is a source of blessing (and it is *sin* which kills and not the place itself).’

From here we see that the men of *Kiryat Yearim* were known for their piety and were the only ones who could handle the holiness of the ark without being affected detrimentally, as were the men of *Bet Shemesh*. The spiritual standing of the people was the deciding factor and the people of *Kiryat Yearim* were holier than others in Israel.

2) *Redak*

**רד"ק שמואל ב פרק ו פסוק יז**

ולמה לא הביא דוד את הארון לגבעון שהיה שם אהל מועד לפי שידע כי אהל מועד היה עתיד לבא לירושלם וחשב כי בימיו יהיה זה והוא יבנה בית המקדש

‘…and why didn’t *David* bring the ark to *Givon*, where the *Mishkan* was situated? In fact, *David* knew that the *Mishkan* was meant to come to Jerusalem and he thought that this will happen in his days and that he will build the temple ( so he found a temporary location for the ark until these events came about).’

The *Redak* suggests that the ark would only now return to a completed Temple which *David* hoped to build in his days. As such it needed a temporary home until that time.

3) *Meiri*

He argues that the people were afraid that it may be captured again so they put it in a fortified city, such as *Kiryat Yearim*, to make sure it would always remain in Jewish hands.

It is clear from the above analysis that there was a dire need for central leadership which was not around at that time. This lack of direction led to the *aron* ‘fiasco’ and the Jewish world was quickly coming to the realization that a new strong leader was necessary for the future. This leader was about to appear in the form of *Shmuel Hanavi*.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------