

Where is the Ark?

Why are we so obsessed with the location of the Ark, and what does it tell us about the Jewish people?

Kotel Tunnels

There are two things that everyone needs to do when they visit the Western Wall in Jerusalem: Put on tefillin at the Chabad tefillin-stand, and take a tour of the “Kotel Tunnels.”

The one who initiated the excavations around the Western Wall was Rabbi Meir Yehuda Getz, the Kotel rabbi after the Six Day War. Rabbi Getz, who lost his son in the battle for the Old City, decided to move to Jerusalem to be near his son’s grave, and after the war, when there was no organizational structure at the Kotel, began to devote himself to running its affairs. Eventually, he was appointed as the Kotel rabbi.

In 1969, he initiated what is now known as the “Kotel Tunnels.” In the beginning, there was no public interest in the project; he and several volunteers would dig at night with their own hands! But in 1971, during the excavations, he made an incredible discovery: they uncovered a sealed gate which he identified as the “Gate of the Kohanim.” According to his calculations, there was a high probability that this gate leads to the location of the Ark of the Covenant!

From time immemorial, the location of the lost Ark has perked our imaginations. Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark is all built on this story. But let’s avoid Hollywood for a moment.

What does Judaism have to say on the topic? Where is the Ark?

The Talmud records an argument about its fate: according to Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the Ark was carted off to Babylon during Nebuchadnezzar's invasion. According to Rabbi Yehudah ben Lakish, the Ark was hidden in subterranean tunnels under the Temple mount, when the Judean king Josiah realized the rising danger of invasion.

Rabbi Yehudah ben Lakish's opinion is supported by a story: the Talmud relates that a Kohen was once in one of the side chambers of the Temple, designated for the storage of wood, when he noticed a stone tile that was higher than the others. He suspected that the Ark had been hidden there, and ran over to tell his friend—but died suddenly before he could complete his account.

On another occasion, two Kohanim were sorting wormy wood in that same chamber when the axe of one of them dropped and fell into a hole in the floor—when a fire emerged from the hole and burned the Kohen. After those occurrences, people understood that the Ark was there—but that it was intended to remain a secret. (Yoma 53b, 54a).

The Rambam, in his code, cites only the second opinion. He says that King Solomon built the first Temple with subterranean tunnels to house the Ark in the event of destruction, and more than 350 years later, King Josiah decided to make use of them (Hilchos Beis Habechirah 4:1).

The Decision

When Rabbi Getz began his project of the tunnels, his dream was to find the Ark, so when he discovered the “Gate of the Kohanim,” he was extremely excited.

Over the next few years, he deliberated whether he should break through the gate. The decision to enter such a sacred place was not easy for him, and he realized that he needed to consult with rabbinic leaders, so he decided to direct the crucial question to the Rebbe. He wrote down the details of his question and sent the letter to New York.

Shortly thereafter, he received a very clear-cut response. The Rebbe wrote that he would mention Rabbi Getz at the resting place of his father-in-law, the previous Rebbe, in prayer for the fulfillment of his heart’s desires, and also for good news in everything he wrote about, “including the cancellation of the plan to dig beneath the Temple Mount, G-d forbid, and even the thought thereof” (Igros Kodesh v. 31 pg. 281). In the continuation of the letter, the Rebbe emphasized the need to preserve the sanctity of the Temple and not to touch it, even where there is a slight possibility that this is a holy place.

Rabbi Getz accepted the Rebbe’s opinion and, with a heavy heart, shelved his plan.

Several years passed. In 1981, Rabbi Getz suddenly received an urgent message from one of the engineers working in the tunnel. As a result of the excavations, a hole in the wall opened near the Warren’s Gate of the Kotel, revealing a massive underground space filled with water and mud.

He was incredibly excited. “For a long time, I was immobilized; I just sat there with tears streaming down my face...” Rabbi Getz decided to venture into the tunnel in an attempt to find the Ark of the Covenant.

The significant amount of water flooding the tunnel required serious pumping, which delayed the excavation efforts. The complicated process took a considerable amount of time, and meanwhile, rumors began circulating among officials and politicians—all sworn to secrecy about the astonishing discovery. But the “secret” soon became a widely known rumor. Eventually, news of the excavations reached the media, and they published the story with great fanfare, causing a major uproar in the Arab world. Israeli Arabs began threatening with riots.

One day, Rabbi Getz was rushed from his home to the Kotel. Arabs were breaking into the tunnel through an opening from the Temple mount. Rabbi Getz raced for the tunnel, where to his horror, he was met by a large group of Arabs, holding metal rods and makeshift weapons.

It was him against a frenzied mob. Luckily, he was armed with a gun. He drew his weapon and yelled, “Stop! Don’t come any closer!” Soon, a group of yeshiva students arrived to support him.

But he couldn’t stop them from accomplishing their goal. Right in front of his eyes, they brought in large cement blocks and significant amounts of concrete, pouring it into the tunnel and closing it up. The Israeli government, also concerned about

potential riots, decided to seal off the tunnel from the side of the Western Wall. Rabbi Getz's dream was buried before his eyes.

Solomon's Decision

Why did King Solomon build a tunnel under the Temple mount to house the Ark?

The Rebbe explained that the central feature of the Temple—the feature that gives it its crucial sanctity—is the Ark. When King Solomon built the Temple, he knew that it would be destroyed someday, so he—from the outset—built two chambers for it; one in the center of the Temple in the Holy of Holies, and another underground. Both were legitimate locations for the Ark. Thus, being that the Ark remains in its place, the Temple hasn't actually been fully destroyed; the Ark remains in its location and serves as a link between all three Temples.

That's why we see an interesting phenomenon. When people come to Israel for their first visit, they go to see all the important archeological sites—Masada, Caesarea, and so on and on, and of course, the Kotel. But the second time they visit, they go only to the Kotel; one experience climbing Masada is good enough, but there is never an end to how many times one can pray at the Kotel.

Because the Kotel is not just a historical location of the ancient Jewish Temple; it is the very current site of the Ark of the Covenant, a magnet that draws people from all over the world, Jews and non-Jews, to come there and connect to G-d.

During these three weeks, we mourn the destruction of the Holy Temple. It's a good time to remember that not everything was destroyed; in fact, the most important element, the Ark and the Tablets inside it, remain with us not in Ethiopia or Iraq, but in Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jewish people.

What is the message for us?

Every Jew has an inner side and an outer side. From the outside, things might seem like a disaster and destruction, but we need to remember that in reality, the two *luchos* - *Ten Commandments* are engraved in the heart of every Jew.