

With eyes on winning war, building third Jewish Temple, Ark replica shown in Jerusalem

“Now we can see with our own eyes something which we have missed for 2,000 years,” said Israeli scholar Lt. Col. (res.) Mordechai Kedar of Bar-Ilan University.

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A replica of the Ark of the Covenant, painstakingly constructed, its creators say, to the Torah specifications of the sacred vessel that was the First Temple’s central fixture, was displayed in Jerusalem on Sunday evening, during the intermediate days of the Sukkot holiday.

The ark described in the Torah, which housed the Ten Commandments tablets among other holy objects, was hidden after the destruction of the First Temple, per rabbinic tradition. At Jerusalem’s King David Hotel, the replica shown in the hotel’s sukkah contained a refurbished Torah scroll, which survived the Holocaust, from Thessaloniki, Greece.

Several members of the Knesset and Israeli activists were on hand at the hotel for an event and festive meal—a stop on the replica’s journey retracing the steps of the biblical prototype.

Earlier in the day, it was fitted with the Greek Torah at Jerusalem’s City of David. It was later displayed—with some difficulty and via a Schweppes pallet jack—on a rooftop overlooking the Western Wall plaza and Temple Mount.

The replica ark stopped in Jericho, the first Israeli city inhabited by Jews after the biblical Exodus from Egypt, and in Shiloh, the site that served as the Jewish capital for 369 years after Jews settled in Israel and the location of the Tabernacle before the building of the First Temple.

‘Process of discovery, mystery’

It took 17 volunteers, who live in several countries, three-and-a-half years to build the replica ark, which is made out of donated gold and some three tons of Egyptian Acacia, according to “Jake” the project’s chief architect, who prefers to remain anonymous, and Lewis Topper, its principal financier.



Project financier Lewis Topper displays a replica Ark of the Covenant at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem on October 20, 2024. Photo by Alex Traiman.

Although the Torah delves into extensive detail about the construction of the Ark and its dimensions and materials, it leaves out a lot of critical information that a builder would need to create the sacred vessel.

“It was really a deep process of discovery and a mystery. It’s not a question of just reading the descriptions literally and building the device,” Jake said at the event. “You have to do some heavy research, you have to immerse yourself and you have to go on a journey.”

“Building the Ark is the ultimate journey,” he added. “It’s the ultimate pilgrimage to discover God and discover the Jewish people, and that pilgrimage was both horrifying and very satisfying.”

Each step raised new questions about how such a complex object was constructed before the advent of modern manufacturing.

“We went with the highest purity of gold available to the Egyptians,” Jake said at the event. “The purity used for royal artifacts is around 23.75 carats, so we went with 23.75.”

The volunteers also drew on a “tremendous amount of math” to build the ark, according to the project’s chief architect.

“A lot of the concepts or motifs that we used follow up either Kabbalistic or some other concept by way of numerology,” Jake said. “The math parallels the ones found both in the Tabernacle and the First Temple. They used the same kind of numerology.”

He added that the Golden Ratio—a relationship between values that has been seen as beautiful since ancient times and which appears in nature, including human anatomy—played a “very important part in the design.”

“That’s one reason why the art is so aesthetically appealing,” Jake said.

Designing a functional replica

Illustrations of four biblical stages of the Exodus from Egypt are displayed on the exterior of the ark replica: Moses’s prophecy at the burning bush, the parting of the Red Sea, the clouds and pillar of fire that protected and guided the Jews in the desert and the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.

“The ark by itself is a book,” Jake said at the event. “It’s a book that tells the story of the Exodus. It’s the ultimate manifestation and illustration of our Exodus and our relationship to God.”

The project architect told attendees that the replica had to be both beautiful and functional.

“The ark weighs around 85 pounds, so it is pretty heavy,” he said. The structure’s legs and poles, “need to sustain the load for extended periods of time.”

The replica of the sacred Temple object also “is exposed to a high degree of torsion—the twisting of the structure—because it’s carried by four individuals.” Due to that twisting force, “if the joint is not strong enough, you’ll eventually break it apart,” he said.

To construct a replica that withstands the tests of time, the volunteers who worked on the project studied arks that were constructed in ancient Egypt.

“The Egyptians were prolific ark builders,” Jake said. “They had many, many types of arks that they constructed during that period.”

Following the group’s initial research, the volunteers built a full-size, low-cost, “proof of concept” plywood model before building the golden replica.

“We took it for walks,” Jake said. “We figured out what the joints should be and how the mechanical connection should work.”

Since Egyptians didn’t know what mechanical fasteners were, the ark replica has no screws or nails.

“We had to come up with really creative ways to solve the mechanical fastening,” Jake said. “It may look trivial to actually build a wooden joint, but the Egyptians used very specific techniques when they created the wooden joints.” They also used a fastening technique called mortise and tenon “that can practically last forever,” Jake said. “We had to analyze a lot of those.”



A modern-day Ark of the Covenant was displayed in Jerusalem on Oct. 20, 2024. Photo by Alex Traiman.

Divine ‘communication device’

The crown jewel atop the golden box, which required painstaking detail, is the pair of male and female cherubs—winged angels with child-like features that face each other.

“It’s very difficult to hammer gold to a high degree of precision, so a lot of the techniques have to be invented and discovered,” Jake said.

“Scripture tells us that God spoke to Moses in between the cherubs,” he said. “The purpose of the Ark was to have a communication channel between Moses and God, so it’s the communication device. It certainly wasn’t an electronic communication device.”

It was also a sacred object with military implications.

In biblical times prior to the Temple, there were likely two Arks—one housing the Ten Commandments that was always in the Tabernacle—and the other which led the Jewish army in battle—according to Jake.

“The Ark of the Covenant was the weapon that was taken into war,” he said.

Several attendees said that it was meaningful that the ark replica was built and brought to Jerusalem amid Israel’s seven-front war against Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran and all of the latter’s other terror proxies.

“There is a very deep connection, believe it or not, between the Philistines and the Ark,” said Simcha Rothman, a member of Knesset and chair of its Constitution, Law and Justice Committee.

Rothman noted that when the Jews misused the Ark in the Bible, it was taken away from them and held temporarily by the Philistines before it reverted to its rightful owners. “People thought that the Ark by itself wins the wars. The Ark by itself does not win the war,” Rothman said. “The Ark by itself represents the connection between the people of Israel and Hashem, and this is what wins the wars.”



An illustration of the biblical burning bush on a modern-day Ark of the Covenant was displayed in Jerusalem on Oct. 20, 2024. Photo by Alex Traiman.

Ohad Tal, another Knesset member, discussed the symbolism of the replica ark’s delivery in wartime.

“How can we know if we are actually winning this war or not?” he said. “The first stage is first of all to understand what we are fighting about.”

When Hamas terrorists penetrated Israeli villages and kibbutzim on Oct. 7, 2023, and murdered and raped civilians, they shouted, in Arabic, that “God is great,” according to Tal, “as if they are fighting for God.”

The terrorists called the war, which they launched, “Al Aqsa Jerusalem Flood.”

“They didn’t do that in order to expand their backyard or to improve their education system,” Tal said. “No. They did that for Jerusalem, for the Temple Mount. They wanted to prevent the unity that this ark represents.”

The Jewish people “are fighting not just against Hamas, not just to bring back security to Gaza or the northern border in Lebanon or against Iran,” Tal added. “We are fighting to bring back to the world the unity that the Ark, the Temple and Jerusalem represent.”

Jake told attendees that the replica ark might be providing some symbolic military assistance already.

“We brought it to Israel to get it reattached to all of the places it was before. We actually visited Shiloh,” he said.

Jake hopes the replica ark can be used more formally in the current war.

“We would like to bring it to a number of military camps,” he told attendees. “The original idea was to actually bring it physically into Gaza, but we are running into some administrative challenges.”



An illustration of the biblical pillar of fire and clouds protecting the Jews in the desert in Exodus on a modern-day Ark of the Covenant displayed in Jerusalem on Oct. 20, 2024. Photo by Alex Traiman.

‘Peace and kindness’

Topper, a businessman and philanthropist who lives in New York and Florida and who funded the project, told attendees that the replica ark is “a passionate task that was performed that encountered construction, engineering and architectural difficulties every step of the way.”

“When you’re doing something good and you’re finding that you’re making progress in an unexpected way, you almost know that you’re operating in line with the goodness and the essence of the Creator,” he said. “That’s what this project is, and I am thrilled to be able to be a facilitator.”

“It was a project designed to bring peace to the world and to bring victory to the Land of Israel, and to bring peace and kindness to America again,” he said. “The project was so dearly received by Hashem that he personally greased the wheels of every obstacle that we came across.” The rewards of the three-and-a-half-year journey were amplified for Topper when the replica ark arrived in Jerusalem.

“When we finally got the Torah delivered to us, it was this morning and it was at the City of David,” he said. “When that Torah was put in, this ark became weaponized.”

Topper anticipates that the project will yield major benefits.

“There is going to be a force that is absolutely so powerful that it’s going to be something that we’ve seen in the movies—but for good,” he said.

Lt. Col. (res.) Mordechai Kedar, a research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University, told attendees that the Ark is a concept in other faith traditions, including Islam.

“The Ark is mentioned in the Quran in the second chapter,” the scholar, who is one of Israel’s leading cultural experts, told attendees. He added that some researchers have made what he considers a “false comparison” between the Kaaba, the holy stone in Mecca, and the Ark. The symbolism of an ark replica approximating the return of the Ark to Judaism is significant, according to Kedar.

“Now we can see with our own eyes something which we have missed for 2,000 years,” he said.

“We have never seen such things. We heard about them. We learned about them. We see pictures, but we have never seen them in real life.”

“It is very important for us to see how these really were—to touch things, to see them, to measure them, to stand near them. We haven’t done so for 2,000 years,” he added. “We can see, we feel, we can touch and we can take pictures with them.”



An illustration of the biblical parting of the Red Sea on a modern-day Ark of the Covenant was displayed in Jerusalem on Oct. 20, 2024. Photo by Alex Traiman.

The covenant remains valid'

It wasn't clear if the replica ark would remain in Jerusalem long term or return to the United States, where it was mainly constructed, to tour and inspire individuals.

The replica has already visited Mar-a-Lago, the Palm Beach, Fla. home of former President Donald Trump, the Republican presidential nominee.

Completion of the project and the replica's delivery to Jerusalem has special significance to Jake. "What the ark represents is the fact that the covenant is still valid. It was never abrogated, and the covenant is still strong," he told attendees. "God's commitment to His people is as strong as it was 3,500 years ago when the Ark was built."

"It should be the weapon that walks in front of the army," he said. "We truly believe that it should be both a weapon and inspirational too."

The project, he said, was among the most difficult and demanding upon which he has ever worked.

"It's drained a lot of my psyche working on it and it's put tremendous stress on everybody," he said. "The end result, I think, it speaks for itself."

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