**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**Parashat Teruma**

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**The *Keruvim***

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And you shall make an ark-cover [*kaporet*]of pure gold: two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof. And you shall make two *keruvim* of gold; of beaten work shall you make them, at the two ends of the ark-cover. And make one *keruv* at the one end, and one *keruv* at the other end; of one piece with the ark-cover shall you make the *keruvim* of the two ends thereof. And the *keruvim* shall spread out their wings on high, screening the ark-cover with their wings, with their faces one to another; toward the ark-cover shall the faces of the *keruvim* be. And you shall put the ark-cover above upon the ark; and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the ark-cover, from between the two *keruvim* which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel. (*Shemot* 25:17-22)

### I.

The *keruvim* are located in the most sacred portion of the *Mishkan*, the Holy of Holies. Their function is spelled out in the verses brought above, as well as in the book of *Bamidbar*:

And when Moshe went into the tent of meeting that He might speak with him, then he heard the voice speaking to him from above the ark-cover that was upon the ark of the testimony, from between the two *keruvim*; and He spoke to him. (*Bemidbar* 7:89)

According to this account, the voice was heard from the space between the two *keruvim.* It seems that the *keruvim* are meant to express what is not there, more than what is, as is stated explicitly in the book of *Devarim*:

And the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the voice of words, but you saw no form; only a voice. (*Devarim* 4:12)

The *keruvim* create a framework that defines the space within it. God's word is heard specifically from within the space, thus clarifying that the voice comes from One who has no form or image. Without the *keruvim*,it would be impossible to define the space, the "nothingness," from which the word of God is heard.

It is possible that even when the people of Israel heard God's voice at Mount Sinai, the voice emanated from an empty space, but that space was encompassed by heavenly beings that had different forms:

Take you therefore good heed to yourselves, for you saw no manner of form on the day that the Lord spoke to you in Chorev out of the midst of the fire; lest you deal corruptly, and make you a graven image, even the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flies in the heaven. (*Devarim* 4:15-17)

It seems that at the assembly at Mount Sinai there was room for the participants to err and to confuse between God Himself – whose voice was heard from the empty space, without any image – and the members of His entourage, whom the observer could imagine in animal form. It is possible that these were the heavenly *keruvim*, as described in the vision of the chariot by Yechezkel, which we will discuss below. Therefore, the Torah is forced to issue a warning, lest we err and liken the Creator to that which He created.

The ability to liken the heavenly *keruvim*, even if only in part, to animals, requires explanation. It even brings to mind the images of the animals in the vision of the chariot in *Yechezkel* (especially chapters 1 and 10). This puzzling fact is exceedingly important in order to understand the people's mistake in the affair of the golden calf, which we will discuss at length when we come to *Parashat Ki Tisa*. At this time, let us content ourselves with the fact that in his vision, Yechezkel sees, in addition to animal-like images, also "a likeness as the appearance of a man" (*Yechezkel* 1:26). We will never fully understand this vision, but it seems that in the prophet's vision there is some kind of a relationship and correspondence between man vis-a-vis animals in our world and God vis-a-vis the *keruvim* and the angels in the heavenly world.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is the meaning of their similarity to animals in the prophet's vision.

### II.

Apart from the space that they create between their wings – a space that marks the place of the *Shekhina* – does the appearance of the *keruvim* over the ark have any independent significance? It is possible that it does, as the Rambam writes:

It is known that the fundamental principle of belief in prophecy precedes the belief in the Torah. For if there is no prophet, there can be no Law. The prophet receives prophetic revelation only through the intermediary of the angel. Thus: "And the angel of the Lord called" (*Bereishit* 22:15); "And the angel of the Lord said to her" (*Bereishit* 16:9, 10, 11). This occurs innumerable times. Even in the case of Moshe our Master, his prophetic mission is inaugurated through an angel: "And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord in the heart of fire" (*Shemot* 3:2). Consequently, it has been made clear that belief in the existence of angels precedes the belief in prophecy, and the belief in prophecy precedes the belief in the Law… Thereupon, when the truth became clear to the men of knowledge and it became known by demonstration that there is a being that is neither a body nor a force in a body, who is the true deity, and that He is one; and that there are also other beings that are separate from matter and are not bodies, being toward whom His being overflows, namely, the angels, as we have explained… it became known with certainty that true prophetic revelation is given to the prophets by the angels, not by the idols and the *asherot*. Thus, it has become clear through what we have stated before that the belief in the existence of angels is consequent upon the belief in the existence of the deity and that thereby prophecy and the Law are established as valid. **In order to fortify belief in this fundamental principle, He has commanded that the image of two angels be made over the ark, so that the belief of the multitude in the existence of angels be consolidated, this correct opinion, coming in the second place after the belief in the existence of the deity, constituting the originative principle of belief in prophecy and the Law and refuting idolatry, as we have explained.** If there had been one image, I mean the image of one *keruv*, this might have been misleading. For it might have been thought that this was the image of the deity who was to be worshipped – such things being done by the idolaters… However, since two *keruvim* were made and the explicit statement enounced: "The Lord is our God, the Lord is one" (*Devarim* 6:4), the validity of the opinion affirming the existence of angels was established and also the fact that they are many. Thus, measures were taken against the error that they are the deity – the deity being one and having created this multiplicity. (*Guide for the Perplexed* III, 45)

The belief in the existence of God precedes everything else. Next come the belief in prophecy, which tells us that God is interested in and capable of speaking to us to teach us His words, and also to listen to us and hear our requests of Him. The essence of prophecy is through the angels, who act as intermediaries between the word of God and the person who hears them. In the ordinary situation, a person – including a prophet – cannot hear the word of God without an intermediary – an angel, and only an angel! The appearance of the *Shekhina* in the *Mishkan* between the two *keruvim* expresses the very appearance and desire and ability of God to speak with man, usually through His angels. There are two *keruvim*, and not one, so that we recognize the One who is above them and who created them. Only after there is faith in prophecy can there be faith in the Torah itself. Therefore, the Torah scroll and the tablets of the Law are placed in an ark on the cover of which there are *keruvim.*

Other commentators, including the *Akeidat Yitzchak* and the Abravanel, follow closely in the footsteps of the Rambam.

In a manner not far from this, the Tosafot, and in their wake R. Elazar of Worms (the author of the Rokeach), write that the *keruvim* are the angels Michael and Gavriel,[[2]](#footnote-2) or alternatively, the attribute of mercy and the attribute of justice, by way of which God governs His world and bestows abundance upon it. According to this view, there is a sort of court on the ark cover – God and His angels or attributes. This is the way God governs the world, even though He Himself is one and unique and not in need of the advice of any angel.

But the idea of an intermediary between God and man – both in His speaking to us and in His governance of us, an idea that was very popular among the medieval commentators – is very limited in Scripture, and it has become less and less accepted since the teachings of the Vilna Gaon. We therefore seek another way to understand the issue.

### III.

R. Katina said: Whenever Israel came up to the Festival, the curtain would be removed for them and the *keruvim* were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwisted with one another, and they would be thus addressed: Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman. (*Yoma* 54a)

Many explanations have been suggested for this difficult passage in the *gemara*. God forbid that we should understand from here that the *keruvim* themselves represent the appearance of God and His love for Israel, for God has no body or form. It would appear that the *keruvim* are intertwined with one another only in their wings, their wings touching each other. In this way, the two *keruvim* – like the friends and agents of the bride and groom – together create with their wings a canopy for the couple described in *Shir Ha-Shirim*, the lover and his beloved, who symbolize the love between God and the people of Israel. But the lover and the beloved themselves do not appear above the ark-cover; their place is in the space between the wings of the *keruvim* under the canopy that is prepared for them. Thus, the *keruvim* are the entourage that accompany the lover and his beloved; they represent the "daughters of Jerusalem" and the "friends of the king" who appear in *Shir Ha-Shirim*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The *keruvim* are intertwisted with each other at their wings only if they face "one to another" (*Shemot* 25:20), as is stated in our *parasha.* The *gemara* comments about this:

But according to the one who says that they faced each other [it may be asked]: Is it not written: "And their faces were inward"? [This is] no difficulty: The former [was] at a time when Israel obeyed the will of God; the latter [was] at a time when Israel did not obey the will of God. (*Bava Batra* 99a)

In other words, the canopy is created in its entirety only when Israel obeys the will of God and the love is whole, as described in *Shir Ha-Shirim*. When they do not do God's will, the *keruvim* turn around and the canopy becomes disassembled.

### IV.

The *keruvim* do not only create a wedding canopy. Like the friends and agents of the bride and groom of days past, they are also responsible for the wholeness of the marriage.[[4]](#footnote-4) Therefore the *keruvim* can appear as representatives of the attribute of justice, when the "bride" – the people of Israel – do not fulfill their role and obligations.

So He drove out the man; and He placed at the east of the Garden of Eden the *keruvim* and the flaming sword that turned every way, to keep the way to the Tree of Life. (*Bereishit* 3:24)

The *Mishkan* and the *Mikdash* are the continuation of the Garden of Eden, where the *Shekhina* once dwelt and walked about with man. Man sinned and was driven out of the Garden, and the *keruvim* – the friends and agents of the bride and groom – who were meant to create a bridal canopy for God and man, were given a different role stemming from the attribute of justice. They watch over the Tree of Life,[[5]](#footnote-5) together with the flaming sword that turned every which way, in order to prevent man from approaching it.

The *keruv* is associated the attribute of justice also in the vision of the chariot seen by Yechezkel on the eve of the destruction of the First Temple, when the people of Israel were immersed in their sins, and the *keruv* – as the one who was responsible for the covenant between God and man – was a partner in their punishment when they breached the covenant:

And He spoke to the man clothed in linen, and said: Go in between the wheelwork, even under the *keruv*, and fill both your hands with coals of fire from between the *keruvim*, and dash them against the city. And he went in in my sight… And the *keruv* stretched forth his hand from between the *keruvim* to the fire that was between the *keruvim*, and took thereof, and put it into the hands of him that was clothed in linen, who took it and went out. (*Yechezkel* 10:2, 7)

The man clothed in linen is an angel; he stands in for the High Priest in the Yom Kippur service, who wears only linen garments. The High Priest enters into the Holy of Holies with a handful of incense and burning coals, whereas the man clothed in linen removes the coals with the help of a *keruv* and uses them to burn Jerusalem at the time of the destruction.

### V.

The *keruvim* described in the *parasha* were found in the *Mishkan* built by Moshe. Shelomo constructed other *keruvim*, as is described in the book of *Melakhim*:

And in the Sanctuary he made two *keruvim* of olive-wood, each ten cubits high. And five cubits was the one wing of the *keruv*, and five cubits the other wing of the *keruv*; from the uttermost part of the one wing to the uttermost part of the other were ten cubits. And the other *keruv* was ten cubits; both the *keruvim* were of one measure and one form. The height of the one *keruv* was ten cubits, and so was it of the other *keruv*. And he set the *keruvim* within the inner house; and the wings of the *keruvim* were stretched forth, so that the wing of the one touched the one wall, and the wing of the other *keruv* touched the other wall; and their wings touched one another in the midst of the house. And he overlaid the *keruvim* with gold. (I *Melakhim* 6:23-28)

It is important to note that Shelomo's *keruvim* were made at God's instructions, as David learned with the prophet Shemuel the laws concerning the building of the *Mikdash*, and as David then taught Shelomo:

Then David gave to Shelomo his son the pattern of the porch [of the Temple], and of the houses thereof, and of the treasuries thereof, and of the upper rooms thereof, and of the inner chambers thereof, and of the place of the ark-cover; and the pattern of all that he had by the spirit…and gold for the pattern of the chariot, even the *keruvim*, that spread out their wings, and covered the ark of the covenant of the Lord. All this [do I give you] in writing, as the Lord has made me wise by His hand upon me, even all the works of this pattern. (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 28:11-12; 18-19)

There are important differences between the *keruvim* fashioned by Shelomo and Moshe's *keruvim* in the *Mishkan*. Moshe's *keruvim* stand on the ark-cover of the ark of testimony; Shelomo's *keruvim* stand on the floor of the Temple, in the Holy of Holies. Shelomo made the *keruvim* even before he brought the ark into the Temple, and for many years the *keruvim* stood in the Holy of Holies with no ark between them.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Moshe's *keruvim* are part of the ark-cover that was made with pure gold. In contrast, Shelomo's *keruvim* are made of olive-wood and are covered with gold. Thus, they resemble not the vessels of the Temple, but rather its walls. Their total wingspan is twenty cubits, the size of the Holy of Holies. In modern lingo, we would define the *keruvim* as "wall to wall." Their height, ten cubits, was much greater than that of Moshe's *keruvim*, which rested on the ark of testimony, which was one and a half cubits tall. Their height is unknown, but theycould not have been ten cubits tall.

Moshe's *keruvim* spread their wings upwards, and faced each other. Shelomo's *keruvim* spread their wings to the sides and faced inwards, looking from west to east.

In general, it is possible to say that Shelomo's *keruvim* were part of the structure of the *Mikdash*, whereas Moshe's *keruvim* were part of the ark-cover. Moshe's *keruvim* spread their wings upwards; they are sort of ready for lift-off, in case the Torah is not kept. Then, the *Shekhina* will fly off with them out of the Temple and out of the camp of Israel. Shelomo's *keruvim*, in contrast, are in a landing state and express permanence on the ground.

It might be added that Moshe's *keruvim* stand on the foundation of the Torah and its observance, whereas Shelomo's *keruvim* stand on the very existence of the Temple in Jerusalem. This permanence is liable to create a false impression, and with that great danger. The *keruvim*, which are part of the structure of the Temple, are liable to create the impression that the *Shekhina* will remain fixed there unconditionally, even without observance of what is written on the tablets of testimony.

This is why God clarifies to Shelomo after his prayer:

But if you shall turn away from following Me, you or your children, and not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, but shall go and serve other gods, and worship them… and this house which is so high [shall become desolate], and every one that passes by it shall be astonished, and shall hiss. (I *Melakhim* 9:6-8)

It is not clear whether Shelomo's *keruvim* replaced Moshe's *keruvim* or were in addition to them, such that Moshe's *keruvim* were brought in together with the ark at the time of the dedication of the Temple, thirteen years after Shelomo's *keruvim* were already standing there.

### VI.

In many places in Scripture, God is described as "sitting on the *keruvim*":

So the people sent to Shilo, and they brought from thence the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, **who sits upon the *keruvim*;** and the two sons of Eli, Chofni and Pinchas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. (I *Shemuel* 4:4)

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You that leads Yosef like a flock; You that **sit on the *keruvim*,** shine forth. Before Ephraim and Binyamin stir up Thy might, and come to save us. (*Tehillim* 80:2-3)

The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble; **He sits upon the *keruvim*;** let the earth quake. (*Tehillim* 99:1)

And David arose and went with all the people that were with him from Ba'alei-Yehuda to bring up from there the ark of God, whereupon is called the Name, even the name of the Lord of hosts that **sits** **upon the *keruvim*.** )II *Shemuel* 6:2)

And Chizkiyahu received the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it; and Chizkiyahu went up to the house of the Lord and spread it before the Lord. And Chizkiyahu prayed before the Lord, and said: “O Lord, the God of Israel, who **sits upon the *keruvim*:** You are the God, even You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; You have made heaven and earth.” (II *Melakhim* 19:14-15)

It seems that this is the name of God when His *Shekhina* reveals itself on the ark between the two *keruvim*. I *Shemuel* 4 speaks of the ark on which there was an ark-cover and *keruvim*, when it arrived at the site of Israel's war against the Pelishtim at Even Ha-Ezer. The verse in *Tehilim* 80 appears to refer to the same event, when it describes a rout in battle. Similarly, when David brings the ark up from Ba'alei-Yehuda – Kiryat-Ye'arim – to Jerusalem, the *keruvim* are found on the ark. In the last cited verse, Chizkiyahu arrives in the house of God with the threatening letter of Ravshakeh and reads from it before God – before the ark of the covenant and the *keruvim* on top of it – and prays to God that He should save Jerusalem.

### VII.

During the Second Temple period, the Holy of Holy was empty.[[7]](#footnote-7) There was no ark. What happened to the ark of testimony, its contents and the ark-cover and *keruvim* upon it? The *Tanna’im* disagree about this issue:

When the ark was removed, other things were removed with it. Who hid it away? King Yoshiyahu hid it away. What did he see [to do this]? "And he said to the Levites that taught all Israel, that were holy to the Lord: Put the holy ark in the house which Shelomo the son of David king of Israel did build; there shall no more be a burden upon your shoulders" (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 35:3). He said to them: Hide it away so that it not be revealed to Babylon like the rest of the vessels, so that you can return it to it place. As it is stated: "Now serve the Lord your God, and His people Israel" (ibid.). Immediately the Levites hid it away. R. Eliezer said: The ark was taken into exile to Babylon, as it is stated: "Nothing (*davar*) shall be left, says the Lord" (II *Melakhim* 20:17). And *davar* refers to the commandments (*dibrot*) inside it. R. Shimon said: Surely it is stated: "And at the return of the year king Nevuchadnetzar sent, and brought him to Babylon, with the goodly vessels of the house of the Lord" (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 36:10) – this is the ark. R. Yehuda ben Lakish said: The ark was hidden away in its place, as it is stated: "And the staves were so long that the ends of the staves were seen… and there they are to this day" (I *Melakhim* 8:8). (Tosefta, *Sota* 13:1)

According to R. Eliezer and R. Shimon, the ark was taken to Bayblon. According to the first Tanna cited and R. Yehuda ben Lakish, it was hidden away on the Temple Mount. It is possible that this is the source of the dispute between the Rambam and the Ra'avad regarding the sanctity of the Temple and of Jerusalem today, after the destruction of the Temple:

Why do I say that the original consecration sanctified the Temple and Jerusalem for eternity, while in regard to the consecration of the remainder of *Eretz* *Yisrael* in the context of the Sabbatical year, tithes, and other similar [agricultural] laws, [the original consecration] did not sanctify it for eternity? Because the sanctity of the Temple and Jerusalem stems from the *Shekhina*, and the *Shekhina* can never be nullified. Therefore, it is stated: "I will lay waste to your Sanctuaries" (*Vayikra* 26:31). The Sages declared: "Even though they have been devastated, their sanctity remains. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Beit Ha-Bechira* 6:16)

The Ra'avad disagrees, arguing that the sanctity of the Temple and Jerusalem was nullified after the destruction:

Avraham said: This is his own reasoning; I do not know his source… This implies that according to the one who says that the original consecration did not sanctify it for eternity, there is no distinction between the Temple and Jerusalem and the rest of *Eretz* *Yisrael*. And furthermore I say that even R. Yose, who says that the second consecration sanctified it for eternity, only spoke about the rest of *Eretz Yisrael*, but not Jerusalem and the Temple. (ibid. 6:14)

It is possible that the Rambam maintains that the ark, the tablets, the ark-cover, and the *keruvim* are still hidden away on the Temple Mount, and they give it its sanctity, and therefore even though Jerusalem and the Temple are desolate, they retain their sanctity. The Ra'avad, in contrast, maintains that the ark was taken into exile, and therefore the sanctity of the place was nullified until the Temple will be rebuilt, speedily in our days.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. The correspondence is primarily in connection with the Garden of Eden and man before he sinned. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The only two angels whose names are mentioned in Scripture (and only in the book of Daniel: 8:16; 9:21; 10:13, 21; 12:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I heard this precise explanation, and many other ideas, from my colleague R. Aharon Friedman. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Ketubot* (12a) regarding their responsibility to see that the bride not commit adultery and that the groom not bring false accusations against her. This follows also from the *Yerushalmi*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Torah and the tablets of testimony in the ark, as is stated in *Mishlei* (3:18): "She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her." [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The *keruvim* were made and positioned in the Temple before Shelomo built his house in proximity to the Temple, whereas the ark was brought in and the Temple was dedicated only after Shelomo built his house, the house of the forest of Lebanon, the porch of judgment, and the house for Pharaoh's daughter. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Except for Shelomo's *keruvim*, which were there, as is stated in *Yoma* (54a): "In truth, the reference is to the Second Temple, but it had the painted *keruvim.*" The Ralbag (*Vayikra* 16:2) attempted to further limit what was missing in the Second Temple, arguing that the ark-cover and the *keruvim* were found in the Second Temple: "I think that the ark-cover together with the *keruvim* were found in the Second Temple, because the Torah was particular about the sprinkling of the blood of the bull and the goat of Yom Kippur that it be upon the ark-cover and before the ark-cover." Perhaps he is referring even to Moshe's *keruvim*, and not only to Shelomo's *keruvim*. It should be noted that the *gemara* in *Menachot* (27b) explicitly states that there was no ark-cover in the Second Temple: "In the Second Temple, where there was no ark or ark-cover." And in *Yoma* (21a), it is stated: "These are the five differences between the First Temple and the Second Temple: The ark, and the ark-cover, and the *keruvim*…." Indeed, the Radbaz (II, 641) maintains that the Holy of Holies was empty during the Second Temple period and that the blood was sprinkled on the *even ha-shetiya*, for from the outset there was no command to sprinkle the blood on the ark itself, but on the site of the ark. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)