

Lessons from the
כלי המקדש
Temple Vessels

RIVKA RUBIN'S
BAS-MITZVAH

The Three Weeks
Tammuz 5786 / July 2026
Albany NY

Thank you for participating in my Bas-Mitzvah.

Most of my sisters did Bas-Mitzvah projects relating to the time of year of their birthday. I was born on the 25th of Tammuz, which always falls during “The Three Weeks” when we remember and focus on the Beis HaMikdash (the Jerusalem Temples). That’s why my project is on the Klei-HaMikdash, the Vessels of the Mishkan-Tabernacle and later of the two Jerusalem Temples.

These vessels are described in the Chumash in several Torah portions in Sefer Shemos (which we started learning now at Maimonides), and also in the Mishne Torah by the Rambam/Maimonides (our school’s namesake), among other places. My grandparents have a big beautiful illustrated book that my father enjoyed looking at as a child, and that book was helpful, too.

Each of these vessels had its own design and function, and a special role in the Temple service. It’s almost like a family or a classroom or community where everyone works together but each person adds something special and unique to the mix. Each person has their own unique divine mission in this world!

There’s a lot of discussion and argument about the exact design of each of the vessels. Pictures here are for illustration only. There are so many details, laws and lessons from each of the vessels, this booklet has a little taste. I learned a lot by doing this project, and I hope you enjoy it, too!

Inside this booklet are pictures of the paintings I worked on of each of these vessels, along with lessons from each one. Thanks to my brother Moshe for preparing line-art, my mother for painting them with me, my father for teaching me the lessons and writing this booklet. Thanks to my sister Sara for helping with my picture-slideshow, and my sister Esther Miriam for making so many desserts! Thanks to my sister Chani for designing my logo with the “See the Good”. My sister Bassie is a counselor and photographer on a CTeen trip out west, my sister Bluma is a camp counselor in Canada this summer, my sister Mushky & family in Florida, but far & near alike, my whole family helped out!

The details, explanations and lessons in this booklet come from many sources that my parents taught me, from Chumash and Gemorah and commentaries, and many of them are from the Rebbe’s teachings.

Hopefully we will get to see them soon with the coming of Moshiach and the rebuilding of the third Bais HaMikdash!

Rivka Rubin

Shabbos House Chabad, Albany NY

a few introductory quotes for this project:

ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם

The (Shmot/Exodus 25:8) Parsha Terumah verse says:
 “Make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell among THEM.”

Why them? Shouldn't it say “in it”? The word them teaches us that we can and should make a mini personal Mishkan and its vessels in our own lives.

(This personalized Beis HaMikdash teaching is emphasized in the Friediker Rebbe's and our Rebbe's Basi L'Gani Maamar).

אדם כי יקריב מכם קרבן לה'

The opening verse of Leviticus/Vayikra 1:2 reads: “A person who offers a sacrifice from among you, a korban for G-d”. Wait, asks the Alter Rebbe: Isn't the word “from among you” seemingly in the wrong place? Would the verse be better written as: “A person from among you who offers a sacrifice to G-d.”? The Alter Rebbe explains that this teaches us that the sacrifice (or in Hebrew Korban means drawing closer) has to come from within ourselves!

שיבנה בית המקדש במהרה בימינו ותן חלקנו בתורתך

We say (and sing) each day in our prayers: “May the Beis HaMikdash be rebuilt speedily in our days, and grant us (each) our (own) portion in Your Torah.”

גדול קריתה בתורה כבנינה. לך אמר להם, ויתעסקו לקרות צורת הבית בתורה. ובשכר קריתה שיתעסקו לקרות בה, אני מעלה עליהם כאלו הם עוסקין בבנין הבית.

Midrash Tanchuma Tzav 14 describes a conversation between G-d and Ezekiel.

Ezekiel wondered how Jews can fulfill the mitzvah of Temple construction while in exile, when they are unable to do so! G-d responded: “The Torah study of it is likened to its construction! Go tell them: Occupy yourselves in learning the construction of the Beis HaMikdash as it is in Torah. In the merit of your study and engaging in it, I will consider it as if you are busy constructing it!”

ומשחרב בית המקדש אף על פי כן יוכל האדם להמשיך כל בחינות ומדרגות הנזכרות לעיל על ידי עבודתו שהרי ושכנתי בתוכם כתיב

In Derech Mitzvosecha, Mitzvah of Building the Mikdash, the Tzemach Tzedek writes: “Even after the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed, a person can draw down and channel all the (abovementioned) spiritual concepts and levels through one's own divine service, for it says, “and I will dwell among them”.



THE BAIS HAMIKDASH

While my project focus is on the Keilim - vessels, we wanted to have the context & setting so we also did this embracing view of the Beis HaMikdash.

We did it in tones of gold and creams (like Jerusalem Stone), which is often how its described. But the Talmud also describes King Herod's reconstruction midway in the Second Temple which had lots of blue and green marble, so much so that from far it looked like waves of the sea.

The way this painting is set up, the viewer is standing in the Ezras Nashim - the Women's Court, which was the largest open space inside the Bais HaMikdash.

The 15 semi-circular steps correspond to 15 Shir HaMaalos (Song of the Ascents/Steps) near the end of Tehillim/Psalms. These steps served as a stage for Levites to stand on as they sang and played musical instruments. It also teaches us: going-up in holiness can be a one-step-at-a-time process.

Two small doors on both sides of the steps? They were basement doors behind the steps and below the Azarah - Inner Courtyard where Levites stored instruments, they practiced there, and it had other uses.

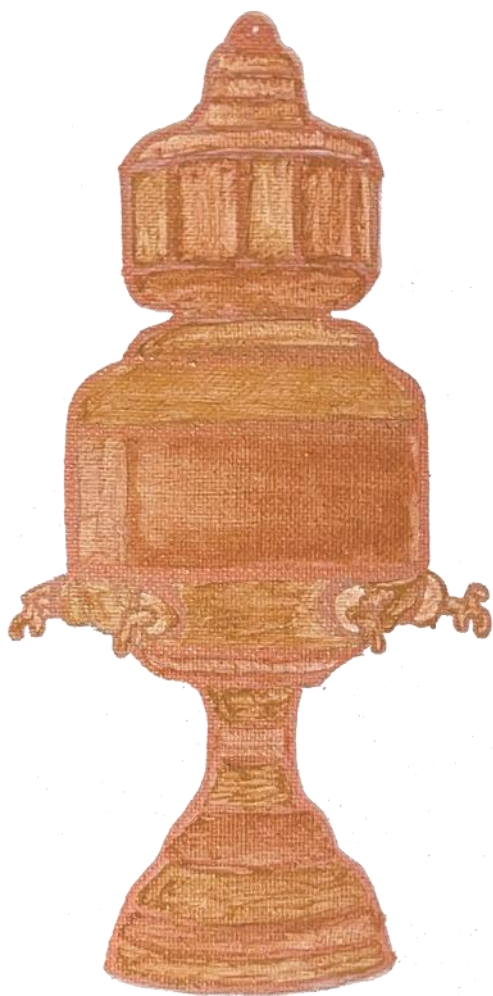
The two big doors atop the 15 steps were called "Shaar Nikanor". Nikanor sponsored these grand doors to be fashioned in Alexandria and had great sacrifice to ensure they survived a storm to miraculously arrive in Jerusalem.

All the vessels described in my project were past the Nikanor doors. The Kiyor washbasin was past those doors in the Kohanim section, nearby the large Mizbaiach - Outer Altar for Korbanos - sacrifices.

The two large golden pillars that flanked the opening to the Heichal (the tall building which had inside both the Kodesh - Holies and the Kodesh HaKadoshim - Holy of Holies) had special names: Yachin and Boaz.

Just past the Yachin and Boaz pillars, inside the Kodesh - Holies, were three of the vessels in my project: The Menorah, the Inner Mizbaiach - Altar for Ketores/Incense, and the Shulchan - Showbread Table with the 12 Loaves.

The innermost of all the vessels was the Aron - Ark, which was inside the Kodesh HaKadoshim - Holy of Holies. Hidden from view, but operating all the time. One of my Zeide Rubin's favorite Rebbe sichas is about the continuous Aron, which continues to connect us today, even if hidden. The lessons from that apply to the inner Neshoma inside each of us!



כִּיּוֹךְ

THE KIYOR - WASHBASIN

The fancy English term for it is a laver. It was a large water container, like a cold water urn, with spigots/faucets for the Kohanim to wash their hands and feet before beginning the Temple service. It had a base to it as well.

This is the last of these 6 vessels mentioned in the Torah. The Kiyor washbasin isn't mentioned until Parsha Ki Tisa, after all the others. But it was the first vessel Kohanim priests used each morning to start their Temple service. In HaYomYom the Rebbe says about this that ends and beginnings are linked.

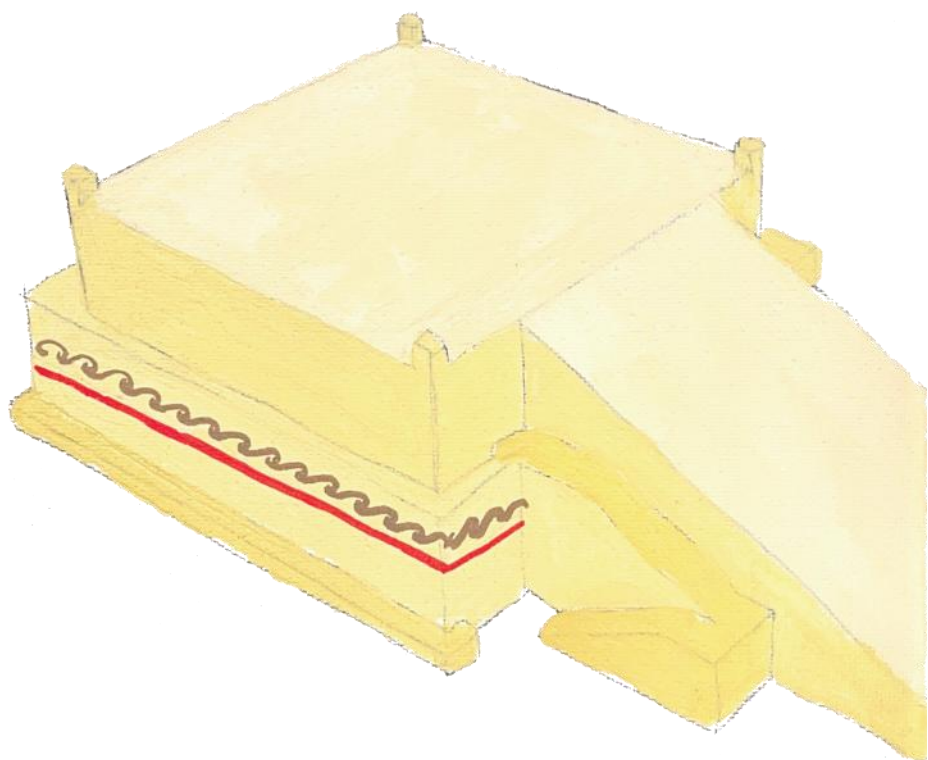
The original Kiyor was made out of the copper mirrors the Jewish women used in Egypt. At first Moshe was reluctant to accept a Mishkan donation used for personal beauty and vanity, but Hashem said these mirrors are especially precious. That's because even in the worst of circumstances, Jewish women used these mirrors to beautify themselves and pick up downtrodden spirits and keep Jewish family life going despite the hardships of the slavery and exile. This is why the Kiyor had a special shine to it, even more than the golden vessels did!

The Kiyor in the Beis HaMikdash had a few upgrades. It had 12 spigots/faucets to serve more Kohanim at the same time. It was larger than the original one in the Mishkan. And they built a refilling mechanism for it, the Kiyor would be lowered down to be submerged into a stream source to fill up with water, then pulled up again to dispense water for the Kohanim to use. Pretty hi-tech!

Our handwashing before bread nowadays isn't directly from the Kiyor, but it is related. Kohanim needed to eat their Terumah food in purity (even outside the Beis HaMikdash) and as we eagerly await and prepare for Moshiach, all Jews, even non-Kohanim, wash before eating bread to get into that spirit!

In a sicha for women and girls in 1963, the Rebbe learned two lessons from the Kiyor: We should rinse off and purify all that we engage with so that it is appropriate and fitting for a Jewish home. And since the Kiyor was made of mirrors, it reminds us to look back and know where we are coming from as we go forward and begin a new day.

In a handwritten Reshimos note, Rebbe explains daily service of G-d through the lens of these vessels, starting with the Kiyor's spiritual rinse and cleanse, leading to service of prayer symbolized by the Outer Altar, a deeper connection and spiritual striving next at Inner Altar, then onto the light of the Menorah, physicality of Shulchan's bread ... and we followed that order in this booklet.



מזבח הח' צוֹן

THE OUTER MIZBAIACH - ALTAR

In the portable Mishkan-Tabernacle, the Outer Altar was hollow but coated with copper. In the permanent Beis HaMikdash, the Outer Altar was made of very smooth uncut stones (Torah forbids metal cut stone for it). Like a stacked square pyramid, each level higher was smaller than the level underneath it.

The Outer Mizbaiach was located in the outdoor space between the 15 Steps & Nikanor Doors and the Heichal building that had the Kodesh and the Kodesh HaKadoshim. It was quite large, especially with its long ramp.

There was a red line with a floral design above it, just below the “Sovev” level. (The Sovev level was large enough for Kohanim to walk around). This red line marked the separation between the Upper and Lower parts of Mizbaiach. This mattered regarding the sprinklings of various Korbanos.

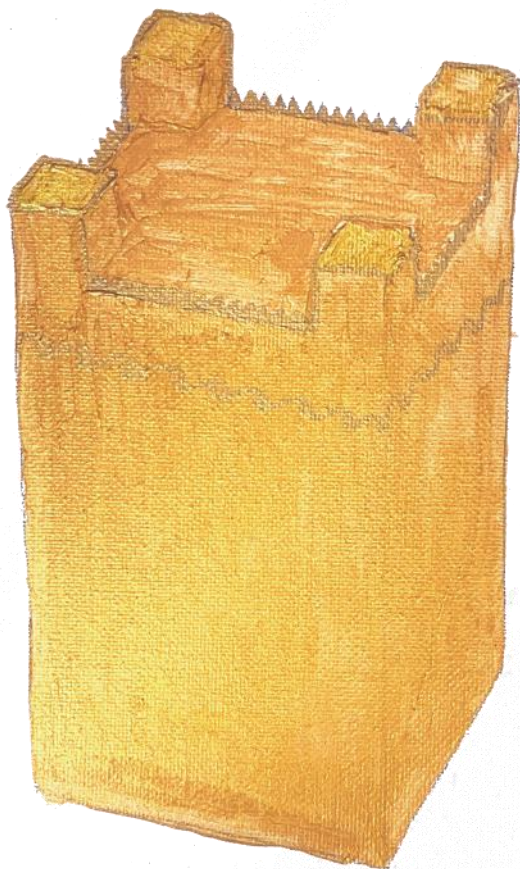
Before we learned anything about the Mishkan, the Torah at the end of Parsha Yitro tells us that the Mizbaiach-Altar can not have steps, that’s why there’s a (start of a) long ramp going up towards the top of the Mizbaiach (with shorter ramps going up to the Sovev level) that extends off the page of my project.

On the top of the Mizbaiach there were several fires burning. There was a mitzvah to keep one fire burning on the Mizbaiach at all times, always, never to go out. “Aish Tamid tukad al HaMizbaiach, Lo Tichbeh!” Some say that this is like the Neshama light inside us, always keep it burning strong!

The Talmud says that even though a heavenly fire miraculously descended upon the Altar, there was still a mitzvah to bring up man-made fire, too. This teaches us that we always have to do our part and can’t just rely on miracles (or others to do things for us).

In the center of the Mizbaiach was a big pile of ashes that would accumulate from the Korbanos. It was called “The Apple” because it would end up as a mound shape. There was a special daily mitzvah called “Terumas HaDeshen” for Kohanim to remove the ashes and dispose of them in a proper way. Cleaning up is also part of the mitzvah.

At the bottom of the Mizbaiach there were pipes to pour wine (or water) libations. On Sukkos is when they’d pour water - and that was a celebration with great lively rejoicing and part of why Sukkos is called Zman Simchaseinu, the festival of our rejoicing. And we love Sukkos at Shabbos House!



מזבח הפנימי

THE INNER MIZBAIACH - ALTAR

This Mizbaiach has 3 Names: (1) Golden Altar (2) Incense Altar (3) Inner Altar.

The larger Outer Mizbaiach was for Korbanot (sacrifices) but the smaller inner Mizbaiach was designated only for Ketoret - incense spices. It was located in a more internal private space, inside the Kodesh - Holies, flanked by the Menorah and the Shulchan - Table.

Korban (the Hebrew word for sacrifice or offering) means to draw closer but the word Ketoret is also connected to a word for knot or bond, symbolizing a deeper connection. The Keli Yakar explains that the Outer Mizbaiach is likened to the body, while the Inner Mizbaiach is likened to the soul. The Alter Rebbe writes that the Outer Mizbaiach represents our Outer Heart, while the Inner Mizbaiach represents our Inner Heart.

The Inner Mizbaiach - Altar was wooden on the inside with a thin outer layer of gold. The end of Talmud Chagiga learns a beautiful message from this gold coating: "Reish Lakish said: Even the sinners of Israel cannot be consumed by the fires of Gehinom. We learn this from the Golden Altar of Incense, where the fire burned many years but never penetrated the wood, which was covered only by a thin sheet of gold the size of a coin. Certainly the fire would not penetrate even the Sinners of Israel who are filled with Mitzvos like a pomegranate is filled with seeds!"

There was an art in preparing the Ketoret, which had 11 ingredients. The list of ingredients is in the Siddur, but there were secret additives and processes that only the Avtinas family knew, which kept the smoke rising in a straight line.

The spices for the Ketoret had to be ground up. They used an old tool called a mortar and pestle. You still see that symbol on some pharmacies. In fact, the modern Hebrew word for pharmacy and pharmacist comes from the Torah's word for the grinding of the spices. The Talmud said that they would sing or say rhythmic words when grinding the spices, because that enhanced the spices (or spice grinding).



מנורה

THE MENORAH

The Menorah might be the best known and most beloved of all the vessels! In many ways the Menorah is commonly used as a symbol for the Jewish people.

In our times it is best known through the lights of Chanukah. Note: Chanukah candles differ from the Menorah in at least 3 ways: (1) The Temple Menorah had 7 branches, while the Chanukah Menorah has 8 lights to remember the 8 nights of miracle. (2) The Temple Menorah was lit inside the Holies, a closed area only for Kohen-priests, but Chanukah lights are lit at the doorway or window facing outside. (3) The Menorah was lit in the afternoon, during daylight, vs. Chanukah candles which are lit after dark (aside for Shabbos).

There's an interesting requirement about the Menorah's design. The Torah says it has to be made out of one big piece of gold. Why does it have to be made out of one piece? And why is this one-piece requirement only for the Menorah and not for any other of the vessels? The Rebbe explains this teaches us an important lesson about Jewish unity. The prophet Zecharia compares the Jewish people to a Menorah. Like a Menorah, the Jewish people branch out and shine in different directions, even to the extreme right and left. But we should remember: despite our differences, shining in opposite directions, we are all made out of one original solid piece, we are all rooted in the same source.

The design we used is based on the Rambam's hand-drawn design, which Rebbe learns from the "Alachson" (diagonal) expression in Rashi and other sources that the Menorah had straight diagonal branches instead of semicircular ones.

The Rambam depicts the decorative cups on the Menorah's branches as Alexandrian-style (or what we might call martini glasses) with a narrow bottom and a much wider top. In his drawing, Rambam depicts these decorative cups upside-down! Rebbe explains that this symbolizes a generous outpouring of abundant blessing, not to hold onto blessing but to pour it onward! And the widest, most generous part of these cups faced outward, to others!

When the wicks were lit each day, the Kohain had to hold the ignitor in place, "until the flames rise up on their own." That's a lesson in patience. It also teaches us that the goal is for students to learn how to do it on their own.

The Menorah teaches us to be a sparkling bright shining example, to do whatever we can to ignite and illuminate for others, "Neiros L'Ha'ir!"



של חזק

THE SHULCHAN - SHOWBREAD TABLE

The Shulchan was located in the Kodesh-Holies, opposite the Menorah, and the Inner-Mizbaich Altar was in between them.

This table was made of wood and coated in gold. The table itself had a crown-type border design. Alongside and above the table there were two sets of poles and racks that held 6 special loaves each, for a total of 12, one for each tribe.

These breads did not look like Challahs! They were baked in molds to create non-Chametz breads with a flat bottom and walled-sides. There's an argument exactly how they were shaped. Some say they were "V" shaped, others more like a flatter "U", some say the top part of the breads folded over and partially (but not fully) closed in on the top (we sketched and painted this last opinion).

All opinions agree this special bread had sides that went upwards and was (at least somewhat) open at the top.

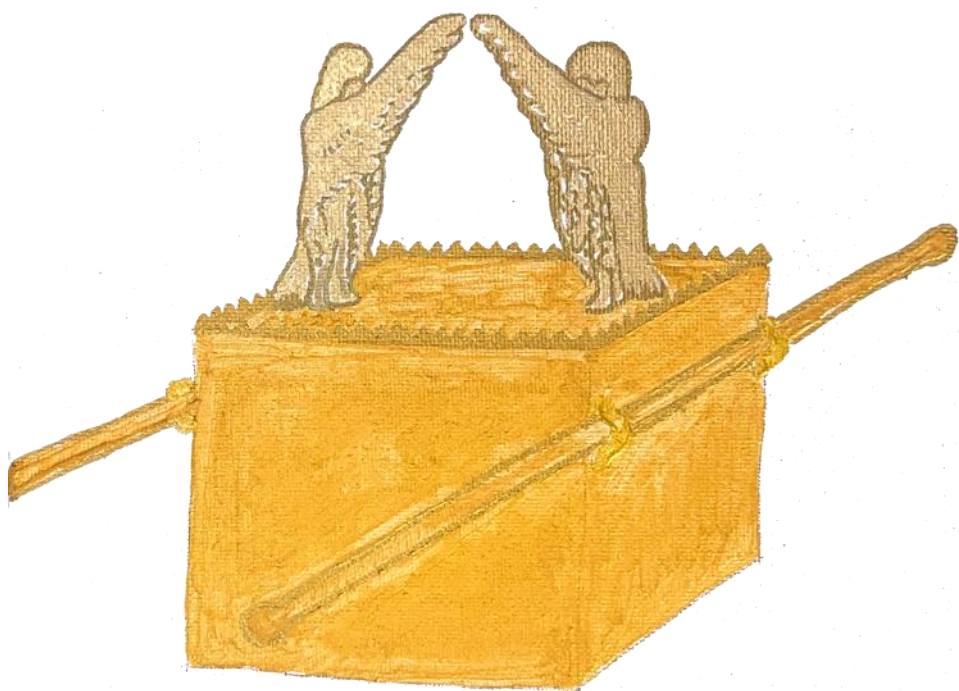
Why was this bread called "Lechem HaPanim" - the Bread of Faces? Some say it's because the walls of the bread faced each other, others say it's because the bread had a "Pnim" an inside hollow, and other say it's because it was open (at least partially) at the top and it faced heavenward.

These breads were left out all week, yet they remained fresh for the Kohanim to eat at the end of the week, when they were replaced with new breads.

The Talmud says that "the table is similar to the altar". Just as the altar provided atonement, so can our tables! What we eat and how we eat can be a meaningful religious experience. That's why we treat our tables with respect.

Speaking of respect, one time a Kohain complained that the piece he got was too small, and he used a very negative term to describe it. So unbecoming of a Kohain! They found out he actually wasn't a Kohain! This teaches us to be appreciative, and to treat things with respect, and not use inappropriate words.

The Shulchan's bread represents our livelihood and physical sustenance, wide open (facing upwards to heaven) to receive Hashem's blessing.



אָרֶן

THE ARON-ARK

The Aron-Ark had the Luchos - Tablets inside, many say it was both sets - the whole and the broken, a Torah scroll that Moshe wrote, and in/near the Ark was also a small jar of Manna, and Aaron's blossomed staff. Atop the Aron were the two Keruvim, angelic winged figures with the faces of children.

The Aron-Ark itself was 3 sets of boxes: The innermost and outermost box were made of gold but the middle box was made of wood. The gold cover that had the Keruvim on it was called the Kapores.

Many of the vessels had traveling-poles. The Ark did, too. But the Torah has special instructions for the Ark's traveling poles: The verse says very clearly that we're not allowed to ever remove them. Why not? What's the reason to keep the traveling poles in if not traveling? And why is this rule specific for the Ark? The Rebbe explains this teaches us how Torah (symbolized by the Ark) will travel with us anywhere and everywhere, it is always available and accessible!

Most of the vessels have specific measurements listed in the Torah. There's something different about the Ark's measurements, all of its measurements are in halves, not full Amos - cubits. A lot of lessons in this! It teaches us that we're never done with Torah study, there's always more to learn. It teaches humility. It teaches us that we're only half and Torah is best studied with someone else.

There was an amazing paradoxical (opposites) miracle about the Aron that it both did AND didn't take up space in the Kodosh HaKadoshim. Many of the Rebbe's teachings have such a synthesis of beyond world & within the world.

The Rambam puts the laws of the Aron's design in the same section as the laws of the building of the Bais HaMikdash - because he sees the Aron not as a vessel, but almost as part of the building itself.

Interestingly, the Rambam also goes into great detail in how the Ark was hidden some time before the destruction, taken by the Kohanim down winding hidden passageways. Why does Rambam include this escape route in the laws of the Aron's design? The Rebbe says this teaches us that this was more than just an hideaway escape. The hidden Aron is part of the Aron's original design! The Rebbe explains that the Aron can exist in both a revealed way and in a concealed way, but either way, both ways, it is active and operating, continuously connecting us - even in times of destruction on the outside. And the same is true of the deep hidden Neshama core inside each Jew, even if takes winding, twisted or hidden journeys to reach it!

MY NAME RIVKA

In addition of course to the biblical matriarch, Rivka or Rebecca, the name runs in both sides of our family.

My mother's grandfather, Zeide Shmuel Tzvi Fox, of blessed memory, was the only one of his family to survive the Holocaust. When the Nazis came to Poland, he was studying away from home at the Lubavitch Yeshiva in Otwotsk, and soon after escaped with fellow students (including my father's grandfather) with Sugihara visas to Shanghai. On his tombstone near the Rebbe's Ohel in Queens are the names of his sisters who perished in the Holocaust, including Rivka, who had no other memorial. I see her name whenever we visit the Ohel.

My father's grandmother, Bubbe Yocheved Miriam (nee Backman) Rubin, of blessed memory had an older sister "Aunt Ray" Rivka Rochel Lichtman who raised a fine Jewish family in East Flatbush. My grandfather Rabbi Rubin remembers her well, and has fond memories of her home. She was strong, warm and nurturing, dedicated and committed to her family and Jewish observance despite the challenges of pre & post WWII Judaism. Amazingly, the 25th of Tammuz, the day I was born, is the yartzeit, anniversary of the passing of "Aunt Ray" Rivkah Rochel Lichtman!!

Rivka is an important name in our Chabad Lubavitch heritage as well. Of the 7 Chabad Rebbes, the 6th Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak Scheersohn (1880-1950) was the most grandfatherly-type, filled with nostalgia, warmth and inspiration who shared so many Chassidic stories and vivid images of older Chassidim. He wrote a lot, and kept a diary dating back to his youth, much of which was published. He credited his grandmother, Rebbetzin Rivka (wife of the 4th Chabad Rebbe) who inspired and nurtured his rich appreciation of stories and love of people. He felt very close to his grandmother Rivka, and spent much time with her, and he shared in his writing much of what he learned from her. The famous Chabad girls school Beth Rivka is named for her, too.

In more recent Chabad history, Rivky and Gaby Holzberg were the Rebbe's Shluchim to Mumbai India, which was attacked by terrorists in their Chabad House in 2008 (about six years before I was born) while they were "in the line of duty". Their famous hospitality, open home, genuine Ahavat Yisrael and their dedication to the Rebbe's work and vision is how all remember them.

The biblical Rivka (or Rebecca) was called "a rose among thorns". We should have "rose-colored glasses" (but in a more realistic and regular real-life way), to be able to see and focus on the good!



Rivka's Bas Mitzvah

SEE THE GOOD!

The Shabbos after my Bas-Mitzvah celebration is “Shabbos Chazon” - the Shabbos of Vision! named for opening word of Haftorah “Chazon Yishayahu” - the Vision of Isaiah. The basic meaning refers to a vision of destruction that Isaiah foresaw, that’s why its read in the 3 Weeks, just before Tisha B’Av. But a Chassidic teaching has a positive twist: On the Shabbos of Vision, each Jew (spiritually) sees an inspiring vision of the rebuilt 3rd Temple!

“See the Good” is a good message not only for Shabbos Chazon, but every day, all year round. The Baal Shem Tov taught us to see the goodness in everyone, the Alter Rebbe’s Tanya 32 shows us how we can make the soul within the focus in ourselves and in others, and the Rebbe uplifted our perspective to see the positive, the potential, the mission, the good inside (nearly) everything!

My Bas-Mitzvah giveaway gift is a mirror. It reminds us of the copper mirrors that women donated for the Kiyor-washbasin, one of the vessels of the Mishkan & Beis HaMikdash (see inside pages 6-7). The mirror also reminds us to look closer, get a better angle, to seek & see the good in ourselves and in others.