Debar Torah: Make a Sohar for the Ark

Archaeology Illuminates an Unusual Biblical Word — BY E. EDINGER

education

Make a “Sohar” for the ark and finish it within a cubit from above. Put the door to the ark in its side; make it with second and third decks below (Genesis 6:16). The word Sohar (ṣōḥar) is a Hapax Legomenon—appearing just once in the entire bible. Several different meanings have been proposed. The ancient Targumim translate the word variably. The Septuagint has the word εὐρύδικον, meaning “to gather together.” This is hard to understand in context, but could indicate a textual variant having the word ἡν (bough up, head) instead of יָעָר. Targum Onkelos translates it as צֵּו (“light”). While Targum Jonathan renders it a “sparkling gem.” The midrash in Bənehît Rabbi Shabbah offers two explanations: (1) Sohar means window. (2) Sohar is a luminous gemstone. The Vulgate follows the first opinion of the midrash, translating Sohar as fenestram (window). In the Talmud, however, Rabbi Yohanan in the second opinion meaning precious stones. In both cases the explanation is related to lighting the interior decks of the Ark, and is usually understood as being related to the word צֹהַר (tsahor), which means midday, when the sun is at its highest point.

Some commentators, such as R’ David Kimchi (RaDaK) and Chizkuni reject the translation of window, instead connecting the word צֹהַר to the word צָהָר (tsahar) which means newly pressed oil. According to them, Sohar refers not to a window but to an oil lamp which Noah installed into the Ark. The second opinion in the midrash is that Sohar means a luminous gemstone. In the words of Targum Jonathan, this sounds like something supernatural—“Go thou unto Pishon, and take from thence a precious stone, and fix it in the ark to make a Sohar” (Genesis 2:10). The ancient Aramaic expresses the idea of reinforcing the Ark with a “light.” While sohar refers to a gemstone, Sohar for the Ark is interpreted as an indicator of the Ark being an oil lamp to light the interior, or a precious stone. In either case, Sohar was an unusual word to describe the Ark itself. The ancient world knew of many gemstones. From the ancient world to modern scholars, a Sohar has been interpreted in many ways.

In the words of Targum Jonathan, this sounds like something supernatural. Sohar, instead of צ?’ר (tsahar) or צ?’ר (tsahar) could be a precious or cut stone. Our Ark of the Covenant was a casket. It was a small chest with a hole in the top. The explanation that the Sohar above would be refracted in many directions and diffuse throughout the lower deck below. These deck prisms were multifaceted glass lenses built into the deck. The sunlight entering the prism from above would be refracted in many directions and diffuse throughout the lower deck below. The explanation that the Sohar could be a precious or cut stone should not simply be dismissed as supernatural—such prisms have in fact been used to illuminate ships. Whether Sohar is translated as window, oil lamp, or precious stone, all these early explanations are related to lighting. The prevailing explanation among modern scholars, however, is that Sohar means “roof,” and that Noah was instructed to construct a sloped roof above the ark to make sure that rainwater would run off. The similarity of the word Sohar to the Arabic word شار that means “back,” was already pointed out by Albertus Schultens in the 17th century. This was later quoted by Solomon D. Luzzatto (ShaDaL), who offers “roof” as a possible meaning for the word Sohar.

This theory became more and more prevalent after the discovery of the El Amarna tablets in 1887 and the deciphering of Ugaritic in 1920 which gave scholars a new corpus of ancient Western Semitic texts to compare with biblical Hebrew. Both in El Amarna and in Ugaritic we find the Western Semitic word צ?ר (tsahar) with the meaning “on top of.” From these discoveries, modern scholars now believe that the biblical Sohar is closely related to many of these other Semitic words, and that all of them stem from the Akkadian word צ?ר or צ?ר (tsahar). According to modern scholars, covenant was probably best translated: Make a sloped roof for the ark and finish it to (a point) one cubit higher (than the level of the walls).
UPCOMING EVENTS AND INITIATIVES

COMING THIS WEEK: DON’T MISS IT!
New York Times & Los Angeles Times CRITICS PICK!
Israel’s #1 Film of the Year!
Special Screening of “The Women’s Balcony”
with introductory remarks by our member, Tikva Ostrega
This Wednesday, October 25 | 7:00 pm
An accident at a bar mitzvah celebration leads to a rift between
the men and women in a devout Sephardic community in Jerusalem in this rousing, good-hearted comedy. Awash with Jerusalem’s distinctive glow, The Women’s Balcony is a warm, poignant portrait of a modern community struggling to balance protocol with practical, progressive values—at once rebellious and respectful in spirit.
Purchase your tickets online by Wednesday at 4 pm for $5 members/$8 non-members. $10 at the door. Visit shearithisrael.org/content/special-screening-womens-balcony-0.

Women’s Service
Parashat Lekh-Lekha, Saturday, October 28
We are looking for leaders for our next Women’s Service. If interested in a part, please contact Mrs. Lisa Rohde at lirohde cs@yahoo.com.

EVENT CHAIRS AND VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!
Third Annual Thanksgiving Pack-A-Thon
Thursday, November 23, 9:30 am | Levy Auditorium
Building on the success of the past two Pack-a-thons, this year we will be expanding our circle of UWS faith community partners to include our founding partner, the West End Collegiate Church, the Jewish Center, and, this year, the Church of Latter-day Saints. On Thanksgiving morning, after Rabbi Soloveichik’s special Thanksgiving address, registered volunteers will pack meals to be delivered to hungry New Yorkers. We are seeking volunteers to take a leadership role in this ambitious project. If you’d like to join the event committee and help ensure the success of this important activity, please contact rosenberg@shearithisrael.org.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS
Mazal tov to Arnic Goldfarb on the birth of a great-granddaughter, Dafna, in Petah Tikva.

Introducing Shearith Israel’s Guide to Friday Night Services
We are thrilled with the number of new members and guests who have been joining us for services, classes, special lectures, and events over the past few years. Surely one of the highlights of our service is our Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat, capped by Rabbi Soloveichik’s Friday Night Lights talks.
So many of you have told us how beautiful and inspiring these services are. But some of you have also told us that you wish you had a deeper understanding of our service, liturgy, music, and customs. Our clergy, leadership, and veteran members are eager for you to learn and settle in as well.

In follow up to our recently released Guide for the Perplexed: A Newcomer’s Primer to Congregation Shearith Israel, we have just released: Friday Night Services: A Guide to Congregation Shearith Israel’s Unique Customs. Pick up a copy at the synagogue and check it out online anytime.

We are offering sponsorship opportunities to support this endeavor, and would be delighted to include your name in the upcoming second edition of this beautiful publication. To sponsor, go to shearithisrael.org/friday-night-services-guide.

Hazakim U’Barukhim to our 5778 Hatanim
We’d like to wish hazakim u’barukhim to Simon Salama-Caro and Robert Kapito, who have fulfilled their roles admirably during this holiday season and will surely continue to do so throughout the year. Mazal Tov also, to their wives, Gillian and Ellen, and their entire families.

Simon Salama-Caro, our Hatan Torah, is a respected art dealer, originally from Morocco, with deep Spanish and Portuguese roots. He and his wife Gillian joined Shearith Israel eight years ago after moving from London.

Robert Kapito, our Hatan Bereshit, and his wife Ellen joined the congregation four years ago, and have become deeply committed members. Rob is originally from Monticello, NY, and is currently the president of BlackRock, a global investment firm.

We are currently planning a special celebration of our Hatanim, to take place a little later in the season. Stay tuned.

YOU CAN STILL JOIN!
Another Very Special Shearith Israel Shabbaton in Historic Charleston, South Carolina
With Rabbi Meir Soloveichik
Friday, November 3 - Sunday, November 5
What was it like for Americans to take up arms against one another, and what happened to Jewish families divided between the North and South? Questions like these, and so many more, will be engaged over an unforgettable weekend spent reliving history.

Highlights will include:
• Three illuminating shabbat lectures by Rabbi Soloveichik
• A visit to Charleston’s colonial Synagogue, Beth Elohim
• Guided tour through the historic Coming Street Jewish Cemetery
• Rabbi Soloveichik’s one-of-a-kind tour of Fort Sumter
• Time to explore the historic Charleston Marketplace
• Delicious, fully catered meals

To register, visit shearithisrael.org/charleston

SAVE THE DATE: THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9 | 7:00 PM
A Special History Lecture Marking the 100th Anniversary of the Balfour Declaration
“Jew vs. Jew: The Battle Over the Balfour Declaration”
Rabbi Meir Soloveichik
Stay tuned for details and sponsorship opportunities.

The NYC Marathon is Coming…Right to our Front Door! The New York City Marathon is on November 5th. Best of luck to all Shearith Israel members who will be racing! As in past years, Shearith Israel is teaming up with JRunners to make ourselves available to those runners praying with the International Minyan for NYC Marathoners. Minyan-goers may check their tefillin, siddurim, and tallitot with the Minyan organizers for pickup on our Portico, which is close to the finish line.

For more information, contact Saul Rosenblum at saultmcc@gmail.com or Peter Berkowsky at peterberkowsky@gmail.com. If you know of any members who are running, let us know. Email rosenberg@shearithisrael.org their names so we canroot for all of our Shearith Israel marathoners!