

Yahrzeit for Eitan 2017, 4 Adar

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by Lisë Stern

When Eitan was in third grade at Solomon Schechter, and we were studying some Tanach, he said he thought that as people evolved, they'd understand more of what the Torah means – that we today understand more than the people at the time it was written do, and in the future, people will understand more than we do now.

A few years later, I had the joy (and challenge) of training Eitan for his bar mitzvah. I learned to leyn and study Torah in depth from my dad, when I trained for my bat mitzvah. As it happens, this week's parsha, Trumah, was my bat mitzvah portion. It's all about instructions on how to build the ark that will hold the luchot, the two tablets containing the 10 Commandments.

The instructions are straightforward enough – until there's a passage about how the top of the ark of the covenant is supposed to be decorated: "And you shall make two KRUVIM of gold." *Kruvim* gets translated as cherubim, but these are not the plump little winged cherubs depicted in paintings, or on Valentines' cards. The interpretation is that they are a kind of angel. In fact, there is only one other reference to KRUVIM in the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, and that's in Genesis, when Adam and Eve are banned from Eden:

כד וַיִּגְרֹשׁ, אֶת-הָאָדָם; וַיִּשְׁפֵּן מִקֶּדֶם
לְגַן-עֵדֶן אֶת-הַכְּרֻבִים, וְאֵת לֶהֱט
הַחֶרֶב הַמִּתְהַפֶּקֶת, לִשְׁמֹר, אֶת-דֶּרֶךְ
עֵץ הַחַיִּים. {ס}

24 So He drove out the man; and He placed at the east of the garden of Eden the KRUVIM, and the flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life. {S}

Yet it's assumed that the Israelites in the desert know what Kruvim look like, even tho there is no description of them in the Torah.

The instructions in Trumah describe the placement of the KRUVIM on top of the portable ark that will contain the 10 commandments. And then God continues,

כב וְנִוְעַדְתִּי לָךְ, שָׁם, וְדַבַּרְתִּי
אֵתְךָ מֵעַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת מִבֵּין שְׁנֵי
הַכְּרֻבִים, אֲשֶׁר עַל-אֲרוֹן
הָעֵדֻת--אֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶה
אוֹתְךָ, אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. {פ}

22 And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the ark-cover, from between the two KRUVIM which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give you in commandment unto the children of Israel. {P}

When a word appears infrequently in the Torah, it deserves special attention. The use in one place illuminates its use in another. So what is the connection between the KRUVIM of Genesis, wielding swords and blocking the way back into Eden, and the KRUVIM in Exodus, framing with wings an area where God will make God's presence known in the desert?

In Eden, humankind lost the opportunity to be side by side with God, once they ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And God sets a pair of KRUVIM to guard Eden, preventing living humans from reentering.

Here, now, God is giving the Jewish people the Torah, commandments of knowledge, of ways of being. It's a second chance to be close and connected with God. Not in the innocent, almost childlike way of Eden, before life knowledge, but in the way of the living world. The decorative KRUVIM – which are not idols, but representations of God's messengers on earth, are a reminder of an attainable closeness with God, here, on earth, in this life.