

## כפרת

### אבנר רמו

In the last chapter of the Book of Exodus we read:

ויהי בחדש הראשון, בשנה השנית-באחד לחדש: הוקם המשכן,  
ויקם משה את-המשכן,

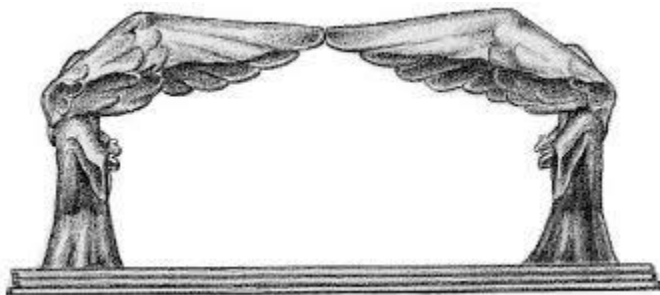
“And it came to pass in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month that the tabernacle was reared up.

And Moses reared up the tabernacle” (Ex 40:17-18).

ויקח ויתן את-העדת אל-הארן, וישם את-הבדים על-הארן; ויתן את-הכפרת על-הארן  
מלמעלה.  
ויבא את-הארן אל-המשכן, וישם את פרכת המסך ויסך על ארון העדות-כאשר צוה יהוה,  
את-משה.

“And he took and put the testimony into the ark, and set the staves on the ark, and put the ark-cover above upon the ark.

And he brought the ark into the tabernacle, and set up the veil of the screen, and screened the ark of the testimony; As *YHWH* commanded Moses” (Ex 40:20-21).



A Model of the “ark cover” according to Ex 25:17-21

Fifteen chapters earlier we read the divine instructions for constructing this *כפרת* (*kaporeth*) and about its intended function:

ועשית כפרת, זהב טהור: אמתים וחצי ארכה, ואמה וחצי רחבה.  
ועשית שנים כרבים, זהב; מקשה תעשה אתם, משני קצות הכפרת.  
ועשה כרוב אחד מקצה מזה, וכרוב-אחד מקצה מזה; מן-הכפרת תעשו את-הכרבים על-שני קצותיו.

והיו הכרבים פרשי כנפים למעלה, סככים בכנפיהם על-הכפרת, ופניהם איש אל-אחיו; אל-הכפרת-יהיו פני הכרבים.

ונתת את-הכפרת על-הארן מלמעלה; ואל-הארן-תתן את-העדת אשר אתן אליך.  
ונועדתי לך שם, ודברתי אתך מעל הכפרת מבין שני הכרבים, אשר על-ארון העדת-את כל-אשר אצוה אותך, אל-בני ישראל.

“And you shall make an ark-cover 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 cherubim of gold; of beaten work shall you make them, at the two ends of the ark-cover.

**And make one cherub at the one end, and one cherub at the other end; of one piece with the ark-cover shall you make the cherubim of the two ends thereof.  
And the cherubim 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 cherubim 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 cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel”** (Ex 25:17-22; see also: Ex 37:6-9; Num 7:89).

Although **כפרת** (*kaporeth*) was translated to English as: “ark-cover” and to Greek as: **ἱλαστήριον** (*hilasterion*) - “propitiatory” (this Greek word appears only in the Septuagint), we do not know on what basis these meanings of this Hebrew word were determined, or whether they are correct. Furthermore, we are not even sure about the etymology of this Hebrew word itself.

The description of the **כפרת** (*kaporeth*) suggests that it was a type of oracle. It is rather interesting that the geographer Pausanius (c.110-c.180 AD) described the top of the oracle of Delphi as decorated with two gilded eagles.

While we read that God spoke to Moses from above the **כפרת** (*kaporeth*) (Ex 25:22; Num 7:89), the Bible does not indicate whether God employed this device for communicating with other people to. In fact, it is not certain if the word **כפרת** (*kaporeth*) has ever been used beyond the Book of Numbers.

Furthermore, it seems that at one point in time the exact meaning of this word may have been forgotten, and this could explain the fact that the late scribes sometimes wrote instead of **כפרת** (*kaporeth*) the word **פרכת** (*parocheth*) - a “veil” (an order-type error; e.g. Ex 30:6; 40:3). The Greek translator also made such an error in his translation of verse Ex 26:34.

Although in post-biblical times an effort had been made to relate **כפרת** (*kaporeth*) to the biblical word **כפרים** (*kipurim*) - “atonement” (Ex 29:36; 30:10, 16; Lev 23:27, 28; 25:9; Num 29:11), there is no biblical indication that these terms are related in function or otherwise. The English interpretation of the Greek enigmatic *hilasterion* as the “seat of mercy” is unrelated to the biblically described function of the **כפרת** (*kaporeth*).

While the **כפרת** (*kaporeth*) is often mentioned in the Book of Exodus (18 times) and Leviticus (7 times), it is rather odd that except for these biblical books, it is mentioned only twice (or only once) more (Nu 7:89; 1 Ch 28:11).

The Chronicler uses a unique term: **בית הכפרת** - “the house of the ark-cover” (1 Ch 28:11) which was part of the “**house of rest for the ark of the covenant of YHWH**” (1 Ch 28:2).

However, in the Book of Kings we hear King Solomon words:

ואבנה הבית לשם יהוה אלהי ישראל.  
ואשם שם מקום לארון אשר-שם ברית יהוה, אשר כרת עם-אבותינו בהוציאו אתם מארץ מצרים.

“And I have built the house for the name of *YHWH*, the God of Israel.  
And there have I set a place for the ark, wherein is the covenant of *YHWH*, which He made with our fathers, when He brought them out of the land of Egypt” (1 Ki 8:20-21).

We should indicate again that the Book of Kings’ description of the house of God, built by King Solomon, does not mention the **כפרת** (*kaporeth*). Yet some of the features of the **כפרת** (*kaporeth*) were incorporated into the holiest part of building itself. It appears that already the Greek translator of the Book of Chronicles assumed that the mention of the **כפרת** (*kaporeth*) in this book is erroneous, and he translated **בית הכפרת** to: “the house of atonement.”

In the Book of Kings we read about the holiest part of Solomon’s house of God:  
**ויבאו הכהנים את-ארון ברית-יהוה אל-מקומו, אל-דביר הבית-אל-קדש הקדשים: אל-תחת כנפי הכרובים.**

“And the priests brought in the ark of the covenant of *YHWH* to its place, into the Sanctuary of the house, to the most holy place, even under the wings of the cherubim” (1 Ki 8:6; see also: 2 Ch 5:7).

The Greek translator wrote here “Dabir” which is a transliteration of the Hebrew **דביר** (*devir*). The presence of the **כנפי הכרובים** - “the wings of the cherubim” in the **דביר** (*devir*) is somewhat similar to description of the **כפרת** (*kaporeth*) of the Book of Exodus.

In the Book of Exodus we read: **“and I will speak with you from above the ark-cover, from between the two cherubim”** (Ex 25:22). The word **דביר** (*devir*) seems to be of the same root as **דברתי** (*dibarthi*) - “I spoke”, and it is therefore suggested that the **דביר** (*devir*) was the place in the house of God where God’s speech was supposed to be heard.

The word **דביר** (*devir*) is never mentioned in the 1<sup>st</sup> Book of Chronicles and it is possible that **בית הכפרת** (*beith hakaporeth*) of verse 1 Ch 28:11 is a letter-substitution error of **בית הדברת** (*beith hadabereth*) - “the place (where God) speaks.”



A model of King Solomon's house of God. The "Holy of Holies" is on the left side.

In the Book of Kings we read:

ויעש בדביר שני כרובים עצי-שמן : עשר אמות קומתו.  
 וחמש אמות כנף הכרוב האחת, וחמש אמות כנף הכרוב השנית; עשר אמות מקצות כנפיו  
 ועד-קצות כנפיו.  
 ועשר באמה הכרוב השני: מדה אחת וקצב אחד לשני הכרובים.  
 קומת הכרוב האחד עשר באמה; וכן הכרוב השני.  
 ויתן את-הכרובים בתוך הבית הפנימי, ויפרשו את-כנפי הכרובים ותגע כנף-האחד בקיר, וכנף  
 הכרוב השני נגעת בקיר השני; וכנפיהם אל-תוך הבית נגעת כנף אל-כנף.  
 ויצף את-הכרובים זהב.

“And in the Devir he made two cherubim of olive-wood, each ten cubits high.

And five cubits was the one wing of the cherub, and five cubits the other wing of the cherub; from the uttermost part of the one wing to the uttermost part of the other were ten cubits.

And the other cherub was ten cubits; both the cherubim were of one measure and one form.

The height of the one cherub was ten cubits, and so was it of the other cherub.

And he set the cherubim within the inner house; and the wings of the cherubim were stretched forth, so that the wing of the one touched the one wall, and the wing of the other cherub touched the other wall; and their wings touched one another in the midst of the house.

And he overlaid the cherubim with gold” (1 Ki 6:23-28).

While in the Book of Exodus the ark was placed under the wings of the cherubim of the **כפרת** (*kaporeth*), in the House of God it was placed under the cherubim of the **דביר** (*devir*).

Although the **כפרת** (*kaporeth*) is not mentioned beyond the Book of Numbers. It appears that its function as an oracle was preserved in the structure of the **דביר** (*devir*).