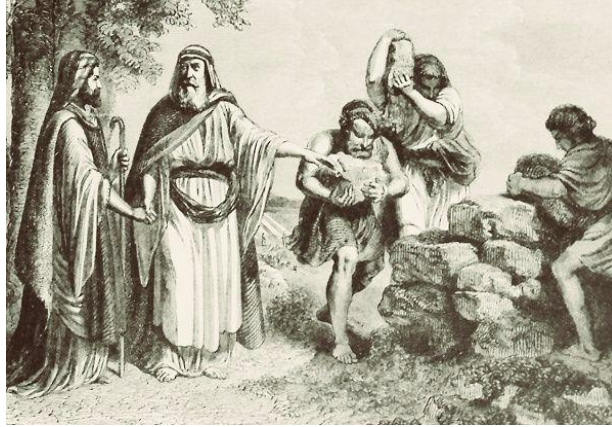


## ספר הברית וארן העדות

אבנר רמו



**Laban and Jacob covenant and the heap of witness. Illustration from the 1890 Holman Bible.**

In the Book of Genesis we read that Laban told Jacob:

ועתה לכה נכרתה ברית-אני ואתה;

“And now come let us make a covenant, I and you” (Gen 31:44).

ויאמר לבן, הגל הזה עד ביני ובינך

“And Laban said: This heap is witness between me and you” (Gen 31:48).

These verses of the Book of Genesis indicate that there is a difference between the **ברית** - “covenant” and the **עדת** - “witness” to the covenant.



“The ark of the covenant.” On a stamp issued by the Israeli Postal Service, in July 1985.

In the Book of Jeremiah we read:

שובו בנים שובבים נאם-יהוה, כי אנכי בעלתי בכם; ולקחתי אתכם אחד מעיר, ושנים ממשפחה, והבאתי אתכם ציון.  
ונתתי לכם רעים כלבי; ורעו אתכם דעה והשכיל.  
והיה כי תרבו ופריתם בארץ בימים ההמה, נאם-יהוה-לא-יאמרו עוד ארון ברית-יהוה, ולא יעלה על-לב; ולא יזכרו-בו ולא יפקדו, ולא יעשה עוד.

“Return, O backsliding children, said *YHWH*; for I am a lord to you, and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion;  
And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.  
And it shall come to pass, when you are multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, said *YHWH*, they shall say no more: The ark of the covenant of *YHWH*; neither shall it come to mind; neither shall they make mention of it; neither shall they miss it; neither shall it be made any more” (Jer 3:14-16).

This prophecy, delivered “in the days of Josiah the king” (Jer 3:6) at the end of the seventh century BC, in regard to the holiest relic of the Jewish religion, appears profoundly unorthodox. However, among all the Prophets, Jeremiah is the only one who ever refers (although only once) to this venerated object.

The specific term: **ארון ברית-יהוה** - “the ark of the covenant” is not mentioned in the Book of Psalms either, and an “ark” is mentioned there only once:

קומה יהוה למנוחתך: אתה וארון עזך.

“Arise, *YHWH*, to Your resting-place; You, and the ark of Your strength” (Ps 132:8).

These words duplicate those found in the Book of Chronicles at the end of King Solomon’s oration delivered after the completion of the building of “the house of *YHWH*” (2 Ch 6:2-42). Yet we should notice, the while in general, the Chronicler’s version of King Solomon’s address, is a duplicate of the one found in the Book of Kings (1 Ki 8:13-53), verse 2 Ch 6:41, which states: “Now therefore arise, *YHWH* God, into Your resting-place, You, and the ark of Your strength”, does not have a counterpart in the Book of Kings.

In the Book of Kings we are told that in the days of King Josiah (when, as indicated above, Jeremiah was prophesizing):

ויאמר חלקיהו הכהן הגדול על-שפן הספר, ספר התורה מצאתי בבית יהוה; ויתן חלקיה את-הספר אל-שפן, ויקראהו

“And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe: I have found the book of the Law in the house of *YHWH*. And Hilkiah delivered the book to Shaphan, and he read it” (2 Ki 22:8; see also: 2 Ch 34:14-15)).

ויגד שפן הספר למלך לאמר, ספר נתן לי חלקיה הכהן; ויקראהו שפן לפני המלך.  
ויהי כשמע המלך את-דברי ספר התורה; ויקרע את-בגדיו.

“And Shaphan the scribe told the king, saying: Hilkiah the priest had delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.

And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the Law, that he rent his clothes” (2 Ki 22:10-11; see also: 34:18-19).

וישלח המלך; ויאספו אליו כל-זקני יהודה וירושלם.  
ויעל המלך בית-יהוה וכל-איש יהודה וכל-ישבי ירושלם אתו, והכהנים והנביאים, וכל-העם,  
למקטן ועד-גדול; ויקרא באזניהם, את-כל-דברי ספר הברית, הנמצא בבית יהוה.  
ויעמד המלך על-העמוד וכרת את-הברית לפני יהוה, ללכת אחר יהוה ולשמר מצותיו ואת-  
עדותיו ואת-חקתיו בכל-לב ובכל-נפש, להקים את-דברי הברית הזאת הכתבים על-הספר  
הזה; ויעמד כל-העם בברית.

“And the king sent, and they gathered to him all the elders of Judah and of Jerusalem.  
And the king went up to the house of *YHWH*, and all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem with him, and the priests, and the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; and he read in their ears all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of *YHWH*.

And the king stood on the platform, and made a covenant before *YHWH*, to walk after *YHWH*, and to keep His commandments, and His testimonies, and His statutes, with all his heart, and all his soul, to confirm the words of this covenant that were written in this book; and all the people stood to the covenant” (2 Ki 23:1-3; see also: 2 Ch 34:29-32).

However, an “ark of the covenant of *YHWH*” was not mentioned in regard to this event. In fact the word “ark” does not appear in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Book of Kings. The Chronicler tells us that after this event, King Josiah said:

ויאמר ללויים המבונים (המבינים) לכל-ישראל הקדושים ליהוה, תנו את-ארון-הקדש בבית אשר בנה שלמה בן-דויד מלך ישראל

“And he said to the Levites that taught all Israel, that were holy to *YHWH*: Put the holy ark in the house which Solomon the son of David king of Israel did build” (2 Ch 35:3).

As the unique phrase: ארון-הקדש - “the holy ark” does not appear anywhere else in the Bible, we do not know whether this is the ark for the recently found ספר הברית - “book of the covenant”, or is the same as the ancient: “ark of the covenant of *YHWH*.”



Illustration from the 13th century Morgan Bible of David bringing the Ark into Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6).

We read in the Book of Kings that after “all the work that King Solomon wrought in the house of *YHWH* was finished” (1 Ki 7:51):

אז יקהל שלמה את-זקני ישראל את-כל-ראשי המטות נשיאי האבות לבני ישראל, אל-המלך שלמה-ירושלם: להעלות את-ארון ברית-יהוה, מעיר דוד-היא ציון.

“Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel, and all the heads of the tribes, the princes of the fathers' houses of the children of Israel, to king Solomon [in] Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of *YHWH* out of the city of David, which is Zion” (1 Ki 8:1; see also: 2 Ch 5:2).

ויבאו כל זקני ישראל; וישאו הכהנים את-הארון.  
ויעלו את-ארון יהוה, ואת-אהל מועד, ואת-כל-כלי הקדש אשר באהל; ויעלו אתם הכהנים והלויים.

“And all the elders of Israel came, and the priests took up the ark. And they brought up the ark of *YHWH*, and the tent of meeting, and all the holy vessels that were in the Tent; even these did the priests and the Levites bring up” (1 Ki 8:3-4; see also: 2 Ch 5:4-5).

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, under the wings of the cherubim” (1 Ki 8:6; see also: 2 Ch 5:7).

The comparison between these verses suggests that ארון יהוה - “the ark of *YHWH*” of verse 1 Ki 8:4, could be a word-deletion error of ארון ברית-יהוה - “the ark of the covenant of *YHWH*.”

The same could not be said in regard to: ארון יהוה - “the ark of *YHWH*” which appears also in many other biblical verses (Jos 3:13; 4:5, 11; 6:6, 7, 11,12,13, 7:6; 1 Sam 4:6; 5:3, 4; 6:1, 2, 8, 11, 15, 18, 19, 21; 7:1; 2 Sam 6:9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17; 1 Ch 15:2, 3, 12, 14; 16:4; 2 Ch 8:11).

The prevalence of this phrase, suggests that in spite of the fact that the ark was manmade, shortly after it was produced, the Israelites began to relate to the revered ארון ברית-יהוה - “ark of the covenant of *YHWH*” as the real “ark of God” (see also: ארון אלהים - “the ark of God” 1 Sam 3:3; 4:11, 13, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22; 5:1, 2, 7, 8, 10, 11; 6:3; 14:18; 2 Sam 6:2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 12; 7:2; 15:24, 25, 29; 1 Ch 13:3, 5, 6, 7, 12,14; 15:1, 2, 15, 24; 16:1; 2 Ch 1:4; and ארון אדני יהוה - “the ark of my Lord *YHWH* 1 Ki 2:26).

In his address, King Solomon said about the “house for the name of *YHWH*” that he built:

ואשם שם מקום לארון, אשר-שם ברית יהוה, אשר כרת עם-אבותינו בהוציאנו אתם מארץ מצרים.

“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 8:21; see also: 2 Ch 6:11).

In the Book of Kings we also read about this ark:

אין בארון, רק שני לחות האבנים אשר הנח שם משה בחרב-אשר כרת יהוה עם-בני ישראל, בצאתם מארץ מצרים.

“There was nothing in the ark save the two tables of stone which Moses put there at Horeb, when *YHWH* made [a covenant] with the children of Israel when they came out of the land of Egypt” (1 Ki 8:9).

It appears that the Chronicler, who apparently was familiar with the content of the Book of Exodus, knew that the writer of the Book of Kings had seriously erred here. The Chronicler wrote:

אין בארון-רק שני הלחות אשר-נתן משה בחרב: אשר כרת יהוה עם-בני ישראל, בצאתם ממצרים.

“There was nothing in the ark save the two tables which Moses gave there at Horeb, when *YHWH* made [a covenant] with the children of Israel, when they came out of Egypt” (2 Ch 5:10). Here both the Greek and English translators assumed that the word ברית - “covenant” is erroneously missing.

Yet in the Book of Exodus we read:

ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, עלה אלי ההרה-והיה-שם; ואתנה לך את-לחת האבן, והתורה והמצוה, אשר כתבתי להורתם.

“And *YHWH* said to Moses: Come up to Me into the mount and be there; and I will give you the tables of stone, and the law and the commandment, which I have written, to teach them” (Ex 24:12; see also Ex 31:18).

After Moses broke these tablets we read:

ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, פסל-לך שני-לחת אבנים כראשנים; וכתבתי על-הלחת את-הדברים, אשר היו על-הלחת הראשנים אשר שברת.

“And *YHWH* said to Moses: Hew you two tables of stone like the first; and I will write upon the tables the words that were on the first tables, which you did break” (Ex 34:1).

It is not unlikely that the Chronicler’s correction (2 Ch 5:10) was an intimation that rather than reading: “Moses gave the tables”, we should remember that the two tables “were given” to Moses by God.

In the Book of Exodus we also read:

ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, כתב-לך את-הדברים האלה: כי על-פי הדברים האלה כרתי אתך ברית-ואת-ישראל.

ויהי-שם עם-יהוה, ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה-לחם לא אכל, ומים לא שתה; ויכתב על-הלחת את דברי הברית-עשרת הדברים.

“And *YHWH* said to Moses: Write you these words, for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.

And he was there with *YHWH* forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten words” (Ex 34:27-28).

It is therefore not surprising that later, after an ark would be made to retain the stone tables, it will be referred to as: **ארון ברית-יהוה** - “the ark of the covenant of *YHWH*” (Num 10:33; 14:44; Deu 10:8; 31:9, 25, 26; Jos 3:3, 17; 4:7, 18; 6:8, 33; Jud 20:27; 1 Sam 4:3, 4, 5; 1 Ki 6:19; 8:1, 6; Jer 3:16; 1 Ch 15:25, 26, 28, 29; 16:37; 17:1; 22:19; 28:2, 18; 2 Ch 5:2, 7), or as: **ארון ברית האלהים** - “the ark of the covenant of God” (Jud 20:27; 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 15:24; 1 Ch 16:6), and even as: **ארון ברית-אדני** - “the ark of the covenant of *ADONAI*” (1 Ki 3:15).

Yet oddly enough, the terms: **ארון ברית-יהוה** - “the ark of the covenant of *YHWH*” and/or **ארון ברית האלהים** - “the ark of the covenant of God” are not to be found in the Book of Exodus. In fact the Book of Exodus does not indicate where the tables, upon which “the words of the covenant” were written, should be retained.

In addition to **ארון ברית-יהוה** - “the ark of the covenant of *YHWH*”, we find in the Book of Joshua (but nowhere else) the phrase: **ארון הברית** - “the ark of the covenant” (Jos 3:6, 8, 11, 14; 4:9; 6:6). We also find in this book the term: **ארון העדות** - “ark of the testimony” (Jos 4:16). It seems that the Greek translator of this book noticed that while the ark is mentioned 29 times in the Book of Joshua, it is named **ארון העדות** - “ark of the testimony” only once. To “correct” this situation the Greek translator wrote: “the ark of covenant of testimony.”

In the Book of Numbers the ark is mentioned twice as **ארון ברית-יהוה** - “the ark of the covenant of *YHWH*” (Nu 10:33; 14:44), and twice as **ארון העדת** - “ark of the testimony” (Nu 4:5; 7:89). Here the Greek translator of this book wrote: “ark of witness.”

The only other book that mentions the term **ארון העדת** - “ark of the testimony” is the Book of Exodus (Ex 25:22; 26:33, 34; 30:6, 26; 31:7; 39:35; 40:3, 5, 21). For most of these verses the Greek translator of the Book of Exodus wrote “ark of witness.” However, twice he translated it to “ark of covenant” (Ex 31:7; 39:35). Yet we should again indicate that the phrases: **ארון הברית** - “the ark of the covenant”, and **ארון ברית-יהוה** - “the ark of the covenant of *YHWH*” are never mentioned in the Hebrew version of the Book of Exodus.

According to the Book of Exodus, “in the third month after the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt”, God told Moses who climbed the mountain:

**ועתה אם-שמוע תשמעו בקלי, ושמרתם את-בריתי-והייתם לי סגלה מכל-העמים, כי-לי כל-הארץ.**

**ואתם תהיו-לי ממלכת כהנים, וגוי קדוש: אלה הדברים אשר תדבר אל-בני ישראל.**

“Now therefore, if you will hearken to My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine; And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel” (Ex 19:5-6).

**ויבא משה, ויקרא לזקני העם; וישם לפניהם את כל-הדברים האלה אשר צוהו יהוה. ויענו כל-העם יחדו ויאמרו, כל אשר-דבר יהוה נעשה; וישב משה את-דברי העם אל-יהוה.**  
“And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which *YHWH* commanded him.

And all the people answered together, and said: All that *YHWH* had spoken we will do. And Moses reported the words of the people to *YHWH*” (Ex 19:7-8).

In the next three chapters of the Book of Exodus we read about the commandments and the laws that Moses received from God (Ex 20:1- 23:33), and then we read:

**ויבא משה ויספר לעם את כל-דברי יהוה, ואת כל-המשפטים; ויען כל-העם קול אחד ויאמרו, כל-הדברים אשר-דבר יהוה נעשה. ויכתב משה את כל-דברי יהוה,**

**“And Moses came and told the people all the words of *YHWH*, and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said: All the words which *YHWH* had spoken will we do.**

**And Moses wrote all the words of *YHWH*” (Ex 24:3-6).**

**ויקח ספר הברית ויקרא באזני העם; ויאמרו, כל אשר-דבר יהוה נעשה ונשמע. ויקח משה את-הדם ויזרק על-העם; ויאמר הנה דם-הברית אשר כרת יהוה עמכם, על כל-הדברים האלה.**

**“And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the hearing of the people; and they said: All that *YHWH* had spoken will we do, and obey.**

**And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said: Behold the blood of the covenant, which *YHWH* had made with you in agreement with all these words”** (Ex 24:7-8).

The name: **ספר הברית** - “**the book of the covenant**” was also one of the names given to the “book of Law” that was found in the house of God in the days of King Josiah (2 Ki 23:2; 23:21; 2 Ch 34:30). It is not impossible that it was the **ספר הברית** - “**the book of the covenant**” of Moses (or a copy of it). The same book was also referred to by the Chronicler as: **ספר תורת-יהוה ביד-משה** - “**the book of the Law of *YHWH* given through the hand Moses**” (2 Ch 34:14; see also: Neh 9:3; 2 Ch 17:9).

We may also wonder whether **ספר תורת משה** - “**the book of the law of Moses**” (Jos 8:31; 23:6; 2 Ki 14:6) is also the same book, in particular as we read in the Book of Nehemiah:

**ספר תורת משה, אשר-צוה יהוה את-ישראל.**

**“The book of the Law of Moses, which *YHWH* had commanded to Israel”** (Neh 8:1).

Although Moses had just written all “**the words of *YHWH*”**, and read them to the people, we now hear God:

**ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, עלה אלי ההרה-והיה-שם; ואתנה לך את-לחת האבן והתורה והמצוה אשר כתבתי, להורתם.**

**“And *YHWH* said to Moses: Come up to Me into the mount and be there; and I will give you the tables of stone, and the law and the commandment, which I have written, that they will be thought”** (Ex 24:12).

After Moses climbed the mountain again, God gives him additional instruction (Ex 25:1-31:17). In particular in regard to:

**ועשו לי מקדש; ושכנתי בתוכם.**

**ככל אשר אני מראה אותך, את תבנית המשכן, ואת תבנית כל-כליו; וכן תעשו.**

**“And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I will dwell among them.**

**According to all that I show you, the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the furniture thereof, and so shall you make [them]”** (Ex 25:8-9).



A model of “the Ark of Covenant” built according to Ex 25:10-15

Among these instructions, there are those on how to make an ark (Ex 25:10-15; see also: Ex 37:1-5), and immediately after that we read: ונתת אל-הארן-את העדות אשר אתן אליך - “And you shall put into the ark the testimony which I shall give you” (Ex 25:16; see also: 25:21; 40:20).

Indeed after God finished delivering His instructions to Moses we read:

ויתן אל-משה ככלתו לדבר אתו בהר סיני, שני לחת העדות-לחת אבן, כתבים באצבע אלהים. “And He gave to Moses, when He had made an end of speaking with him upon mount Sinai, the two tables of the testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God” (Ex 31:18; see also: Ex 32:15; 34:29).

Although, it is not indicated for what this “testimony” was, we can safely assume that it was the testimony for the covenant between God and the people of Israel.

When the writer of the Book of Deuteronomy referred to this event he replaced the phrase: שני לחת העדות-לחת אבן - “the two tables of the testimony, tables of stone” with: שני לחת האבנים-לחות הברית - “the tables of stone, the tables of the covenant” (Deu 9:9; see also: Deu 9:11, 15). However, as the Book of Deuteronomy was written several hundred years later, its writer apparently was no longer aware of what the real function of these tables of stone was.

While Moses wrote ספר הברית - “the book of the covenant”, the stone tables were עדת - the “testimony” or the “witness” to the covenant, forever reminding both sides that made the covenant of its existence.

No wonder that this עדת - “testimony” was retained in an ark overlaid with pure gold (Ex 25:11), and that it was positioned first in the most holy area of משכן אהל מועד - “the tabernacle of the tent of meeting” (Ex 40:2), and later in דביר בתוך-הבית מפנימה - “the Sanctuary in the midst of the house within” of King Solomon’s house of God (1 Ki 6:19).



The importance of the **עדת** - “testimony” was so great that sometimes the **משכן** - “the **tabernacle**” was referred to as **משכן העדת** - “tabernacle of the testimony” (Ex 38:21; Nu 1:50, 53; 10:11). Similarly, **אהל מועד** - “the tent of meeting” which is mentioned in the Bible more than 127 times, was sometimes referred to as: **אהל העדת** - “the tent of the testimony” (Nu 9:15; 17:22, 23; 18:2).

The Gold decorations of temples and their ever increasing treasures of gold artifacts frequently lured the rulers of other nations and they assembled military expeditions for raiding such temples.



1922 photograph of the tomb of Tutankhamun. Photograph by Harry Burton (1879-1940).

We read that already in the days of king Rehoboam son of Solomon:

**ויהי בשנה החמישית, למלך רחבעם; עלה שושק (שישק) מלך-מצרים על-ירושלם  
ויקח את-אצרות בית-יהוה, ואת-אוצרות בית המלך, ואת-הכל לקח;**

“And it came to pass in the fifth year of king Rehoboam, that Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem;

And he took away the treasures of the house of *YHWH*, and the treasures of the king's house; he took away all” (1 Ki 14:25-26).

It is not unlikely that **ארון העדות** - “ark of the testimony”, which was “overlaid with pure gold” was lost in this raid. It is therefore not surprising that except for Jeremiah, no Prophet mentions this holy relic. It appears that even Jeremiah himself did not know its real purpose and name, and he referred to it as: **ארון ברית-יהוה** - “The ark of the covenant of *YHWH*” (Jer 3:16).

While the testimony for the covenant may have been lost, the covenant itself was retained and is named as **ספר הברית** - “the book of the covenant”, or as: **ספר תורת-יהוה ביז-משה** - “the book of the Law of *YHWH* given through the hand Moses.”

Jeremiah was right in proclaiming that the “witness” to the covenant was lost and forgotten, but the covenant between God and Israel itself is strong as ever.