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Torah Ark and Ecology

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TORAH ARK AND ECOLOGY

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QUESTION: My congregation is constructing a new ark for the Torah. We would like to utilize wood from trees that were used in biblical times both as a token of our ties to the Bible and as a modern environmental reminder. Can you supply me with the names of some trees and let me know whether this has been done before and if it is appropriate? Is this preferable to using a replica of ancient synagogue mosaics? (M.K., Los Angeles, CA)

ANSWER: Your idea is lovely. I know that various congregations have decided to use Jerusalem stone for their ark or for portions of synagogue walls. Others have designed replicas of the synagogue floors found in Israel or the Mediterranean Basin that date back to the third and fourth centuries. They, of course, in contrast to the Jerusalem stone, represent a problem, as many of the synagogue mosaics show pictures of pagan deities, such as Helios and signs of the Zodiac (Hammath-Tiberias, etc.). These mosaics may reflect a form of Judaism at odds with the rabbinic tradition as a prayer from *Sefer Harazim* suggests (Lee I. Levine, *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* [Jerusalem: 1981] pp. 8f.) or they may have been interpreted metaphorically (*Sirach* 23, 28; *Ps.* 88:37). These synagogue pavements aroused a negative reaction from the rabbis, so Rav would not prostrate himself even on a stone floor (*Meg.* 22b, *Yad, Hil. Avodah Zarah* 6:6 and commentaries), never mind one with an engraved zodiac. This, however, did not stop such synagogue floors from being constructed and used. The negative reaction as recorded in the Talmud became

part of Jewish tradition, while the decorated synagogue floors and walls were not rediscovered until the twentieth century. The human figures, usually of Biblical heroes found there (Dura-Europe, 256 C.E.; Mopsuestia, 520 C.E.; Gaza, 510 C.E.; Bet Alfa, 520 C.E.) disappeared in subsequent synagogue construction and were avoided until modern times through a strict interpretation of the second commandment (Ex. 20:4; Deut. 5:8; A.Z. 43b; R.H. 24b; *Tur, Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah* 14).

As a Reform Jewish community, we would have no objection to using such mosaics either in the floor of the synagogue or for that matter, as a design on one of the walls. After all, such idolatry has been completely foreign to us for a very long time. Your thought of using wood of some biblical trees is novel and to the best of my knowledge has not been considered by anyone. Let us pursue that a bit further. There are no negative connotations about using such wood, although the author of Deuteronomy and the prophets expressed considerable concern about worshipping under terebinths, probably tamarisks (*Tamarix pentandra*), acacias (*Acacia raddiana*), or other species, as described by Irene Jacob, *Plants of The Bible and Their Uses* (Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom Press, 2003).

These sacred trees were problematic throughout the biblical period and worship under them was denounced (Deut. 12:2; Jer. 2:20). Of course, even earlier, the patriarchs erected altars under such trees (Gen. 12:6; 21:33). Upon entering the Land of Israel, effort was made to eliminate these trees and the high places associated with them. This met with limited success until the end of the biblical period. Subsequently there were no objections, and some scholars even reported gardens around their synagogues (Shalom Schwadron, *Responsa* I, 127; VI, 17).

You, however, have not asked about living trees, but about the wood of biblical trees. That never presented a problem. After all, several types of wood were used extensively in the desert tabernacle. Later in the construction of Solomon's Temple, cedars of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*), a much more sophisticated and rare wood, was extensively used and brought to Jerusalem for this purpose at very great expense.

Much of ancient Israel was heavily forested, but because of weather conditions, trees were often not large. Furthermore, the very rugged nature of the countryside, with its numerous ravines, made access to large trees extremely difficult. Wood, in

other words, in sizes usable for major construction was extremely valuable and expensive.

A number of different trees were mentioned in the Bible and were used for building and furniture. Let me now list some of the trees; all of this material has been taken from Irene Jacob, *Plants of the Bible and Their Uses*, where you will find additional information. I will provide the common name, the Latin term, and the Hebrew name.

Acacia (*Acacia raddiana* or *A. Julibrissin* – *shittim*). Many references to *shittim* occur in the Bible, either to the tree or as a term to designate localities. Four varieties are found in Sinai. *Acacia nilotica* a flat-topped tree with prickly branches and small compound leaves is found in Egypt. *Acacia raddiana* has yellow globular flowers, followed by brown twisted pods. (*Acacia Julibrissin*, also known as *Albizia Julibrissin* or *Mimosa* is without prickly branches and has pinkish flowers.) Ancient uses include the wood used for the portable Tent of Meeting in the desert. Its furniture was also constructed from this hard lumber. Acacia was also used for fuel, hand tools, and posts. The bark was used for tanning leather as well as rope fibers.

Almond (*Prunus amygdalus*, *P. glandulosa* – *shaked mazui*) Almonds are among the first trees to flower in spring. The Hebrew word means "diligence," and the flowers symbolize the awakening of spring. It is mentioned six times in the Bible. Another name for almond – "Luz" – is a place name. Almonds were found in the Negev and throughout the land. The almond tree grows to twenty feet in height. Almonds produce fruit after five to six years. Some ancient uses for the nut uses include food and flavoring, while the oil and bark was used was medicinally. Burned almond shell may have been used for kohl soot (the ancient Egyptian eye paint). The shape of the tree (or that of the sage plant) may have been used for the design of the candelabrum of the desert tabernacle.

Apricot (*Prunus armeniaca* – *mishmesh*) Many Biblical scholars believe that the apricot or the quince (*Cydonia oblonga*), not the apple, was the first fruit mentioned in the Bible. While domesticated apple trees are now found in Israel, wild specimens did not grow there in biblical times as it is a tree native to the Northern Hemisphere. Apricots grow in warmer climes. They are abundant in Palestine and were introduced before biblical times. The tree grows to a height of thirty feet. Some ancient uses: food (fresh or dried) and alcoholic beverages.

Box (*Buxus longifolia* – *etz tevot, eshkeroah*) The box tree is mentioned three times in the Bible and grows in the Galilee hills. This is a hardy, long-living evergreen reaching a height of twenty feet. Ancient uses include caskets, statuary, musical instruments, writing tablets, combs, and spoons.

Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani* – *rez halabanon*) When Solomon used its wood to build the Temple in Jerusalem, the large timbers were floated two hundred miles down the coast to Jaffa and hauled another twenty-five miles cross-country to Jerusalem. It took 183,000 men seven years to build this temple. The oldest specimens are three thousand years old. Eventually the pyramidal form of this tree changes to widespread branches. The wood of this slow-growing tree is durable, fragrant, takes a fine finish and is fungi resistant. Ancient uses include houses and, boats; the resin and oil were used for the protection of manuscripts and perfume. Medicinally, the oil was used in biblical times to cleanse lepers.

Cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens* – *berosh*) Although there is some confusion as to which Hebrew word refers to this tree, the cypress is native to the Land of Israel. It was one of the trees used by Solomon for building the temple in Jerusalem. In Bethar it was a custom that when a boy was born, a cedar tree was planted, and when a girl, a cypress. The English name of the tree is derived from the island of Cyprus, where the tree was worshiped. It is an evergreen that grows to a height of eighty feet. Ancient uses include as a windbreak, and for construction, shipbuilding, mummy cases, idols, furniture, lances, musical instruments, and doors. The oil was used in cosmetics and for medicinal purposes.

Etrog (*Citrus medica* – *etrog*) It is not native to Palestine, but believed to be the first of its genus to grow there. By 200 B.C.E., it was used as the "goodly tree." It is a small evergreen tree. The fruit is one of the four species at the Feast of *Sukkot*. For this purpose, it must have its pistil intact to be *kasher* and is used together with the *lulav*. Combined with quince seeds, cloves, lemon, and sugar, it has been made into a jam. The peel had medicinal uses.

Greek Juniper (*Juniperus oxycedrus, J. Communis hispanica* *arar*) The *arar* of Jeremiah, often referred to as heath, is believed by most biblical scholars not to refer to a true heath. It is impossible to be exact as to the true identity of evergreens in the Bible, so the juniper is but one candidate for the "heath." Juniper (*J.*

phoenicea) berries were found in a third-dynasty Egyptian grave. It is a small pyramidal evergreen shrub. Ancient uses include construction, flavoring for meats, and medicine. It was mentioned more than eighty times in the famous Egyptian Ebers Papyrus as having antiseptic and antibiotic qualities.

Mulberry (*Morus nigra* – *tut*): This tree, a native of Persia, has been cultivated in Palestine since 200 B.C.E. It is of medium size. The fruit is black and contains sweet juice, it was used to provoke elephants to fight in 1 Maccabees. Some ancient uses include the bark for tannin and the fruit (fresh or dried) was made into jams and wine. Medicinally, the root was a remedy for tapeworms and the bark served as a laxative.

Olive (*Olea europaeae* – *zayit*) This tree was cultivated over six thousand years ago. Olive trees are mentioned in the Noah story and more than fifty times in the Bible. Oil is symbolic of goodness and purity and the tree is a symbol of peace and happiness. The cultivation of olives was most important, as shown when Moses exempted men who worked in its cultivation from the military. Many references to gardens in the Bible seem to refer to olive groves. This slow-growing tree can reach an age of more than one thousand years. It is difficult to kill because when the tree is cut down new sprouts appear from the roots around the old trunk. Olive trees can even bear fruit when the trunk is hollow. Olive trees are cultivated for seven years before fruiting and reach maturity after fifteen to twenty years. A full-sized tree produces half a ton of olives annually. Olive oil is the only edible oil made from a fruit instead of a nut or seed (e.g., corn, peanut, safflower). Some ancient uses for the wood include construction, ornaments, and household utensils. The fruit was used for anointing oil, cooking, lighting, and as a leather softener. It also had medicinal uses.

Sycamore fig (*Ficus sycomorus* – *shikma*) This species of ficus is similar to the fig tree (*Ficus carica*) but reaches a greater height – to sixty feet. The fruit is picked several times annually; it is inferior in taste and sweetness to the true fig. Amos knew the importance of pricking each fruit at the right stage in its development to make it edible. The wood is light and porous. Some ancient uses include sarcophagi, construction, furniture, boxes, doors, and mummy coffins, while the figs were food for the poor. Medicinally the fruit was used as vermifuge and a laxative.

Tamarisk (*Tamarix pentandra* – *eshel*) This tree grows in sandy areas. Some biblical scholars believe that the tamarisk was the

source of manna in the desert. Bodenheimer ("The Manna of Sinai," *Biblical Archeologist*, vol. 10, pp. 2-6), described *manna* as a sweet secretion of various insects. The word *manna* may be derived from the Egyptian word *mennu* – food, or *ma hu* – Hebrew for "what is it?" The Arabs called it *mann al samma* – heavenly bread. (B. Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible, Exodus*, tr. Walter Jacob [Hoboken NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1992] pp. 452 ff.) Some modern scholars identify the manna as derived from lichen or allied species of plants found in Arabia and Yemen. (A detailed discussion of manna has been provided by R.A. Donkin, *Manna: An Historical Geography* [The Hague: W. Junk B.V. Publishers, 1980]). The tamarisk is a deciduous tree that grows up to twenty feet high. Tamarisks have a high water requirement and may cause desert water resources to dry. Ancient uses include construction, ploughs, milking bowls, charcoal, and tanning, and the leaves provide fodder.

Willow (*Salix alba*; *S. blanda* *babylonica* – *aravah* *levanah*) There is dispute among scholars as to whether the Bible plant is the willow or the Euphrates poplar; both trees grow along streams. Willow boughs are among the four species for the Feast of Sukkot. It is a medium-sized deciduous tree. The ancient uses include troughs, shoes, sieves, tool handles, boats, charcoal, and tannin. The twigs have been used for weaving baskets, twine, and chair seats. The leaf galls have been used as for veils. Medicinally, the bark, leaf, twig, and fruit were a source of salicylic acid, later used as the primary component of aspirin. The medicinal value was already known by ancient Egyptians. Synthetic aspirin was only introduced in 1899.

The date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera* – *tamar*) which was mentioned frequently in the Bible and which we might expect to be used was a very valuable tree. However, as a palm it has no lumber value.

As you can see, this is a fairly extensive list. It will, however, be difficult to obtain lumber from many of these trees in reasonable quantities. In some instances you may have to rely on veneers and even they will be hard to find. Allow me to note that some of these trees, such as for example the sycamore fig and the acacia, were used extensively in ancient times, although they are hardly a preferable wood and have been used only rarely since. We find both of these as well as some others represented often in Egyptian tombs not only for the elaborate cas-

kets but also for many statuettes and smaller objects. These trees grew in Egypt and nearby lands, while others had to be imported at great expense.

An ark built of such different wood would be an appropriate reminder of biblical times and a way of bringing the congregation closer to our modern environmental concerns.