

*Terumah: The Collective Creativity of the Jewish People*  
 Rabbi Eliot Malomet February 21, 2026 4 Adar 5786

The verse that is quoted most often in dedication ceremonies and on synagogue donor recognition walls is this one:

וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וּשְׁכֵנָתִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם. (שמות כה:ח)  
**They shall make for Me a sanctuary and I shall dwell among them.**<sup>1</sup> (Exod. 25:8)



(A small collage of Donor Recognition Plaques, at www.webaum.com)

This verse contains three propositions.

Proposition	Based on the words	
1. God wants a sanctuary for <b>himself</b> .	<i>They shall make for me.</i>	וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ
2. God wants to dwell <b>among the people</b> .	<i>I shall dwell among them.</i>	וּשְׁכֵנָתִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם.
3. The making of that sanctuary is a <b>collective process</b> .	<i>They (the people.)</i> (3rd person plural form of עָשָׂה.)	וַעֲשׂוּ

The first piece of furnishing for the sanctuary is the **Ark of the Covenant**. The instructions for it begin with these words: **וַעֲשׂוּ אֲרוֹן** - *They are to make an ark...* (Exod. 25:10) We learn that the Ark is to be made of acacia wood; it has specific dimensions; it is to be overlaid on the inside and on the outside with gold; it has a rim; it has to have golden rings on its corners and two gold-covered wood carrying

<sup>1</sup> It is easy to explain why this verse is such a great choice for speeches and dedications. **1. It imbues the moment with authenticity and spirituality and places what is taking place now within a biblical frame. 2. It enables us to reenact our ancestors' actions, and to invite their presence, together with every other generation of Jews who built synagogues, into our midst. 3. It invokes God's presence and conveys the idea that, having just completed our own sacred space, God will dwell among us as well.** However, the downside of using this verse is that it anthropomorphizes God and invites many obvious questions: *if God is everywhere, why does God need a dwelling? Is our construction really for God's sake? Or is it for our sake? Do lavish decorations and ornamentations really matter to God?* To explore these ideas, visit the website of W&E Baum, the self-described "premier designer and manufacturer of unequalled, innovative, recognition and memorial products" (based in Freehold, NJ!). There you will find the regrettably (and very ironically) titled paragraph, **The Unrivaled Baum Touch**. Full disclosure: we have used this

poles; it will have a covering adorned with two cherubs. And we also learn the purpose of the ark (Exod. 25:16)

וְנָתַתְּ אֶל הָאָרוֹן אֶת הַעֲדוּת אֲשֶׁר אֶתַּן אֵלֶיךָ. **And you shall put in the Ark the Testimony that I give you.** The Ark verses also contain three propositions:

1. God wants there to be an <b>Ark</b> .	<i>They shall make an ark.</i>	וַעֲשׂוּ אֲרוֹן.
2. The Ark is the <b>container for the Testimony</b> .	<i>You shall place in the ark the Testimony.</i>	וְנָתַתְּ אֶל הָאָרוֹן אֶת הַעֲדוּת...את העדות...
3. The making of the ark is a <b>collective process</b>	<i>They (the people) shall make...</i>	וַעֲשׂוּ

In the entire catalogue of instructions for the sanctuary and its furnishings, the only time the text uses the plural is one it talks about the sanctuary as a whole and the Ark. All other directives are stated in the singular<sup>2</sup> and addressed specifically to Moses: *you (Moses) shall make, you (Moses) shall overlay, you (Moses) shall affix* etc. The rabbis noted this discrepancy and addressed it in a midrash:

וַעֲשׂוּ אֲרוֹן מִפְּנֵי מָה בְּכָל הַפְּלִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּתִיב: וַעֲשִׂיתָ וּבָאָרוֹן כְּתִיב: וַעֲשׂוּ אֲרוֹן אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוּדָה בֶּן רַבִּי שְׁלֹמֹה: אָמַר לֹו הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יָבוֹאוּ הַכֹּל וַיַּעֲסִקוּ בָאָרוֹן כְּדִי שִׁיזְכוּ כָּלֶם לַתּוֹרָה.

*Why is it that regarding all [other] vessels, "you (2nd person singular) shall make" is written, and regarding the Ark, "they (3rd person plural) shall make" is written? Rabbi Yehuda ben Rabbi Shalom said: The Holy One blessed be He said to [Moses]: 'Let everyone come and be involved in the Ark so that all of them will acquire the Torah.'* (Shmot Rabbah 34:2)

<sup>\*</sup>We should point out that this verse (25:10) does not indicate for whom the Ark is to be made. For God or for Israel? A plausible interpretation: it was for both, therefore neither one is mentioned.

company for our own dedications. While Exod. 25:8 features prominently in many of their past designs for synagogue dedications, a cursory analysis of their recent dedicatory designs demonstrates a marked departure away from this classic verse. Perhaps this is based on a trend towards individuality and uniqueness, or perhaps it is a breakaway from the classic, the cliché, or the clunky. Or perhaps, it reflects an emerging new theology of sacred spaces. I will be dealing with this subject in a future essay entitled, **Covering One's Baum: An Analysis of the Theological Underpinnings of Synagogue Dedications and Donor Walls in the Recognition Art of the Legendary W&E Baum.** (It's Adar. That's a joke.)

<sup>2</sup> One scholar (W. Propp) notes that ancient translations of the Torah render these verses in the singular: **You (Moses) shall make Me a sanctuary. You (Moses) shall make an Ark.** Perhaps they were based on variant texts of the Torah, or they were attempts to harmonize the entire chapter to be singularly directed to Moses. The crucial point is that our text, the Masoretic Text, chose the plural for these two verses. The reason for that is, I believe, **to emphasize the collective.**

collective nature of the project and **to demonstrate that every Jew "owns" the Torah**. This may be one of the rare instances where the plain sense of the text (the *pshat*) is the same as the homiletical or deeper meaning of the text (the *drash*). How can we not read this as an aspirational statement of a deep value as opposed to a report of a precise narrative fact? Can thousands of people fabricate a single gold ornamented wooden box? No. **But metaphorically it is possible to say that everyone had a hand in making it and therefore everybody can take pride in owning it.**

**Two Examples of Collective "Ownership."** Several years



ago, when we dedicated a new Sefer Torah, we wanted everyone to participate. At the dedication ceremony, individuals and families took pictures with the sofer (Rabbi Saul Teitelbaum, z'l, with me on the left) and held onto the quill as he wrote the remaining letters of the scroll. Symbolically, this demonstrated that each of us had a hand in writing that Torah, and because we contributed financially to buy it, each of us "owned" it! With regard to the Ark, no ordinary person was allowed to touch it.<sup>3</sup> **However, in framing the Ark as a collective creation, using the 3rd person plural, וְעָשׂוּ -they shall make, the Torah is imprinting upon us the idea that every member of the Household of Israel symbolically "owns" the Ark.**

To offer a similar example of symbolic collective "ownership" from the world of sports, we might want to turn to the Stanley Cup, **arguably the most coveted trophy in sport**. As outlandish as this might sound, from an anthropological perspective, **the Stanley Cup is to the hockey world what the Ark of the Covenant is to Israel: it is the holiest object.**<sup>4</sup> When a team wins the Stanley Cup, each member of the team has the privilege bringing the trophy home for one day where they can imbue their home and surroundings with the aura of the Stanley Cup. There are plenty of stories of players inviting family and friends over for barbecues and picnics in the presence of the Cup. Players from small towns invite the entire town to parade with it and take selfies with it. For some this would unquestionably rank as one of the greatest moments in their lives! Why? Because by being



close to the Cup, they would feel that they "owned" it as well.<sup>5</sup> As a supporter of the team and a special fan of the player, they would feel that they were part of the victory.

### **The Collective Creativity of the Jewish People**



**One of the defining features of Jewish peoplehood is collective creativity.** The most articulate proponent of this idea was the late Amos Oz (1939-2018) who spoke about it in countless lectures, essays and books. He characterized the Torah as a collective creation because of the many

voices contained within it. Its assemblage took place over generations at the hands of numerous scribes. The Bible is our greatest collective literary creation, arguably rivalled by the Mishna and the Talmud where each page is a collective cacophony of questions, arguments, conversations, stories, interpretations, and meditations. The vast Jewish library of rabbinic Midrash, biblical interpretation, codes of Jewish law, responsa, philosophy, kabbalah, poetry and imaginative literature; the Jewish languages, Aramaic, Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian and Judeo-Czech; the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language - all of these are Jewish collective creations.

**And the main goal of Jewish collective creativity - whether conscious or not - is to sustain the unity of the Jewish people. Collective creativity compels communal cohesion.**

The greatest collective creation of Jewish history is, of course, the State of Israel. Here is Amos Oz speaking about one of the great collective creations within Israel, Israel's largest city - Tel Aviv: **And I want to tell you something, that you may have not thought of but maybe think about it now: the city of Tel Aviv, the first Hebrew city, is in my view, a collective creation of the Jewish -Israeli people and it is a no less important and perhaps even a more important creation than, for instance, the Rabbinical Literature of the Diaspora. The city of Tel Aviv is perhaps even more important than the Hebrew Poetry of Spain. The city of Tel Aviv is perhaps no less wonderful than the Babylonian Talmud, and it is only one of the many collective creations that we have crafted here in the land of Israel in the 100 years of our solitude.** Israel is an ongoing collective creation. And it belongs to all of us.

The entire Sanctuary and the Ark of the Covenant were collective creations designated by the word- וְעָשׂוּ -they shall make. They set our people's collective creativity in motion - and we haven't stopped since. **Shabbat Shalom!**

**This parasha sheet is sponsored by Paula and Aaron Kondioti remembering their son, Adam Marc Kondioti z'l, on the anniversary of his Bar Mitzvah.**

<sup>3</sup> If anyone other than the Kohen Gadol touched the Ark it could be fatal. Recall the tragic story of Uzzah who, when he reached out to steady the Ark as it was being jostled on its way from one temporary location to another, as King David danced before it, was struck dead. 2 Sam 6:6-7

<sup>4</sup>In fact, during the year, it resides in Hockey's "Holy of Holies," the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto.

<sup>5</sup> A particularly moving example of this is 2025 Stanley Cup Champion Florida Panthers' Mackie Samoskevich from Newtown CT, who brought the Cup to be with the kids at the Sandy Hook Elementary School Memorial. He graduated from that school just a few months before the terrible shooting in December 2012.