

The meter was once defined as 1/10,000,000th of the distance between the North Pole and the equator. To represent this length, a special platinum bar was cast, two lines were etched on it, and it was established that the official standard of the meter was the distance between two



etchings on that bar (later a platinum-iridium bar). That bar was deposited in a special vault, officially inaugurating it as the standard unit of measurement and replicas were distributed.

While over time the definition of the meter was changed,¹ the original meter is

still held today in the vault of the **Bureau Internationale des Poids et Mesures in Paris (BIPM)** and is virtually inaccessible though authentic copies of it exist. There is something profound about that. A standard exists. It is stored in a vault and invisible. The preservation of that standard in a secure, impenetrable location gave it its power. All future measurements of distance, therefore, were grounded in a faith that a standard of the meter exists, even if that standard was essentially out of public sight.² For biblical Israel, The Tablets of the Pact (*luhot habrit*) functioned very much like the prototype of the meter. They were placed in the Ark of the Covenant and never seen again. Even if they were invisible, the covenantal relationship was grounded in the faith that the Tablets (the textual proof of the covenant) existed in the Ark of the Covenant, housed in the Holy of Holies - first in the mishkan, then in the Temple. Here is how the Torah describes what Moses did with them:

וַיִּקַּח וַיִּתֵּן אֶת הָעֵדוּת אֶל הָאָרֶץ וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת הַבְּדִים עַל הָאָרֶץ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת הַכַּפֹּרֶת עַל הָאָרֶץ מִלְמַעְלָה. וַיָּבֵא אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֶל הַמִּשְׁכָּן וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת פְּרֻכַת הַמִּסְכָּה וַיִּסְדֵּף עַל אַרְוֹן הָעֵדוּת כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת מֹשֶׁה.

He took the Pact and placed it in the Ark; he fixed the poles to the Ark, placed the cover on top of the Ark, and brought the Ark inside the Tabernacle. Then he put up the curtain for screening, and screened off the Ark of the Pact—just as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Careful readers will note that there are seven actions here:

1. Moses took the Pact.
2. He placed the Pact in the Ark.
3. He fixed the poles to it.
4. He placed the cover on the it.
5. He brought it into the sanctum.
6. He installed a screen in front of it.
7. He screened the Ark from the sanctuary.

Seven always suggests a deeper significance: the seven stages of the assembly and placement of the Ark in the mishkan constituted a complete unit of seven activities, an echo of the seven stages of creation, imprinted with God's number, seven, all contained within the seven stages of the mishkan's assembly. While the Ark features in some later biblical stories,³ *there is not a single instance in the bible of the Ark being opened, and the Tablets being displayed or read.* The Tablets have no liturgical function that we know of, no holiday, no ceremony on a special occasion. Like the prototype of the meter in the vault of the BIPM, it was enough to know that they simply existed in the Ark. Nahum Sarna points out that there are some fascinating ancient Near Eastern parallels to the placing of the Tablets in the Ark: *The practice of depositing legal documents in a sacred place was quite widespread in the ancient Near East. It symbolically underscored the importance of the document and projected the idea that the presiding deity witnessed and guarded it and oversaw its implementation.*⁴ These examples from modernity and antiquity demonstrate the deep commonality among all cultures in

¹ The 1983 definition: The metre is the length of the path travelled by light in vacuum during a time interval of 1/299 792 458 of a second.

² Scientific standards and national treasures, all have infinite value and are generally inaccessible to the public. They are displayed only under the strictest conditions. For example, the prototype of the kilogram is also located in a vault at the BIPM under three nested glass jars, that can only be opened by three designated individuals with three different keys. The Charters of Freedom of the United States are encased in bullet-proof glass, and when not on display, they are stored in a bomb and fire-proof vault. The Isaiah Scroll, the largest of the Dead Sea Scrolls, was supposed to be on a limited display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem but because of the war, it has been returned to its special storage vault.

³ Early in the Book of Samuel, the Ark is dispatched into battle against the Philistines and captured causing a great

crisis (1 Sam 4-6). When David has the Ark is transported from Kiryat Ye'arim to Jerusalem on new carts, Uzza tries to steady it when it is jostled, and dies touching it (2 Sam 6:6). On the next leg of this journey from the house of Oved-Edom the Gittite, David dances in front of the Ark when it is relocated (2 Sam 6:14-16). Solomon has the Ark brought into his newly completed temple as part of the great dedication (1 Kings 8:1-9) which is the last time we hear that the Ark contained the tablets: *There was nothing inside the Ark but the two tablets of stone that Moses placed there at Horeb, when GOD made [a covenant] with the Israelites after their departure from the land of Egypt.*

⁴ Sarna, JPS Commentary on Exodus 25:16, p. 160. *The disposition of such legal instruments in this manner is exemplified by, among others, the treaty of nonaggression and mutual assistance contracted between King Mattiwaza of Mitanni in Upper Mesopotamia and the Hittite monarch Suppiluliumas (ca. 1375-1335 BCE). One copy was*

the practice of taking sacred objects, or objects that are basic to how a culture understands itself, and hiding them from view. The hiding becomes a reinforcement loop: **Because they are intrinsically sacred they are hidden, and when they are hidden, they become even more sacred.**

While the covenant was already in effect when Moses brought the second set of tablets down from Mount Sinai,



the act of placing them in the Ark and then placing the Ark in the sanctuary and screening the Ark from view gave them greater sanctity and functions as the foundational moment.

We could say that while the covenant had moral force when it was issued, **it was not officially binding until it was placed in the Ark.**⁵ And when did that moment take place?

On the first day of the first month in the second year of

וַיְהִי בַחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִיָּה בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הִקְבַּם הַמִּשְׁכָּן.

the Exodus (Exod. 40:12).

Which means that

not only does the first of Nisan have significance because it is the first day of **Biblical Israel Liberation Month**, it is also **Biblical Israel Mishkan Day**, the day that the sanctuary was assembled. **And Friends! It just so happens that the 3337th anniversary of the mishkan's assembly will take place this week, on Thursday, March 19, 2026, when we observe Rosh Hodesh Nisan!**⁶

Moses act of placing of the Tablets in the Ark has echoes in Rabbinic Judaism. Consider the following comparison chart:

The Tablets	The Torah Scroll
The originals were shattered. The new ones were placed in the Ark (perhaps with the fragments of the original, according to midrash) which is separated by a screen.	An unlimited number of scrolls exist and each one is an authentic copy of the original. Each is placed in an Ark of a synagogue which is separated from the rest of the assembly space by a curtain.
When they are placed in the Ark, Israel's covenantal relationship with God goes into effect. It is a foundational moment.	When a Torah is symbolically placed in a shul Ark for the first time, the shul becomes a shul. It is a foundational moment.

deposited "before the Sun-goddess of Arinna" and another "before the deity Tessub."

⁵ This could be a fascinating legal defense for Israel in the Golden Calf incident. While they had indeed ratified the covenant through the covenant ceremony and saying the words, **na'aseh ve-nishma**, the covenant wasn't operational until it was deposited in the Ark. An interesting analogy comes to mind. In Jewish law from the time of death until burial the mourner has the status of an **onen** - a halakhic limbo in which they are not obligated to perform mitzvot like tefillin. For an **onen**, all halakhic obligations are suspended.

The Ark of the Covenant is invisible to the public and the Tablets are never seen or touched.	The Ark is the most prominent feature of the synagogue, and the Torah Scroll is constantly seen and touched.
The writing on the Tablets is etched in stone by God and is never read in any worship or celebratory setting.	The writing on the Torah Scroll is handwritten by a human scribe on parchment and has always and will forever be read in a worship or celebratory setting.
The Tablets have always had a mythic presence. They have vanished and exist only in our imaginations and artistic depictions. They have no bearing on our day-to-day lives.	The Torah a real presence. It is tactile. Its content is auditory. Every interaction with it animates our entire lives.

The Torah tells us that Moses placed a highly concentrated God-revealed, God-engraved stone text in a box. It was never to be seen again, touched again, or read again. But by simply knowing it was there, like any sacred object, it exerted power over our biblical ancestors. For that matter, it still exerts power over our imaginations to this day. Judaism took the idea of **sacred-stone-carved-text-stored-in-an-inaccessible-box-hidden-behind-a-screen** and transformed it into **sacred-handwritten-text-stored-in-a-screened-alcove-accessible-to-all**. This overlooked seven-layered moment where Moses placed the Tablets in the Ark is, arguably, the foundational moment of Jewish covenantal peoplehood. Like the cosmic egg prior to the Big Bang, this highly concentrated unread covenant text first "grew" into the 5845-verse-79,980-word written Torah and then "exploded" beyond that to oral Torah of infinite unending commentaries and conversations (and parasha sheets!) that we continue to produce to this day.

Shabbat Shalom!

This parasha sheet is sponsored by Heather and Philip Kibel to commemorate the yahrzeit of Philip's father, Ben Kibel, z'l.

Today is Day 15 of the new war. May God protect the IDF and all US forces who are risking their lives to defeat a tyrannical regime and create a new future for Israel, the Iranian people, the region and the world. AMEN!

But from the moment of the burial, for which the halakhic term is coincidentally **stimat hagolel** - literally, the act of **sealing** (in many places burial involved the placement of remains in caves or niches, and those were then sealed; today this term refers to the completion of the burial) - all of the suspended obligations come back into effect.

⁶ This calculation assumes that the date of the Exodus was 15 Nisan 2448. This is the conclusion of the great amateur Russian-Israeli amateur bible scholar Eliezer Shulman in his irrepressible and indispensable magnum opus, *The Sequence of Events in the Old Testament*.