



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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The Secret of the Kotel Tunnels

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Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

# Shoftim

## The Secret of the Kotel Tunnels

With all the sensational and bad news we have all the time, here's a little bit of news I'll bet you didn't hear: The Kotel HaMa'aravi, the famous Western Wall, has been getting more and more visitors in recent years.

As a matter of fact, if the reports are correct, the number of visitors to the Wall has doubled, if not more, in recent years.

In general, thanks to today's high technology, the Kotel is far more accessible, regardless of where you live. Thanks to the Internet, we've got live streaming webcams showing you what's happening at the Kotel plaza at any given moment.

Until just a few years ago, if you wanted to send a note to be placed between the Kotel's stones, you would have to find a friend who was going to Israel, give him the note, and hope that he wouldn't forget to stuff your note into the Wall when he finally got there.

Today, however, you can sit at home anywhere in the world and send the note via e-mail, and someone will stick it in for you. There's even a cell phone service that lets you call a certain number, and someone will physically hold up a cell phone on the other end right next to the Wall so that you can pour out your heart in the most personal way.

After all, it's every Jew's dream that he or she will one day personally merit to visit Jerusalem and kiss the Kotel's stones.

There was a Jew who finally realized his dream and actually went to Israel to visit the Kotel. He even took a tour of the Kotel tunnels.

However, he came back kind of depressed. He told his rabbi: "They explained to us that the Kotel wall is really the outer wall of the Temple Mount—so what's really so special about this wall that everyone wants to pray at?"

The truth is he did have a point. Yes, the Kotel is an historical site. It's where the Beis Hamikdash once stood, both the First Temple and the Second Temple. And yes, the day will come when the Third Temple will also stand there. The man understood that it was a very significant historical location, as our Torah portion this week states (Devarim 18:2), "The place which G-d shall choose"—which Rashi explains (in last week's Parshah, Devarim 12:11) as referring to "the House of Choice in Jerusalem."

But why is it considered a holy site today?

At the moment, there's nothing holy there. On the contrary, there's a mosque sitting on the Temple Mount—and so, the man asked, why does everyone run to pray there?

So here's the answer: There are scholarly opinions among the Sages and rabbis that hold that "the holiness never left its place"—and so therefore, since the Temple Mount was a holy site in the past, it remains a holy place in the present.

Others quote the Midrash (Shmos Rabbah 2:2) which states, "the Shechina [Divine Presence] never budged from the Western Wall."

But if the holiness of the place never left, then there are other holy places! For example, before Shlomo HaMelech, King Solomon, built the First Beis Hamikdash in Jerusalem, there was the Mishkan in Shilo which stood for 369 years before it was destroyed. But we don't find Jews flocking to pray there, now, do we?

However, explains the Rebbe, the holiness of the Temple Mount is there not just because of its past—but because there is holiness today there too. How so? Because the Aron, the Holy Ark of the Covenant, which contains the Luchos, the Two Tablets, given to Moshe Rabbeinu, at Mt. Sinai, was hidden there—and there it remains.

So because the Aron was and is holy, the Temple Mount remains holy.

I'm sure you've heard of, or maybe even seen, the famous movie "Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark." There are more than a few books and movies about people looking for the lost Ark. But what really happened to it?

Over 2,650 years ago, there was an eight-year-old boy in Jerusalem who became king. His name was Yoshiahu. Someone assassinated his father Amon, who had been the king from the Davidic dynasty, a direct descendant of King David. But since King Amon had left a son, they crowned the boy king and raised him to take power.

And so, the boy grew up, became strong and turned into a good and just king. Whoever raised him did a good job.

Unfortunately, however, Yoshiahu's father and grandfather had been kings who had popularized idol worship all across the Holy Land. So when Yoshiahu became a man, embraced his Jewishness and got closer to G-d, he decided to uproot all the idol worship from the Land of Israel and bring the people back to G-d too.

So King Yoshiahu sent royal marshals all across the county to obliterate and destroy all houses of idol worship. The king then banned idol worship in Israel, making it illegal.

But the people, after so many years of being used to worshipping idols, didn't want to give up their false beliefs. And no matter how much the king tried to use the law to force the people to repent, it simply didn't work.

So the Midrash describes the situation: “What did the cynics of the generation do? They would put half an image on one door and half on the other door, and when two scholars would come to their house to purge it of any images, they’d come in and find nothing. When they would leave, they would say to them, ‘Close the door behind you,’ and they’d go out and close the door behind them—and they’d find the image that they joined together on the inside.”

In other words, the front doors of these Jews who worshiped idols were like Wild West saloon doors, only full length from floor to ceiling. Each half had half the idol on it, so the idol would only be complete if you closed the door behind you.

And so, even though the king tried to enforce repentance among the people, many of them didn’t want to repent.

But besides the king, who tried to legally make the Jews do teshuvah, repentance, there was another very important personality at the time who also tried to motivate the Jews to repent—only he approached the issue spiritually, not legally. This was the prophet Yirmiyahu, or Jeremiah.

Yirmiyahu came to the people in the name of G-d and aroused them to return to “the Rock from which they had been hewn.” But that didn’t work either.

So Yirmiyahu quickly began to prophesy on the destruction of Jerusalem. And when King Yoshiahu was convinced that the destruction of the Temple was imminent, he decided to do something that had never been done until then.

And so the Tanach tells us (II Chronicles 35:3), “And he said to the Levi’im, ‘...place the Holy Ark in the House which was built by Shlomo son of David.’” But what’s the meaning of this? Wasn’t the Ark always in the Beis Hamikdash? However, the Talmud (Tractate Yuma 52b) and Maimonides (Laws of the House of Choice) explain at length that Yoshiahu ordered the Ark to be hidden in the tunnels that King Shlomo had built.

As Maimonides (Chapter 3:1) tells us, “When Shlomo built the House and knew that it would ultimately be destroyed, he built in a place to stow the Ark below, in deep slanted tunnel, and King YOSHIAHU ordered it to be hidden in the place that Shlomo built.”

So today, when we come to visit the Western Wall, we come to the holiest place in the world not because it once was holy but because today, too, somewhere in the catacombs beneath the Temple Mount, is the Holy Ark containing the Luchos, the Two Tablets of the Covenant. This is the magnet that draws millions to pray there of all places.

Now on the outside of the Temple Mount we may see a mosque. We may see the remains of the Beis Hamikdash from 2,000 years ago. But deep within, nothing has changed. The Ark of the Covenant is always there.

The lesson, my friends, is this: Every Jew is a portable Beis Hamikdash.

So when you meet a Jew in the street, he or she may seem like nothing but ruins on the outside—or worse. But we must always remember that deep inside, within the tunnels of his or her soul, are stored the Ark of the Covenant.