

NHS Sedra Sheet

Square or Round? – Henry Ebreich

כ"ב שבט תשע"ז – 18th February 2017 – שבת פרשת יתרו

We live in a world that is logo-mad. Every government, business, shop, company, organisation, Shul and charity must have its own logo to help to act as a positive identification. Here are just a few logos of Shuls in North West London



But, in truth, we only have one logo



OR IS IT



In other words, were the Luchos which Moshe received on Mount Sinai square at the top or rounded at the top (as is the depiction of the Luchos in many Shuls and on the mantles of many Sifrei Torah)?

The Gemorah in Baba Basra 14a goes into a long discussion as to how the Luchos fitted into the Aron which was in the Mishkon and later in the Beis Hamkdosh. But there is no definitive mention of the shape of the Luchos. Rabbeinu Bechaya (1255-1340), in his commentary on the Torah, states that the Torah tells us in Parshas Beshalach, that at Moroh G-d gave the Bnei Yisrael "חוק ומשפט" (a decree and an ordinance). Rabbeinu Bechaya explains that "Chok" in the context alludes to the Luchos. Each of the Luchos was 6 tephachim long by 6 wide by 3 thick, total volume 108, which is the numerical value of חוק. Of course, this calculation is only valid if the Luchos had a straight top.

Depictions of the Ten Commandments in non-Jewish paintings and murals as early as the Middle Ages showed the Luchos as being rounded although, famously, Michelangelo and Andrea Mantegna depicted the Luchos with square tops, although Michelangelo (1475-1564) also depicted the Luchos with rounded tops, as did Rembrandt (1609-1669). The Ramak (Rabbi Moshe Cordovero) who lived in Sefad 1522-1570, quoting a Zohar in Parshas Yisro says that the Luchos were squared at the bottom and rounded at the top. Some sources state that the Rabbis of the time wanted the Luchos to appear as being rounded so that replicas should not try to exactly match the originals.

Rabbi Eliyahu Katz, Chief Rabbi of Slovakia and later of Beer Sheva, in two Teshuvos, confirmed that the Luchos were definitely squared and that rounded depictions of the Luchos emanated from non-Jewish sources. Yet, we can see for ourselves, that the Luchos in most Shuls are rounded. Rabbi Katz had a theory as to why the Luchos usually now appear rounded. He wrote that in Tunisia it was usual to depict the Luchos with three crowns, כתר תורה, כתר כהונה and כתר מלכות (the crown of Torah, Priesthood and Kingship) and that over time these three crowns had morphed into a rounded top. So much so that the religious council of Beer Sheva changed their official logo from rounded Luchos to square! Similarly the late Lubavitcher Rebbe spoke strongly against the portrayal of Luchos with a rounded top.

Rabbi Yisroel Yaakov Fisher (1928-2003) Chief Rabbi of the Eidah Chareidis, wrote that the Gemorah never stated specifically that the Luchos were square and that there is no proof either way. He asserted that the Luchos were, in fact, rounded. The Gemorah Yerushalmi, in several places, stated that when Hashem created the world over six days, nothing was created that was squared. The Mishna in Ovos states that the Luchos were created during the last day of creation. Hence, the Luchos MUST have been rounded. The discussion between Rabbi Katz and Rabbi Fisher continued for some years. Rav Elazar Menachem Shach (1899-2001) ruled for a Shul who asked for guidance, that the Luchos are universally depicted "round", but the Steipler (Rabbi Yaakov Yisroel Kanievsky 1899-1985) ruled that the Kollel Chazon Ish should have squared Luchos and Rav Shach therefore ruled likewise. Finally, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander (1923-1985), the Mashgiach of Ponevez Yeshivah, explained that the Luchos are depicted as being round to give a "heart shaped" look as the Ten Commandments represent the heart of a person.

(Just to complete the picture: The Shul logos above are from the following Shuls

LINE 1: Nishmas Yisroel, JLE, Hendon Aduah, Beis Gavriel, Kinloss, Bridge Lane and Magen Avot

LINE 2: Porat Yosef, Dunstan Road, Raleigh Close, North Hendon, Ner Yisrael and Od Yosef Hai)