

Britney Spears and the Threat of Idolatry in Our Time

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The following sermon comes with a warning. I am about to do something which, to the best of my knowledge, has never before been attempted in an American synagogue. You are going to hear a sermon which will include citations from the Bible, the Talmud, the midrash, Maimonides, the Shulhan Aruch and Britney Spears. I caution you against trying this at home – after all, I am a professional, with many years of experience.

Let me go straight to the sage whose wisdom I know you are most interested in hearing, Britney (“Bracha”) Spears. Earlier this summer the singer was asked by a reporter about her interest in the study of kabbalah, the Jewish mystical texts. She responded, “I have stopped studying Kabbalah. My baby is now my religion.” (The same baby she drives around with on her lap without a seat belt.)

Not that I am concerned about the impact the attrition of such a prominent student will have on the realm of kabbalistic studies. I am confident that yeshivot around the world will somehow manage to recover and sustain the loss. After all, they still have Madonna, and Lindsey Lohan has apparently recently expressed an interest.

Britney’s comment deserves consideration today, not because of what she is saying about the Kabbalah, but because of the underlying premise it reveals. Although I may be the first rabbi to analyze and take seriously one of Britney Spears’ statements, I would like to suggest this morning that her attitude is worthy of discussion because it reflects a deeper problem in our society.

To summarize and reiterate, she unabashedly and without shame proclaimed that her child is her religion.

In many respects, Britney Spears resembles any other parent who idolizes and worships his or her child. What may be a well-intentioned reaction to an earlier generation of parents who were busy with their workload and who may not have doted upon us, has led our generation to go overboard in the opposite direction and revolve our world and schedules around our children.

Please do not misunderstand me. It is essential to love and cherish protect, provide, nurture and care for our children.

We err and do them a disservice though, when our attention becomes excessive. The ubiquitous cell phone has contributed to enhanced accessibility and availability, maybe even too much. Psychologists call the phenomena of the always present parent, “helicopter parents” because they hover over their children. They try to prevent anything from happening that would harm or diminish their self esteem and are afraid to say no to

them. We should not be surprised when coddled children think that they deserve everything they desire.

When we make our children the center of the universe and encourage them to think that they can do no wrong, we leave them insecure, unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with the realities of a sometimes harsh world. Children raised in this fashion have little sense of responsibility and usually lack respect or concern for parents, elders or teachers. It is often difficult for them to acquire a sense of independence and they may have difficulty making decisions.

We have confused devotion to our children with making them the subject of our devotion.

This sentiment is actually indicative of a more pervasive problem than the phenomena of over-indulging our children. It is not just children who have become the objects of our devotion, for one of the problems plaguing our society is that we serve other false gods as well.

A fundamental purpose of the Ten Days of Awe ushered in today is to remind us that it is God we should worship. We sound the shofar to awaken us to the message that God is the King and Creator of the Universe, and the one deserving of our allegiance. Our prayers are modified and passages are inserted into the liturgy to emphasize this notion of God's sovereignty.

In fact, the very origin and *raison d'être* of monotheism and of Judaism and the very legacy we have given the world, is predicated upon a steadfast rejection of idolatry in all forms.

When Avraham aveenu founded the Jewish religion, the very first thing that distinguished him from all who came before him was his absolute rejection of idolatry.

The midrash tells us that Abraham was called an *ivri*, a Hebrew, for it comes from the word *la'avor*, which means to be on the other side. While the rest of the world worshipped idols, Abraham had come to know that there is only one true God. As another midrash recounts, he grew up in a home where his father was an idol-maker. One day he put young Abraham in charge of his shop and asked him to watch over the merchandise. His father, Terah, was upset when he returned and saw that all the idols had been smashed. Enraged, he asked Abraham what had happened. Abraham explained that when he had placed food in front of one of the idols, the others got upset and started to fight amongst themselves.

Abraham's father did not accept the explanation. He reprimanded his son and said, "How can you say such a foolish thing. These are all clay objects made by me. They do not eat, move or do anything."

At which point the young child, wise beyond his years, said, “Ah-ha! Why then, Father, do you worship them?!”

It is not an exaggeration to say that Judaism began with the quest to smash the idols and the icons revered by others. The first Jew bequeathed to us the courage not to be afraid to be in the minority and to be willing to take a stand that was unpopular but right and morally defensible.

The battle against idolatry was waged not just by Abraham, but by Moses and most of the major prophetic figures of the Biblical period. Elijah stood at the mountain where he resoundingly defeated and publicly humiliated Ba'al and his prophets. The psalmists mocked those whose gods were made by men as having “eyes, yet they cannot see; ears, yet they cannot hear.” The prophets were appalled by the immorality and lack of concern for human life, which stemmed from idolatry. But the prophets did not just fight outsiders. They also engaged in an ongoing campaign against encroachments of idolatry amongst the Israelites, lest they be tempted to adopt and embrace their ways.

The temptation to drift away from God goes back to our inception as a people. Shortly after leaving Egypt and experiencing the miracles of the plagues and crossing the Red Sea, the children of Israel built a Golden Calf. The sight of such a defiant act was so repugnant to Moshe Rabbeinu, that he smashed the Tablets of the Law at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Literally and figuratively, he could not bear in his arms the very tablets that asserted belief in one God while the Israelites were paying homage to another god. The *Meshech Chochmah* an early 20th century commentary understood that Moses broke the tablets because he did not want the people to think that any object other than God is intrinsically holy.

The powerful opening words of the first of the Ten Commandments, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods besides me” are a clarion rallying cry for monotheism. They are amplified by the second commandment restricting any depiction of images of God. “You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth, nor shall you bow down to them or serve them.” Together the first two commandments serve as the foundation for all future Jewish belief and are fundamental principles of Jewish theology.

The rabbis of the Talmud devoted an entire tractate called “Avodah Zarah” to the laws defining and prohibiting worship of idols and foreign objects. In fact, the Shulhan Aruch prohibited Jews from trading or selling to idol-worshippers three days before their holidays, for fear that one would commit the sin of placing a stumbling block before the blind by enabling them to carry out their reprehensible practices.

The messianic vision as described in the aleinu prayer which concludes every service looks forward to the time when God alone is sovereign and that sovereignty will be accepted by all; to the time when “idolatry will be swept away so that false gods will be

utterly destroyed”. It concludes by quoting the prophet Zechariah who unequivocally hoped for the day when God would be acknowledged as King over all the earth.

The most articulate and passionate crusader against any form of idolatry creeping into our belief system was the great medieval philosopher, Maimonides, the Rambam, who made it a life-long mission and emphasis of his philosophical and halakhic writings. He was such a pure monotheist, he insisted it was impossible to describe God, for to do so would limit and confine the infinite. He taught that the war against idolatry is the main principle of the Torah and explained all anthropomorphic references to God in the Bible as being metaphors, and forbade them from being taken literally.

Fighting idolatry was an all-consuming, defining aspect of Judaism that ultimately helped to shape our very religion.

You may be wondering why any of this is relevant to us today, since Judaism won the battle and resoundingly defeated paganism, polytheism and idolatry long ago.

Or did it?

Britney Spears is not the only one to make a being other than God the subject of her adoration and adulation, and it is not only children that are worshipped.

Too many of us devote too much time and attention to what she and other stars say and do. The mere fact that her abandonment of kabbalah is newsworthy is of itself disturbing. Why should we care how Britney Spears or anyone spends their spare time?! The way we idolize celebrities and pop culture figures, consuming as much unimportant, inconsequential trivial information as possible about their lives and homes reflects our misplaced values. There was a time when such gossip and consumption of nonsense was confined to one or two papers. Now there are a number of magazines, TV programs, and even a whole network whose sole purpose is to report to us on what is going on in the lives of for the most part relatively shallow people. There is People, Us, InTouch, Entertainment Weekly, and countless other publications to satiate our voyeuristic tendencies and to chronicle everything that famous people are doing and their likes and dislikes. How important is it for us to know so many details, and how much more do we really need to know about the antics of Jessica Simpson, Tom Cruise, Jennifer Anniston, Paris Hilton, Sean Penn, Nicole Richie, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie? (Ok, so maybe a little more about Angelina Jolie might not be so bad.) Sports figures, movie stars, models and recording artists have become the focus of so much of the media’s attention. Is it any coincidence that the most popular show on television today is called, “American Idol”?

The inordinate amount of time spent on hero worship of celebrities may appear to be relatively harmless and inconsequential. But idolatry is not a victimless crime. The Biblical war against idolatry was so intense because it was recognized as a tragic sin of betrayal and disloyalty, of abandoning God, which led to unfortunate consequences.

The Talmud and medieval commentators determined that for violations of any one of three mitzvot one should sacrifice his own life rather than commit a sin. The three inviolable commandments were performing a prohibited sex act, such as adultery or incest, murder, and idolatry.

These three acts were so fundamental to what it means to be a Jew that people died rather than commit them. The Talmud says that if an emperor is wearing a graven image and then says to you to bow down publicly to him, even if he says you can appear to be tying your shoe, it is prohibited to do so.

Why this passionate rejection of idolatry?

Part of it is motivated by concern over whether the center of existence rests within one's own self, or with God. The sages abhorred idol worship because they perceived it to be little more than a projected and objectified extension of the self. They preferred a God-centered perspective to a self-centered one, asserting that we are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, not the other way around.

Our High Holiday prayer book, the Mahzor, portrays idolatry as the root source of sin and wrongdoing. Elsewhere the prayer book says the question is not whether or not to have faith, but what kind of faith will we have and what we do or do not believe in.

I am reminded of the joke about the Scottish atheist who was fishing when suddenly his boat was capsized by the Loch Ness monster. Just as the Loch Ness monster was about to open its mouth to swallow him, this confirmed atheist started praying and crying out to God for help. A booming voice came out from heaven, and said, "I thought you didn't believe in me." And the man terrified by what faced him says, "Come on, God. Give me a break. Two minutes ago I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster either."

On this Day of Judgment, we make choices, and the choice before us is: who is the god we will worship, serve and revere? Some of us mistakenly place all of our faith in technology, modernity, or other panaceas in a quest for instant gratification. Will we turn the objects we crave and long for into gods? In other words, will we be guilty of the very sin our tradition sought to purge from the world?

A story in the midrash has a gentile pose a question to a rabbi and ask, "If God is so opposed to people worshipping the sun, the stars and the moon, then why doesn't He just destroy them?" The rabbi explains that these and other objects in the world are here for us to use and enjoy, but not to falsely place our faith in them. The challenge is to use them wisely.

Whether you choose to pursue a life that seeks to live in harmony with the demands of a God who calls upon humans to live moral lives or to devote your energy to serving other gods will determine your priorities. We are reminded on Rosh Hashana that the choice is between faith in the Creator of the Universe and the creations of human hands. Our sages viewed this decision as the primary decision of life for they felt that if we do not decide

for God, we become beholden to other gods. What you decide will have an impact on the other choices you will make this coming year. It will define the kind of person you are and the kind of life you lead, for our belief system determines not just what we express, but what we profess and how we act.

Much of our hero worship and interest in famous people reflects our envy of their lifestyle and material possessions. Consequently, in addition to being cautious not to make celebrities the objects of our admiration, we must be careful not to make the pursuit of material things our religion. Our homes, our cars, our clothes, can easily become all-consuming and overtake our lives. Placing too much importance on objects and acquiring possessions can place an impediment in the path to God. It is easy to become enslaved to the Almighty dollar instead of seeking to fulfill the will of the Almighty God.

We live in a world in which the idolatry our religion opposed for so long has been defeated. Today the threat to our identity comes from a different form of idolatry -- the challenge of material secularism, coupled with a lack of meaning and purpose. This day we come to synagogue to align ourselves to the teachings of our faith and tradition and to reaffirm what values should be important for us.

Adonai is close and immanent. At the same time Adonai transcends everything and is beyond our reach. Despite all this, God is One, a unifying and sustaining force in the world, who cares about what happens to us and how we live our lives. Faith in *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the Holy One is not intended to be blind adherence to an angry, vengeful God or to justify violence against non-believers. We Jews believe that God does not seek the destruction of infidels or the killing of innocents, but wants us to pursue peace in our world. God is great because He is the source of kindness, justice, forgiveness and compassion, all characteristics we are reminded this day to emulate and bring into our lives.

What ultimately is it that the Lord asks of us? The words of the prophet are as true today as they were when they were first uttered and recorded several thousand years ago. "What does God demand of you? Only to love mercy, act justly and to walk humbly with the Lord thy God." In the coming year, may each of us set aside our worship of false gods and instead walk in the ways of the One True God.

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