

Some teachings from Tractate Avodah Zarah

Idolatry: The No. 1 sin

-Right at beginning of Ten Commandments:

-You shall have no other God but Me. [Ex. 20:2]

-You shall not make unto thee any graven image. [Ex. 20:3]

-Talmud:

-To abstain from idolatry is "equivalent to fulfilling all [other] commandments in the Torah". [Horayot 8a]

-So, to be a fully observant Jew, all one has to do is not worship idols?

-Whoever rejects idolatry is called a Jew. [Megillah 13a, b]

-Idols must not only be destroyed, but completely eradicated. Every trace of them must be removed. [Avodah Zarah 45b]

-If one had to sum up Judaism with one line, it would be the Shema:

-*HaShem Echad* -- The Lord is One. [Deut. 6:4]

-Tractate *Avodah Zarah* mostly discusses relations with gentiles.

Why doesn't God destroy all idols?

Mishnah. The elders [of Israel visited] Rome and were asked:

"If [your god] has no desire for idolatry, why doesn't he destroy [all idols]?"

They replied, "If what was worshipped was something unnecessary to the world, he would destroy it. But people worship the sun, the moon, the stars and the planets. Should he destroy his universe on account of [such] fools?"

They said [to the elders], "If so, he should destroy what is not necessary for the world and leave what is necessary for the world!"

They replied, "[If He did that], it would merely strengthen the hands of the worshippers of [whatever God spared], because they would say, 'You can be sure these are [real] deities, for, behold, they have not been destroyed!'" [Avodah Zarah 54b]

Must not benefit from idolatry in any way

Phrasing matters!

And thus it has been taught: If one hires a [Jewish] workman, saying to him, "Move for me a hundred casks [of wine] for a hundred perutahs", and among them was found one cask of [wine that had been used for idolatrous purposes], his [entire] wage is prohibited. [But if the contract says: "Move for me] some casks for one perutah each," and a cask of [wine that had been used for idolatrous purposes] was found among them, his wage is permitted [with the exception of the perutah for that cask.] [Avodah Zarah 65a]

Knowledge of intentions matters!

-If an Israelite has a claim for a maneh against an idolater and the latter sold an idol or [wine used for idolatry] and brought him the proceeds, [the money] is permitted to him.
But if [the idolater] said, "Wait until I sell an idol or sell some wine [used for idolatry], and I will bring you the proceeds," it is prohibited.

Not letting converts lose money

-[A candidate for conversion] came before Rabbah ben Abbahu and was told, "Go and sell all your possessions and then come to be converted." [Avodah Zarah 64a]

He only meant "Sell your idols" but would not use that word. He was concerned that the future convert would lose the value of his idols, because he could not sell them after conversion.

Can one praise idolaters?

Rav said: One is forbidden to say, "How beautiful is this idolatress!"
The following objection was raised: Once, Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamliel, while standing on a step on the Temple Mount, saw a certain idolatress who was exceedingly beautiful, and exclaimed: "How great are Your works, O Lord!" [Ps. 104:24]

Likewise, when Rabbi Akiva saw the wife of the wicked Tyrannus Rufus, [Tineius Rufus, Governor of Judea, 1st century CE] he spat, then laughed, and then wept. 'Spat,' because she originated only from a putrid drop; [Avot 3:1] 'laughed,' because he foresaw that she would convert to Judaism and he would marry her; 'wept', [to think] that such beauty should [ultimately] decay in the dust.

What then about Rav's ruling [that one must not admire the beauty of idolaters? Rav might say that] each of these rabbis merely gave praise [to God for the beauty He brought into being]. For a Master has said: One who sees beautiful creatures should say: "Blessed be He who has created such in His universe." [Ber. 58b]

[Avodah Zarah 20a]

So one may praise an idolater.

Learn from many different teachers

Rabbi Hisda said to the students: I want to tell you something, although I am afraid that you might leave me and go elsewhere [after I do]: “Whoever learns Torah from one master only will never achieve great success.”
[Avodah Zarah 19a]