

## The demise of idolatry in Judaism

### The issue

After the return from Babylon, the Jews lost all desire for idolatry, after 1,000 years of clinging to it tenaciously and enthusiastically. Why did idolatry disappear from Judaism so suddenly and so completely in the past 2,500 years?

### The desire for idolatry

-With their first taste of freedom, Jews rushed to worship the Golden Calf. [Ex. 32:1–8]

-Over and over again the Israelites rebelled against God and worshiped idols for 1,000 years. The prophets' main job was to bring them back to the fold.

-Not only idol worship, but also accompanying child sacrifice [2Kings 16:3; 21:6; 23:10; Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35] and sacred prostitution [1Kings 14:24; 2Kings 23:7; Ezek. 16:17, 23:5ff; Hos. 4:14-15].

-Even wise King Solomon fell prey to it in his old age.

-Worst offender: King Menasheh of Judah, the longest-reigning Jewish monarch (55 years: 697-642 BCE). He practiced, sponsored and encouraged idolatry on a wide scale, built idolatrous shrines, turned the Temple into a pagan site [2Kings 21], killed priests and prophets (e.g., Isaiah), outlawed study of Torah [Ezekiel 8–11, 16:17, 20, 23]. He repented before dying, but severe damage was done.

-Talmud: King Menasheh appears to Rav Ashi in a dream, engages him in a halachic discussion, shows himself to be not only well-versed in Torah but also Rav Ashi's superior.

Rav Ashi: If you are so wise, why did you worship idols?

King Menasheh: If you had been there and lived in my time, you would have done the same. You would have lifted the hems of your robes to run behind me to worship idols also. [Sanhedrin 102b]

Society at large has a big impact on our behavior. If even kings and sages can be enticed to worship idols, what about the rest of us?

It was a craving, an organic need, an addiction, an overwhelming desire. Compare with sex drive: If God were to tell us “No more sex”, people would be doing it anyway. The urge for idolatry was that strong, and could not be easily silenced.

Note: Idolatry is the worship of inanimate objects in the belief that they have the power to grant benefits. Some modern thinkers also call “idolatry” the love of money, of specific people, of a hobby, of a cause, etc. That cannot be, because if that were so, the only way to observe the commandment against idolatry would be not to care about anything at all.

## **The demise of idolatry**

Why did the Jews abandon idolatry cold turkey after the return from Babylon? Talmud has a colorful explanation: The Jews captured the idolatry demon and destroyed it. They were about to do the same for the sexual immorality demon, but didn't because sex is needed for procreation:

[After the return from Babylonian captivity, the Men of the Great Assembly said:] Woe, woe! It is [the evil desire for idolatry] who has destroyed the Sanctuary, burned the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us! You [God] have surely given him to us so that we may receive reward [by resisting him.] We do not want either him or reward through him!... [So the evil desire for idolatry] was surrendered to them. He came forth from the Holy of Holies like a young fiery lion... They said: How shall we act? Perhaps, God forbid, Heaven may have mercy upon him!... The prophet said to them: Cast him into a pot made of lead and close its opening with lead, because lead absorbs the voice... [They did so and he died.]

They said... Let us [also] pray for mercy for the Evil Inclination. They prayed for mercy, and he was handed over to them. [The prophet] said to them: Realize that if you kill him [also], the world goes down. They imprisoned him for three days [to see what would happen], then looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg and could not find it. [The Evil Inclination is responsible for sex, which is required for reproduction.] They said: What shall we do now? Shall we kill him? The world would then go down. Shall we beg for half-mercy [allow him to live, but not to tempt us]?

They do not grant half-measures in heaven. They put out his eyes and let him go. It helped inasmuch as he no longer entices men to commit incest. [Yoma 69b]

The Midrash concludes:

Rabbi Hunia said in the name of Rabbi Dosa bar Tebeth: God created two evil inclinations in His world, the inclination to idolatry and the inclination to [sexual immorality]. The inclination to idolatry has already been uprooted [from the Jewish people]. The inclination to [sexual immorality, however,] still exists... [Song of Songs Rabbah 7:14]

After Babylon, the Jews did not just ignore idolatry, they were willing to die rather than be forced to worship idols! (Maccabean revolt).

## **Why did idolatry disappear among Jews so suddenly and so completely?**

Some possible answers:

-God made it happen. He foretold it through the prophet Jeremiah:

And these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to... all the people... who were carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon:

Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel... After seventy years are fulfilled at Babylon I will... [make] you return to this place... Then you shall... pray to Me and I will listen to you. And you shall seek Me and find me, when you shall search for Me with all your heart. And I will allow Myself to be found by you, says the Lord, and I will restore you from your captivity. [Jeremiah 29:1-14]

Counterpoint: There is such a thing as free will.

-They realized the prophets were right: If they worshiped any “god” but God, they were doomed.

Counterpoint: Rational, but reason is not what rules passions.

-Normal evolution. The rest of the world has been slowly moving away from idolatry.

Counterpoint: Not as suddenly as the Jews did.

-The experience of captivity in Babylon cured them.

Counterpoint: But slavery in Egypt did not. Where is the difference?

Counter-counterpoint: They did not have the Torah in Egypt.

-They wanted to assimilate in the world around them.

Counterpoint: But rest of world (Persians, Greeks, Romans) was still idolatrous:

If the names of all the idols were listed, all the donkeys in the world would not suffice to carry them. [Sifre Deut. 43]

Many Jews indeed wanted to assimilate, but not by worshiping idols.

-They saw the bad effects of idolatry around them in Babylon.

Counterpoint: Quite the opposite. Babylon prospered and they prospered along with it. Most did not return to Judea when King Cyrus allowed them. Yet they did not turn to idolatry, established Judaism in exile, and wrote the authoritative Babylonian Talmud.

-I have an explanation, which I consider to be the most likely:

During the 1,000 years of idolatry, the Jews were essentially free and masters of their own house. They felt they could indulge in whatever appealed to them. But for the next 2,500 years, they were subjugated or persecuted (Persians, Greeks, Romans, Christians, Muslims, etc.), so they felt they HAD to keep their own traditions and not adopt any of the customs of the hated overlords, as an act of rebellion.

-Point in support: Now that most Jews are free, especially in the US, and not constrained in their spiritual choices, many are abandoning Judaism.

-Does antisemitism preserve Judaism?