

## Idolatry: Is it really that bad?

Idolatry is the big bugaboo in the Torah. In this parsha, Re'eh, Moses tells the Israelites, as commanded by God:

-[When you encounter the idolaters], you shall tear down their altars, smash their monuments, burn their holy trees with fire, cut down the graven images of their gods, and destroy their name from that place... [Deut 12:3]

-The Talmud elaborates on this passage by saying that idols must not only be destroyed, but completely eradicated, that every trace of them must be removed [Avoda Zara' 45b]

-In last week's portion, Ekev, God says

Deut 11:13-17: "...if you [follow] My commandments [I will do these great things for you, but if] you ... worship strange gods and prostrate yourselves before them, [then] the wrath of the Lord will be kindled against you, etc. [ONLY IDOLATRY MENTIONED]

Later:

Deut 11: 22-23: For if you keep ... this commandment [Ha-Mitzvah, SINGULAR] which I command you, to do it [La'asotah, SINGULAR], then the Lord will drive out all these nations from before you, etc.

-In the Ten Commandments, even before God tells us not to steal, not to murder, not to commit adultery, even before God tells us about Shabbat and honoring our parents, God tells us,

"You shall have no other gods before me... You shall not make for yourself a graven image". [Exodus 20:3-4]

-The Talmud says that to abstain from idolatry is "equivalent to fulfilling all [other] commandments in the Torah" [Horayot 8a]

So, to be a fully observant Jew, all you have to do is refrain from worshipping idols!

- "Whosoever denies idols is called a Jew" [Megillah 13a, b].

-In the Jewish tradition, you can break all commandments to save a life, except three: The ones against idolatry, murder and adultery; and idolatry is listed first. Better dead than an idolater.

-If one had to sum up Judaism with one line, it would be the Shema: "The Lord is One"

## Discussion

### 1. What is so bad about idolatry that it outranks all other forms of bad behavior?

- Idolatry is a matter of personal belief, not concrete action. How can that be harmful? (Not even talking about the dubious practices that came with idol worship back in biblical times, but about rejecting idolatry itself, regardless of what practices come with it.)
- Can't Judaism say 'no murder, no stealing, no adultery, kashrut, Shabbat, etc' -- but allow idolatry? In theory it could. (Buddhism, Hinduism)

Possible answers:

-Judaism was a new beginning, a complete break with all existing religions. What they had in common was idolatry, so no idolatry

-Also, idolatry is intrinsically bad

- "no graven images" forces one into abstract thinking, which fosters originality and innovation
- 'I am the only god' forces spirit of synthesis, into accepting that two things that look very different may have the same origin. (Unified field theory)
- With many gods you can shop for the god that suits you best  
→ relative morality

-We follow that commandment because God told us so, not because we found a good rationale. Still, it's satisfying to find good reasons.

-'No idolatry' also means 'no idolatry of the mind', that is, no absolutes that are beyond discussion.

-But as we question left and right, we must have faith in one simple thing: Whatever our tradition tells us to do is ultimately for our own good. Absent that simple faith, Judaism cannot endure.

### 2. What are the boundaries of idolatry?

- a. Material possessions – worship of wealth?
- b. Objects with sentimental value (amulets, relics, items that belonged to a loved one) – worship of objects?

- c. Viewing certain ideas as absolute, not subject to inquiry -- Worship of ideas? Idolatry of the mind?
- d. Nationalism – worship of country?
- e. Egocentrism – worship of self?
- f. Astrology – worship of the stars?
- g. Love of another human being – worship of a person?
- h. Love of pets – worship of animals?
- i. Excessive family pride -- worship of ancestors?
- j. Magic, the occult, paranormal phenomena, trying to contact the dead, various forms of superstition, etc. – idolatry?

***Is anything you care one whit about - idolatry?***

Main reason for Maimonidean controversy: He essentially condemned a lot of Jewish practices of his time as being idolatrous.

**3. Should we go out today and “smash the idols”?**

- No. These biblical injunctions are one-time only, for conquest of land of Israel.
- Should the mosques in Temple Mount be destroyed and the Temple rebuilt?
  - Not because of idolatry: Muslims are not idolaters
- To what extent should we be fighting idolatry among Gentiles today?
  - How can you condemn people for what they do not know or feel is wrong?

Yet after Alenu we say: “*Veneemar...* One day idolatry shall be abolished...On that day the Lord shall be One and His Name shall be One”