

## Idolatry: Is it really that bad?

This week's Torah portion is Re'eh. In it, Moses gives the Israelites the following instructions, 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]

Wow. Looks like God does not like idolatry one bit!

-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]

-Elsewhere, 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!

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, what does God tell us? God tells us,

"You shall have no other god beside me... You shall not make for yourself a graven image".

That comes before everything else. Moreover, in the Jewish tradition, you are allowed to break all commandments in order to save a life - all, that is except three: The ones against idolatry, murder and adultery; and idolatry is listed first. Better dead than an idolater.

It's fair to ask the question: Why? What is so bad about idolatry that it outranks all other forms of bad behavior? After all, isn't idolatry just a matter of personal belief, rather than concrete action? Isn't idolatry just making statues of wood or stone and worshipping them as if they had

tremendous power over you? How can that be harmful, in and of itself? After all, we are not even talking about the dubious practices that came with idol worship back in biblical times - the human sacrifices, the sexual orgies, the mutilations, the law of the jungle, the trampling of human rights, the murder and stealing as accepted ways of getting what you want, the treating of women as objects, etc, etc. We are talking about rejecting idolatry itself, regardless of what practices come with it.

So we wonder: Can't idolatry coexist with the rejections of all abominable practices? At first blush it seems that it can. Can't Judaism say "no murder, no stealing, no adultery, kashrut, Shabbat, etc" - but allow idolatry? In theory it could. Buddhism is frequently advertised as a pacifist, nonviolent religion, with most teachings consistent with Judaism, yet it's clearly idolatrous. Hinduism has as many as 330 million gods, yet still has many teachings in common with Judaism.

Gentiles have frequently charged that the God of the Jewish Bible is a jealous god, an angry god, a vengeful god, a god who does not tolerate competition. That is nonsense on several grounds. Judaism takes the position that everything God enjoins us to do is ultimately for our own good. So we have to ask ourselves: Where is our own good in staying away from idolatry?

First, we must understand that Judaism was intended to be a COMPLETELY new beginning. This is unique in the history of religion. Usually new religions try to emphasize continuity with the old, in order to gain new members:

-Christianity said, "We accept everything in the Jewish Bible as holy, but God has given us an update through Jesus."

-Islam said, "Moses and Jesus were holy men and true prophets and all they said was true, but God has given us his latest update through Mohammed."

-Then the Mormons, the Baha'is, the Moonists and many other groups said, "Moses and Jesus and Mohammed were holy men and true prophets and everything they said was true, but God had now given us his latest update, through [insert here name of guru]."

It's called co-option, and it works. (Once you are in, of course, only bare lip service is paid to the religious figures of the past - you end up studying and following only the "latest update" and the prophet that came with it.)

But Judaism, alone, did not co-opt. It wanted a completely new beginning. In order to achieve that, Judaism had to make a complete break with all existing religions. And what did they all have in common? Idolatry. So idolatry had to go.

So, was idolatry canned just because all others were doing it, and we wanted something entirely new? No. Idolatry is intrinsically bad, but in subtle ways. Let me offer a modern perspective on why idolatry is bad.

First, by saying "no graven images", God forced us into abstract thinking. This was a great leap forward. If you can't visualize, you have to use the little grey cells, and that's bound to have interesting and original results. And if history has bestowed any blessing on us Jews, originality, that comes from thinking, is certainly one of them.

Second, by saying 'I am the only god', God forced us to unify our thinking. God forced us into a spirit of synthesis, into accepting that two things that look very different may have the same origin. After all, it is not monotheism but polytheism that comes naturally to the mind, as history has shown. When you see good and evil in the world, it is natural to conclude that there is a god of good and a god of evil, struggling for control. Sometimes one is ahead, sometimes the other is ahead, and that explains why there are good times and bad times. In early history, it was natural to believe there is a god for every aspect of the human experience: A god of war, a goddess of love, a god of the sea, a goddess of agriculture, etc. Lots of gods, each with its own individual territory, and no territory uncovered. What Judaism did was force us to accept that these very different things all had the same source. In the Book of Isaiah, God says,

"I am the Lord, and there is no one else. There is no god beside me."  
[Isaiah 45:5]  
"I form the light, and create darkness. I make peace and create evil.  
I, the Lord, do all these things." [Isaiah 45:7]

As we internalize the notion that God is One, we synthesize, we unify, we simplify, our minds try to see hidden connections that point to common origins, and in so doing we help make great progress in the human adventure.

As a physicist, I have obvious examples.

-First, matter and energy are two very different things, but Einstein, using the Jewish way of thinking, taught us that they are really the same thing.  
-Second, there are four fundamental forces in the universe: gravity, electromagnetism, and the two nuclear forces. Everything we see can be traced back to the action of one of these forces. Each force is responsible for a different set of observations. Together, these four masters run the world.

You might say, "So that's it, then; what's the problem? Can't we leave well-enough alone?" Oh no. Physicists are not happy at all. Something inside them, some deep, mysterious faith tells them that this picture cannot be the final one. For many decades, physicists have desperately, passionately, irrationally tried to unify these four forces into a single force. They call it the quest for the Unified Field Theory - a single principle from which the four forces would logically flow, and which would describe all known observations. Einstein spent the last thirty years of his life looking for this principle. Thirty years ago, three physicists got the Nobel prize for unifying two of the four forces. Legions of physicists are engaged in this massive effort. And when they find that basic theory, you can be sure something new and exciting will come out of it - it will NOT be just masking tape to tie the four forces together.

What is the deep faith that moves these scientists? HaShem Echad -- God is One. The ancient profession of faith of the Jew is telling them, "There must be ultimate unity and simplicity in the laws of nature. What seems complicated must derive from a simple principle. We must reach for higher and higher levels of understanding, and find that each level has fewer building blocks than the previous one, until we reach the top of the pyramid, and find that it contains only one block." It does not matter that, for the most part, these scientists are secular and irreligious - the \*attitudes\* encouraged by religions have their influence way outside the sphere of religion.

So there you have it. 'No idolatry' is not an off-the-wall commandment from a selfish god. Even the most secular Jew among us owes the essence of his Jewish identity to that simple commandment, even if he does not recognize it.

Now, needless to say, we Jews follow that commandment because God told us so, not because we found a good rationale. Still, it's satisfying to

find good reasons. It's always good to question, even the big-ticket items, and we Jews certainly specialize in that. After all, '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. For Judaism to endure, we must continue to have that simple faith.

Shabbat shalom.