

The Modern Struggle against Idolatry

March 9, 2007

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Abstract: Judaism's prohibition of idolatry cautions us to think twice concerning the childlike beliefs about God we still cling to, to think twice about the people we tend to put on a pedestal, to think twice about the corrosive values our society pressures us to trust. Our modern culture is full of idolatrous ideas and values. This is why Judaism's struggle against idolatry continues.

Of all the 613 *mitzvot*, or commandments, in Judaism, certainly the most misunderstood, and the least appreciated, is the prohibition of idolatry.

In his book, No Other Gods, Kenneth Seeskin, a well-known professor of Jewish philosophy at Northwestern University, argues that the prohibition against idolatry is the core of Judaism, the litmus test of what it means to be a Jew. If Seeskin is right, then it behooves us to know more about what idolatry is and what's wrong with it.

Where is the prohibition against idolatry to be found in Judaism? Of course, it is in the Torah. Where would you find it in the Torah? It is the second of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other Gods besides me. 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; you shall not bow down to them or serve them..." (Exodus 20:3-5).

In addition, we find the bold statement in the Babylonian Talmud that anyone who rejects idolatry is a Jew (Megillah 13a). We read in another of our sacred texts "Whoever acknowledges idolatry disavows the whole Torah, and whoever disavows idolatry acknowledges the whole Torah" (Sifre Deuteronomy 28).

But if the prohibition of idolatry is the essence of Judaism, is not then Judaism obsolete? For who, today, still worships statues or images as if they were Gods, divine in their own right? In point of fact, however, this is only the most simplistic of Judaism's definitions of idolatry. That definition has evolved over the centuries, has "changed considerably as social conditions and intellectual currents have changed" (No Other Gods, p. 16). For example, in the 12th century, Moses Maimonides and other medieval Jewish philosophers taught that idolatry "is not bowing to a graven image that you have made with your hands but rather believing in an image of God that you have concocted in your mind" (No Other Gods, p. 17).

Some of us think of God as a person or a being. Others of us conceptualize God as an impersonal force or a cosmic process. Even the atheist and the agnostic must have some sort of mental image of the God they don't believe in! All our concepts of God become idolatrous, teaches Maimonides, when we think that our concept, our mental image, captures everything that God is or could be. For if God is truly one, as we proclaimed in the Shema tonight, then God must be utterly unique, truly incomparable. God cannot resemble anything we know from human

experience, especially nothing finite or material – like us. All the human images we compare God to -- to a father or mother, to a king or a shepherd –compromise God’s uniqueness, God’s oneness. So it is just too limiting to think of God as a “he” or a “she.” It is too reductionist -- it makes God small -- to think that God is a “person” or that God is a “cosmic force.”

Underlying Judaism’s prohibition of idolatry is the realization that God is ultimately unknowable to the human mind. All of our names, concepts, and images of God are inadequate to contain the full truth. And this is precisely the reason why the Holy of Holies, the innermost room in the desert sanctuary and then in the great Jerusalem Temple, was completely empty, with no symbol of God whatsoever. Why empty? To convey that God’s complexity transcends all our definitions.

So what is idolatry?

Idolatry is idolizing someone who does not deserve to be idolized. It is idolatry when nations allow their leaders to become dictators. It is idolatry when we give standing ovations to actors and pay millions to watch athletes perform, while nurses and teachers get little prestige and even less compensation. Idolatry is placing someone or something on a pedestal that does not belong there. It is idolatry when we obsess over amassing wealth, chasing beauty, or pursuing fame. It is idolatry when we cling to any single image of God as if it were the absolute truth, the final word. As Seeskin says, “idolatry is not an isolated act but rather a comprehensive worldview according to which nothing is unique and everything can be measured or conceived in human terms.”

Idolatry is the worship of something as absolute, when it is merely relative. It is idolatry to think that everything can be measured or conceived in human terms, to believe that the universe revolves around us, to think that God actually cares who wins the Super Bowl or the World Series.

From this perspective, we clearly see that idolatry is still alive and well, even in the 21st century. Indeed, idolatry is everywhere. “Almost every country in the world has military parades that glorify power, advertisements that glorify beauty...books that extol wealth or influence, and cults that deify movie stars and sports figures” (No Other Gods, p. 18).

Far from being anachronistic, Judaism’s prohibition of idolatry speaks to us with a wisdom we can now appreciate. For the idol of financial success is no guarantee of happiness. Failing to question the policies of a national leader can be disastrous. And putting all our faith in a naïve concept of God can lead to heartbreak.

Judaism’s prohibition against idolatry cautions us to think twice concerning the childlike beliefs about God that we still cling to, to think twice about the people we tend to put on a pedestal, to think twice about the corrosive values our society pushes us to trust.

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