

## ***Is Idolatry a Folly Safely Surpassed?***

In the modern Western world, one does not encounter idolatry frequently. For the past few centuries, Judaism has been forced to confront a whole host of rival ideologies and belief systems; whether it was the lure of secularism and atheism or simply the pervasive modern penchant to shirk tradition. Indeed, these philosophies remain highly attractive for many and demand novel responses on behalf of Judaism's representative voices. At first blush, the one threat that Judaism in the modern world has safely and permanently laid to rest is the menace of idolatry. Idolatry is seemingly so distant from the contemporary conscience that one begins to wonder how people throughout the ages could possibly have been drawn towards such a primitive worldview. Even within secular Western culture, the last remnants of idol worshiping cultures are to be found in the exhibition cabinets of museums and collections rather than in society's religious establishments.<sup>1</sup> Certainly within contemporary Jewish society we have dealt paganism and idolatry a knock-out blow. Idolatry been permanently ejected from the pantheon of respectable and acceptable beliefs. Even the most pessimistic of forecasters do not predict a resurgence of paganism and idolatry. However, this article will argue that such conclusions would be premature and overlook the underlying relevance idolatry has in the modern age. Idols might indeed be hard to come by, but idolatry remains an ever-present and perilous possibility.

### *The appeal of idolatry in the Gemara:*

The belief that idolatry has been finally overcome is not a recent phenomenon. A number of passages within the Talmud intimate that Hazal also felt the attraction of idol worship to be a long-gone attraction. The Gemara in Sanhedrin (102b) reports a dialogue between Rav Ashi and Menashe; 'He [Rav Ashi] then questioned him [Menashe], 'Since you are so wise, why did you worship idols?' He replied, 'Had you been there, you would have raised up the skirt of your garment and run after me [to worship the idols].' We can readily associate with Rav Ashi's perplexed question: How could intelligent and rational individuals fall prey to the snares of idol worship? In the 'post-idolatrous world' which we inhabit, Menashe's claim is still a mystery. How did this radical transformation of attitudes to idolatry come about? Has human nature changed so drastically since the ancient world of idolatry that we can no longer even begin to comprehend Menashe's warning?

Another aggadic piece in Avoda Zara (17a) relates a tale of Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Yonatan who were travelling along a road and encountered a fork in their path. One trail led down a pathway filled with idolaters whilst the other passed by a street occupied by prostitutes. Presuming that retreat was not an option, the Gemara records the ensuing dilemma; 'One said to the other; "Let us follow the road of idolatry, for we have conquered this desire [for idol worship]". The other replied; "Let us go past the prostitutes and gain reward for controlling our desires". These two sages disagree as to whether one ought to knowingly place oneself in potentially religiously challenging circumstances if a safer route presents itself.<sup>2</sup> One position advocates spiritual safety and avoidance of potentially harmful situations whilst the dissenting approach argues for the positive religious value in overcoming spiritual challenges. Nonetheless, the underlying assumption behind both opinions is that avoda zara has lost its alluring appeal and is a vacuous threat. It is hard to imagine how the pagan worldview ever became so thoroughly entrenched in society that people were willing to sacrifice themselves for their idols rather than pledging allegiance to God.<sup>3</sup>

If we take it for granted that avoda Zzra no longer plagues humanity, then idolatry remains an antiquated phenomenon irrelevant to modern society. Idolatry would become an

interesting subject of historical investigation but ultimately only of theoretical worth.<sup>4</sup> We could indeed sleep safely at night knowing that idolatry is a 'folly safely surpassed.'<sup>5</sup> We are in no doubt as to God's unity and omnipotence. There is no need, at least here, to convince anyone of that. The very idea of worshipping physical objects and attributing divine or spiritual powers seems a ludicrous suggestion. However, if idolatry truly is an irrelevance to the modern Western man, a number of problems present themselves. Why does the Torah dedicate so many mitsvot and warnings against idolatry if it remains mere stupidity? After all, of the six hundred and thirteen mitsvot enumerated by the Rambam in his *Sefer HaMitsvot*, at least fifty surround the prohibition of idolatry! In addition, what inspiration and relevance are we to draw from the plethora of biblical detail surrounding idolatry if it is no longer germane to contemporary Jewish thought? Evidently, a closer look at the sources surrounding the nature of avoda zara is necessary.

### *Idolatry as error*

This issue has plagued Jewish thought for centuries and has led to much debate stretching from the Geonim until today. As an introduction, it would be helpful to split up the Jewish perspectives on idolatry into two camps. The first school of thought understood the core problem with idol worship as an error in the way *we think about God*. This approach sees the Jewish ban on idolatry as guiding our thoughts and beliefs about the Divine. God has certain characteristics and any deviation from these traits is a misrepresentation of God, and thus constitutes idolatry. This strict adherence to the plain understanding of avoda zara interprets idolatry as simple 'alien' or false worship. The error of idolatry was in the longing for gods that are 'no-gods' (Jeremiah 2:11). Instead of believing in a monotheistic world, idolaters adopt the mistaken belief that physical objects in the real world are injected with divine spirit. Very often, these forms of idolatry also believe in a polytheistic universe where multiple deities exist and exert differing degrees of power over the human world. However, irrespective of the particular belief adopted, the common feature underlying all these approaches is that they are false *conceptions* of God. Seen in this light, this perspective views idolatry as a purely intellectual sin whereby individuals believe God to be otherwise than He truly is. This misguided conviction might lead individuals to the actual idolatrous worship of other gods, be they physical objects or multiple metaphysical entities, but the core source of idolatrous practise is a problem of faulty logic in the mind. The Rambam is perhaps the clearest advocate of this approach towards *avoda zara*. In his short introduction to *Hilkhot Avoda Zara*, the Rambam indulges his readers in a rare moment of historical narrative accounting for the inception of idolatry in the world. The Rambam writes:

*'In the days of Enosh, the people erred and the counsel of the sages degenerated into stupidity. Enosh himself was amongst those who deviated. Their mistaken reasoning was that since God created the skies and spheres as part of nature, and placed them high up, giving them dignity, and that they are servants who serve Him, it would be appropriate to laud, glorify and honour them as well... Once this matter was decided upon, they proceeded to build temples to the stars, to bring sacrifices to them, to praise and glorify them verbally and to bow down to them, in order to attain [by these means] the will of the Creator by their opinions, which were evil... Owing to the passage of time, the honoured and fear-inducing Name was forgotten by all of nature, and was not recognised. Everybody, women and children included, knew only their forms of wood and stone, and the temples of stone, which they had been educated to bow down to from childhood.'*<sup>6</sup>

The Rambam's association of idolatry with 'error', 'stupidity' and 'forgetfulness' indicate that for him, the root of idolatry lies in thinking about God incorrectly. As it were, the Jewish ban

of idolatry is sinful thought rather than action. Perhaps even the physical act of idol worship is only problematic because of the incorrect philosophical and theological beliefs that lie behind, namely that God exists as an entity in the physical world rather than a wholly transcendental Being. In his *Moreh Nevuhim (Guide to the Perplexed)*, the Rambam highlights all image making and idol creation as so pernicious precisely because of its tendency to lead people to conceive of God in a physical or anthropomorphic manner.<sup>7</sup> The ban on idolatry in Jewish law at its core represents a series of ways in which we are supposed to conceive God.

According to this cognitive understanding of *avodah zara*, we are charged with the imperative to purge our minds of all fallacious and misleading conceptions of God, who ought to remain wholly transcendent. This approach sees idolatry as an internal battle within one's own mind. Indeed, according to the Rambam someone might very well fulfil the entire corpus of halakha to the finest detail and yet still be considered an idolater on account of his innermost thoughts.<sup>8</sup> The Rambam here acts as a foil for the other approach taken towards *avoda zara*, that which is found most prominently in the thought of R. Yehuda Halevi in his *Kuzari*.

*From idolatrous belief to practice:*

The alternative to conceiving idolatry as a problematic metaphysical belief is to view it as a sinful practice. The focus of this second understanding of *avoda zara* concentrates on incorrect modes of worship irrespective of the object of worship. Consequently, idolatry can be found both in the worship of idols and even of God Himself. In this view, one can violate the prohibition of idolatry in full knowledge that idols are no gods at all.<sup>9</sup> R. Yehuda Halevi, in the *Kuzari*, famously adopts this approach to idolatry. The paradigm example of idolatry, according to R. Judah, was the sin of the Golden Calf:

'This sin was not on par with an entire lapse from all obedience to the One who had led them out of Egypt, as only one of His commands was violated by them. God had forbidden images, and in spite of this they made one. They should have waited and not have assumed power, have arranged a place of worship, an altar, and sacrifices. This had been done by the advice of their astrologers and magicians among them, who were of the opinion that their actions based on their ideas would be more correct than the true ones.' (Kuzari, 1:97)

For R. Yehuda Halevi, the focus of idolatry is not on the object of worship, but on the particular mode of worship. God has sanctioned certain ways in which to worship Him and excluded others. Idolatry, according to R. Yehuda Halevi, is mistaken in its belief in the power of 'human wisdom' to dictate the proper mode of worshipping God without recourse to higher Divine authority.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, for the *Kuzari*, the sin of the Golden Calf was abhorrent in the first instance not merely because Benei Yisrael worshipped a golden idol rather than God. Conversely, in refusing to wait for God's instructions as to the proper mode of worship, Benei Yisrael implicitly denied God's absolute authority to demarcate and prescribe the parameters of legitimate worship.<sup>11</sup> This assertion of human freedom is so pernicious because it strikes at the very heart of the relationship between God the Jewish people. Idolatrous worship is a rejection precisely of 'God's freedom to give His laws and of the Jews' freedom to obey them.'<sup>12</sup> At the heart of this conception of the idolatrous impulse lies the will to carve out a space in the universe for a complete human freedom from all strictures and constraints.

Following in the footsteps of the *Kuzari*, Ran also disputed the Rambam's exclusive association of idolatry with metaphysical belief. Ran argues that the root of idolatry lies in the belief propounded by the 'philosophers that God has no interest and interaction with His creations and that all creations are determined.'<sup>13</sup> For the Ran, as for R. Yehuda Halevi, the sin of idolatry is rooted in the yearning for human autonomy in the world, which for both rabbis was manifest most clearly in the enterprise of Greek philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the Jewish battle against idolatry, in the eyes of the Ran and the *Kuzari*, dovetailed neatly with the fight against philosophy.

Taking this broader perspective on idolatry, one realises that *avoda zara* is indeed as vibrant today as in ancient society. Accordingly, *avoda zara* is no mere appendix to the Torah. After all, the desire to shirk authority, specifically religious authority, is certainly a pervasive trend throughout modern Western culture. It is perhaps for this very reason that the Talmud (Kiddushin 40a) described idolatry as 'so heinous [a sin] that he who rejects it is as though he affirms the entire Torah, all of it.' R. Yehuda Halevi's definition of idolatry takes on a much broader definition and thus strikes at the very core of the human desire to create an independent power sphere in the world.

#### *Idolatry and the search for clarity*

The view of idolatry, in the *Kuzari* and the *Derashot HaRan*, located the root of idolatry in the creation of distance between God and the world to make room for human autonomy. A number of nineteenth century Rabbinic sages were also troubled by the relevance of idolatry for the modern age and developed understandings of the danger of idolatry in its modern guise. In particular, two unique Hassidic figures, Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner of Izbizca and Rabbi Tsadok Hakohen of Lublin, developed an existential approach towards idolatry that brought it to the heart of the religious experience in the modern world. From this perspective, rather than trying to build an abyss between God and the world, the idolatrous act became the desire to bring God too close to the humanity.

For both rabbis, the Talmudic passages describing the destruction of the inclination for idol worship proves highly instructive in detailing the nature of idolatry as a sin. The Gemara in Yoma (69b) describes a dialogue between God and the Anshei Keneset HaGedola (Men of the Great Assembly) regarding the danger that the appetite for idolatry presents for Benei Yisrael.<sup>15</sup> In this passage, the Sages complain to God of all the destruction and misery that the idolatrous *yetser hara* has caused:

'And [they] cried with a thunderous voice unto the Lord, their God. What did they cry? — Woe, woe, it is he [the desire for idolatry] who has destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us! Thou hast surely given him to us so that we may receive reward through him. We want neither him [the *yetser hara* for *avoda zara*], nor the reward through him!'

The Men of the Great Assembly decided they wanted to rid the world permanently of this idolatrous weakness that had wrought so much chaos throughout Jewish history. They were even willing to sacrifice the 'reward' that went hand in hand with the potential for idolatry. Whilst the Gemara gives no indication as to the nature of this reward, numerous commentaries all understood that this reward was prophecy itself. The destruction of the idolatrous impulse would simultaneously bring about the demise of prophecy. Both the Gaon of Vilna and R. Meir Simha of Dvinsk state that the decline of idolatry coincided historically with the termination of prophecy.<sup>16</sup>

Seizing upon this link between idolatry and prophecy, R. Tsadok HaKohen of Lublin asserted that this bond is not limited merely to featuring in a common epoch in world history. More importantly, both prophecy and idolatry share a fundamental similarity in their approach towards God. Rav Tsadok writes: 'Whenever great wisdom exists, so too does great folly. The lure of idol worship emanates from prophecy itself: Whenever the light of prophecy shines to reveal God clearly to the human eye, man is also tempted to make other Gods visible to the human eye.'<sup>17</sup> For R. Tsadok the underlying human desire to see the Divine with complete clarity presents a link between idolatry and prophecy, two notions otherwise wholly distinct from each other. Prophecy, for R. Tsadok, represents the apprehension of God with complete clarity whereby God's will becomes intelligible and lucid to the human mind. A similar sentiment is found in the Midrash: 'the Holy One appears to the prophets of Israel with complete speech, clear speech...in language of purity.'<sup>18</sup> However, experiencing God in such a vividly real manner can also lead man to seek perfect clarity in all religious experiences, even idolatrous ones. At its most basic level, idolatry represents the urge to 'place God' within physical limits or to create a tangible material entity to act as a conduit to God Himself. In short, it is the impulse to make God easily accessible to mankind. Idolatry is thus rooted in the positive desire to attain a more unambiguous and clearer image of God.

In R. Tsadok's account, the dusk of prophecy heralded an era where the God-Man encounter would take place within the teachings of the sages of the Torah Shebe'al Peh. 'R. Avdimi of Haifa said: Ever since the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to the sages.'<sup>19</sup> This encounter, however, would now be shrouded in mystery, precluding immediate clarity and lucidity in the Divine encounter. The notion that ambiguity forms an innate part of the religious experience was developed more thoroughly by Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef of Izbica, R. Tsadok's mentor. R. Mordekhai Yosef posited that man's encounter with God is always inherently surrounded by certain elements of haziness:

'I (anokhi) am the Lord your God.' The verse does not state 'ani,' for if it stated 'ani' that would imply that the Holy One Blessed Be He revealed then the totality of His light to Israel, precluding the possibility of further delving into His words, for everything would already be revealed. The letter 'khaf' [of anokhi], however, denotes that the revelation is not complete, but is rather an estimation and comparison to the light which God will reveal in the future.'<sup>20</sup>

The very first of the Aseret HaDibrot, according to R. Mordehai Yosef, is worded precisely to indicate the incomplete nature of the Divine revelation to mankind. God never fully reveals Himself to man. Indeed, given man's inherently limited intellect, he is prevented from ever attaining complete clarity of God. Making any attempt to achieve such certainty, in R. Mordekhai Yosef's eyes, risks a descent into idolatry. Indeed, the Torah's prohibition against the making of statues and images inheres precisely in the belief that man's encounter with God ought to be one of uncertainty and ambiguity:

'The reason that the Commandment of Thou shall not make for yourself a graven image [follows the commandment of anokhi]. . . is because a graven image is cut according to specific dimensions, perfect, lacking nothing. . . this is to teach us that nothing is revealed to man completely.'<sup>21</sup>

This notion of uncertainty and mystery in man's relationship with God forms a dominating motif throughout R. Mordekhai Yosef's writings. Some of the most pivotal and central events in Jewish history, according to R. Mordekhai Yosef, should be understood through this principle of Divine mystery. This approach is most apparent in his commentary on the *Akei'dat Yitschak*. R. Mordekhai Yosef writes:

‘And God tested Abraham’...Actually,, Abraham did not receive an explicit command to slaughter his son. That is why the Torah does not state ‘And the Lord (YKVK) tested’ but rather, ‘And God (Elokim) tested.’ This indicates that the revelation was seen through an unclear speculum (aspaklaria de-lo nehira). . . It was a test to Abraham precisely because the command was not explicit.’<sup>22</sup>

In this novel understanding of the Akeda, R. Mordekhai Yosef explains that this test proved so monumental for Avraham precisely because God’s command was shrouded in uncertainty. Avraham did not know whether God was actually instructing him to slaughter his son or merely to ‘raise him up’ on the altar on the mountain.<sup>23</sup> Faced with such ambiguity, Avraham could have easily deceived himself into believing that God would never command him to kill his own son. Avraham might even be forgiven for assuming the benign nature of God’s command given that he had just received a Divine promise of plentiful offspring.<sup>24</sup> Despite the manifold opportunities for self-deception, Avraham emerged triumphant from this trial due to his ability to perceive God’s will in spite of doubt and uncertainty.<sup>25</sup> Thus, for R. Mordekhai Yosef and R. Tsadok, the prohibition against idolatry strikes to the very heart of the religious experience in a post-prophetic world. The attempt to feign certainty in the religious world is idolatrous precisely because it seeks to place God where He cannot be found. The challenge thrown upon modern Jews by R. Mordekhai Yosef is to come to terms with this lack of complete assurance and to still seek out God. Conjuring up Divine immanence, according to R. Mordekhai Yosef, is tantamount to placing infinite and eternal meaning where it does not belong.

This approach towards idolatry should not be confused with the understanding of God promoted by Karl Barth, the early twentieth century Protestant theologian. Barth argued that God was totally transcendent and completely inaccessible to any human mind. In Barth’s words; ‘We who stand in this concrete world know nothing, and are incapable of knowing anything of that other world.’<sup>26</sup> The only possible reaction to this situation in Barth’s view is simply to wait for God to reveal Himself; ‘Religion, as the final human possibility, commands us to halt. Religion brings us to the place where we must wait, in order that God may confront us- on the other side of the frontier of religion.’<sup>27</sup> R. Mordekhai Yosef did stress the inability of man to fully comprehend the Divine will. However, Avraham’s greatness lay in his ability to act heroically in spite of doubt and uncertainty. He was able to intuit God’s latent will despite its ambiguous guise. Thus, in contrast to Barth, man does have access to God in a world bereft of prophecy. The ultimate challenge placed upon us is to seek out the Divine command hidden within the clouds of God’s transcendence.

*David Pruwer learnt at Yeshivat Har Etzion and Yeshiva University. He graduated from UCL with a BA in History and is now studying for an MPhil in the History of Political Thought and Intellectual History at Cambridge University.*

---

<sup>1</sup> This, of course, touches on whether Christianity falls under the category of idolatry. Rabbenu Tam, Sanhendrin 73b s.v. Assur, claims that non-Jews are not prohibited from shituf, the belief in multiple distinct powers of God. Rambam, however, posits that Christianity is indeed idolatrous, see: Rambam, *Perush haMishna*, Tractate Avoda Zara 1:1 and Rambam *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Makhalot Asurot*, 11:7. Jacob Katz has an extensive discussion as to the eighteenth and nineteenth century evaluation of Christianity within Rabbinic thought. See J.Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (Oxford 1961), chapter 13.

<sup>2</sup> Another interesting Gemara which relates to the issue of deliberately placing oneself in religiously challenging is found in Sanhendrin 107a, in which King David is rebuked for asking God to challenge him.

- 
- <sup>3</sup> In Sanhedrin 63b-64a, the Gemara relates a tale where Eliyahu finds a starving child and offers to save his life if he is willing to embrace God. The child obstinately refuses: 'The child took his idolatrous object of his awe out of his bosom, fondled it, and kissed it until his belly burst.'
- <sup>4</sup> Avoda zara would thus presumably take on the characteristics of the other portions of Torah that are of heuristic and intellectual significance but of little or no practical consequence. See: Sanhedrin 71a.
- <sup>5</sup> E. Fackenheim, *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy* (New York 1973) 179.
- <sup>6</sup> Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Avoda Zara*, 1:1-2
- <sup>7</sup> Rambam, *Moreh Nevuhim*, 1:36.
- <sup>8</sup> M. Halbertal and A. Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge Mass.) 109.
- <sup>9</sup> E.I Fackenheim, *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*, (New York 1973) 178.
- <sup>10</sup> L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*(Chicago 1988) 105.
- <sup>11</sup> L. Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation*, (Princeton 2000) 26.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> *Derashot HaRan*, ninth drdasha.
- <sup>14</sup> M. Halbertal and A. Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge Mass 189.
- <sup>15</sup> This particular account appears verbatim in Sanhedrin 64a as well.
- <sup>16</sup> R. Meir Simha, *Meshekh Hkhma; Ba'alotekha*, s.v. veAzalti min harua'h. R. Meir Simha cites the Vilna Gaon as an additional proof too without providing a source.
- <sup>17</sup> R. Tzadok HaCohen, *Resisei Laila*, 14. This translation is my own. I have slightly rephrased the passage in order to ensure that the intention and meaning of R. Tsadok is not lost in the English translation.
- <sup>18</sup> Bereshit Rabba, 52:5 and 74:7. Here, the Midrash clarifies the distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish prophets. Jewish prophets, the midrash posits, see God with perfect clarity and during the day, whilst other prophets only see God at night and clouded in mystery.
- <sup>19</sup> Bava Batra, 12a.
- <sup>20</sup> R. Mordechai Yosef of Izbitza, *Mei Ha'Shiloah*, , Yitro s.v. anokhi
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> R. Mordechai Yosef of Izbitza, *Mei Ha'Shiloah*, Vayera, s.v. ve-ha Elokim.
- <sup>23</sup> J. Gellman, *Abraham! Abraham!: Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac*, 78.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 79.
- <sup>25</sup> R. Herzl Hefter, 'Idolatry a Prohibition for Our Time' in *Tradition*, 42:1 (2009), 19.
- <sup>26</sup> K. Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. Hoskyns (London 1968), 30.
- <sup>27</sup> K. Barth, *Der Römerbrief*,(Zurich 1985) 250.