

Parshat Va'etchanan

Idolatry

One of the central themes of Sefer Devarim is that of idolatry and its dangers. The Torah spells out the warning against any foray into the world of idolatry in the strongest terms, delineating many types of temptation and a multiplicity of scenarios in which a person, group or nation might find themselves attracted to Avoda Zara, Idolatry.

In attempting to come to grips with this topic, it seems to me that a deeper analysis, which highlights the differentiations and the classifications of idolatry, will add to our understanding of this important prohibition. In the particular case of Parshat Vaetchanan, it is clear that the Torah outlines are two classic but yet distinct routes to idolatry. What I mean is that the Torah frames idolatry in two distinct contexts, each of which is radically different from the other. One route is sacred and the other profane; one path is the path of cultural tension, the other, the path of spiritual confusion. Let us explain.

1. THE CULTURAL STIMULUS

The first type is the attraction to idolatry that takes place within a cultural context. I am referring to a movement towards other beliefs and worship that occurs because I want to affiliate myself with another culture, another people. Here we are not talking about an idealistic, "higher" attraction to idolatry. It is not the ideas or ideals of a particular religion that grabs my attention and my interest; instead, it is the desire to associate with a particular nation, or cultural experience, it is the need to belong, to merge with the cultural expressions of another group. Here let us read some pesukim from the end of the Parsha:

"When the Lord brings you into the land that you are about to enter and possess and he dislodges many nations before you : the Hittites, Girgashites, Canaanites, Amorites, Perizites, Hivites and the Jebusites ... grant them no covenant and give them no quarter. You may not marry them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from me to worship other gods and the Lord's anger will blaze forth against you and wipe you out. Instead, this is what you must do: You shall tear down their altars, smash their pillars, cut down their sacred trees and consign their images to fire."
(Devarim 7:1-5)

This passage is not interested in the physical control of the land. It is focused on the cultural environment. It talks about intermarriage, and cultural covenants. How will we relate to the "Hittites, Girgashites, Canaanites, Amorites, Perizites, Hivites and the Jebusites" when we meet them? The Torah warns us to realise at the outset that their national culture, which is pagan in practice and belief, is wrong and harmful to us. We are warned lest we are intending on the creation of a tolerant cultural environment, engaging in intercultural pacts and covenants as an act of friendship and harmony. We are instructed not to build a multi-ethnic environment in which our people and their peoples shall intermarry. The Torah warns that this route is an inexorable path to attraction to their gods and their religious lifestyle. In the ancient world, there is no

"neutral space", no state separated from religion. Either my belief will prevail or yours; either the Israelite lifestyle or the Canaanite lifestyle; and "lifestyle" includes religion, worship, belief. The Torah is intolerant in this regard and insists that Israel create an exclusive monotheistic environment, a Jewish national culture. Maybe, that is why this parsha in Devarim 7 ends with reference to Am Segula - God's choice of the Jewish people. We are a nation with a particular culture, charged by God with a unique cultural identity. We may not dilute that identity in any way.

Let me stress again that the attraction to idolatry as it is described here is not framed within a philosophical context. It is the social dimension, the attraction of inter-tribal harmony and dialogue, of covenant and marriage that are the danger here. For we are promised that the multi-ethnic approach will result inevitably in a cross-cultural experience of sharing religious practice - idol worship - and a loss of monotheistic identity.

2. THE REVELATION STIMULUS

But, earlier in our parsha, we are described a very different type of idolatry. This type of idolatry is not in response to any outside stimulus; no other nation or culture is involved. Instead - and this is a rather startling concept - the attraction to this type of idolatry would seem to be endemic, built-in, within the experience of revelation. The best way for me to explain this is by quoting from another section of the parsha:

"Take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes, and so they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children ... the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horev, when the Lord said to me, 'Gather the people to me that I may let them hear my words, in order that they may learn to revere (fear) me as long as they live on earth, and may teach their children.' You came forward and stood at the foot of the mountain. The mountain was ablaze with flames to the very skies, dark and densest clouds. The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape - nothing but a voice.... Be most careful - since you saw no image when the Lord your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire - not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a graven image, in any likeness whatsoever: the form of a man or a woman, the form of any beast on earth, the form of a winged bird that flies in the sky, the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth. And when you look at the sky and behold the sun and the moon, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them ... " (Devarim 4:9-20 ... and see also verse 23-4)

What we see from this passage is that there is a possibility (or a probability?) that we respond to revelation in an idolatrous manner. What is the connection between the two?

After experiencing the impressive spectacle of God's power at Horev (Sinai) there is a need to continue to live the event. Such a powerful moment - a meeting face to face with God - fills the senses, the spirit, the emotions. One cannot simply descend to the bounds of normality. One feels an urgent impulse to continue, to somehow capture that moment, to experience it for all time; not that it exist as history, but rather that it happen in the present - for eternity.

It is interesting how the Torah is fully aware of the potency of the revelation at Sinai. It is precisely for this reason that the Torah instructs us to transmit our impressions of that event to

our children and our grandchildren. This is the ultimate happening, the day when Am Yisrael realise "that God will speak to man and he will live" (5:21) - that the Divine desires a relationship with Man, and that precisely that contact is a possibility for man. Revelation lies at the foundation of our religion, as revelation proves to man that he can meet God "face to face." (5:4) Therefore, this moment must be recorded and transmitted; passed from generation to generation.

But here we return to the flip-side. We want to retain the connection. We want to stay on that "high" of that direct contact with God that we felt so closely at Har Sinai. And so, the fear is that the nation may be drawn to represent the experience, to perpetuate that connection by representation of God with images: human forms, animal images or the images of the sun and moon. These images will, in some way, represent the image of God, or the feelings felt within the revelation experience. The Torah forbids this totally. The Torah tells us that it is the words of Har Sinai that are to be its testimony. Not the images.

Notwithstanding this, it is certainly remarkable that there is something in the revelation experience that makes idolatry a greater likelihood! Here we are not talking about a danger from the outside, but rather an inherent danger embedded within the very experience of perceiving God. And this is astounding! The very experience of God which is so positive, so creative, can potentially stimulate idolatry and attract one to its service, a most negative and destructive result.

How can this be?

THE REVELATION DIALECTIC [1]

It would seem that revelation walks a fine line. On the one hand, God must be experienced. That is what religion is about; the relationship. God is creator, He hears our prayers, He heals the sick, He is king, saviour, redeemer, protector. All these descriptions (that we recite in our tefilla) are **relational** descriptions. They describe God as we perceive him; as He relates to us, and hence, as we can relate to Him.

But is God bound by man? Is God bound by his creation? In philosophical terms we talk of God as limit-less, boundless, infinite and **absolute**. In the familiar language of the philosophers [2], God is not capable of being described; because He is beyond anything we can say, beyond any concept, any reference point. He is totally "other." But if that is the true God - omnipotent, incorporeal, abstract, infinite - then how is man able to relate to him? One cannot pray to a being who has no name, no attributes, no personality.

And this is a difficult dialectic, which, to my mind, is ultimately insoluble. The concept of a relational God contradicts the notion of an abstract self-sufficient "absolute" being. If God is completely at rest within himself, then from where dare we suggest a relationship? But if there is no relationship, then where is the concept of religion?

To my mind, this is the conundrum that we face in the revelation dilemma. On the one hand, God is above space, time, form etc. We may not perceive of Him in spatial terms, we may not represent him as an image, a physical form. No form will do God justice. But if God is so abstract, then where is the relationship [3]. So God DID reveal Himself. Yes, it happened in a finite place at a finite time. And the tendency, the danger, is to draw this experience and concretise it, to draw it more and more towards the physical, the tangible. Herein lies the inherent danger of revelation. Revelation is a necessity. Man must have the "face to face" contact, the relationship. Hence, God must reveal his presence. But man must realise that he heard nothing but the ephemeral voice of the Divine, they saw no image. God remains infinite, absolute.

ELOHIM ACHERIM OR AVODA ZARA

We have highlighted two distinct routes to idolatry. The first is propelled by cultural assimilation, the second type, initiated by Divine revelation. Might we be able to distinguish between the "religions", the different atmosphere of religious deviation created by each type?

There is no doubt that the first category of Avoda Zara that we mentioned are the gods of other nations. These gods do not refer to Hashem at all, they are deities which other societies worshipped as powers. Sefer Shoftim talks of "the Baalim and the Ashtoret, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moav, the gods of Ammon, the gods of the Pelishtim." (Shoftim/Judges 10:6) Each god is a god of a particular nation. Each has their guardian, their patron god. This reinforces that which we noted earlier. These gods are cultural categories. When in Ammon one worships Kamosh, when in the land of the Phillistines, one worships Dagon. In Canaan the gods are the Ba'al and the Ashera.

But the second category that we described is vastly different. In the idolatry which is prompted by the revelation experience, there is no Elohim Acherim. There are no "other gods." Rather, what we are dealing with is the service of Hashem, just performed in inappropriate manner. This is "avoda zara"; foreign worship of God. The method is wrong. The address is not.

Does this difference matter? So, in the first case, the destination is wrong. In the second case, the method is faulty. So what! It is all Avoda Zara! It all has an associated death sentence!

But, we do find many commentators who are interested in drawing a distinction in the texture and severity of these two modes of idolatry. What is the nature of this distinction? In short, we will state that there is a quantum difference between worshipping God in the wrong way, and worshipping another god! The Ibn Ezra begins to discuss this in his comments upon the verse (in Sefer Shemot) that immediately follows the description of the Revelation at Sinai. The verse states:

"And God told Moses: Say to the Israelites - You have seen that I spoke to you from the heavens. Do not make any gods of gold with me, nor shall you construct any gods of gold." (Shemot 20:19-20)

Ibn Ezra comments:

"Do not make any gods of gold with me: Just like 'You shall not make graven images (20:3)'. The rationale here is that they will make images in order to receive the divine power and they will think that they are acting in God's honour, as intermediaries, just like the golden calf that Israel made, where Aharon acted for the honour of God... that is why it states: 'with me' - as if to say - I have no need for intermediaries."

The Golden Calf, as perceived by the Ibn Ezra (and more famously, by the Kuzari) is an intermediary. It is not Elohim Acherim - a foreign deity. Rather it is inappropriate service of God. Likewise, RaDaK in his commentary to Melakhim states that the golden calves of Yerovam at Bet-El and Dan were worship of Hashem in a forbidden manner. Here we quote a relevant passage from the Kuzari (4:13):

"In truth, there is a need to make a major distinction between the worship of (golden calves by) Yerovam and (the Baal) worship of Achav. Only the Baal worshippers are idolaters, and it is in reference to this group that Elijah said: 'If you are for Hashem our God then follow him, and if you are for Baal then follow

him' (I Kings 18:21)... and it was against the Baal worship that Elijah make his call of: 'I am zealous for Hashem the God of Israel.' But he never called out against (the calves of) Yerovam. The men of Yerovam's group were "for Hashem the God of Israel" in all their deeds and their prophets were the prophets of God whereas Achav's prophets were the prophets of Baal. God sent Jehu to wipe out the memory of Achav ... but he did destroy the calves (of Yerovam.)

The worshippers of the golden calf (in the wilderness) and the altars of Yerovam and the idol of Michah (Shoftim ch.17-18) only sought to serve the God of Israel. Nonetheless they transgressed a commandment for which there is a death penalty. They can be compared to a person who marries their sister ... but who observes all the Halakhic restrictions of marriage; or someone who eats pork, at the same time being particular to slaughter it according to the strictures of Shechita, and to drain the blood, and keeps all the other kashrut restrictions."

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

In summary then, we might suggest that the Torah describes to us two levels of idolatry. They might be put into the following division of the Ten Commandments; a rather unorthodox division, but one adopted by Rav Mordechai Breuer [4]:

"I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt ... You shall have no other gods beside Me. You shall not make for yourself any graven image, any likeness of what is in the heaven above, or in the earth below, or in the waters below the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them ..." (Devarim 5:6-9)

The first "command" relates to serving God. One must adopt God as one's deity and not turn to any other god. The second "command" deals with a different scenario. It wishes to relate to the adoption of images as objects of worship EVEN IF one intends them to be a medium for serving God.

This is a rather unusual way to look at the first two commandments because we generally see the first as a command to believe in God, and the second as a restriction against idolatry. But this perspective sees the Ten Commandments as aware of this dual level of idolatry.

IN CONCLUSION

We have outlined two types of straying from God. The first is a journey towards other cultures and their religious identity. The second type is a distortion of the purity of our understanding of God and his One-ness.

We all have a yearning for spirituality. We search for meaning, and for a direction that rises above our routine day-to-day involvements. But we also have a tendency to reach this aim via short-cuts. We want to reach a level of spiritual fulfilment, and because that path is a difficult one, there are times in which we sell ourselves short. This can happen by pursuing other cultures and their lifestyles as if they will grant some alleviation of our search for truth. It can also happen by misrepresenting God and Judaism, worshipping the true God in a foreign way. We sometimes sell ourselves short even within our religious practice, hoping to connect with God; but we are bringing God down to us, rather than ascending to Him.

To relate to God means to relate to Him directly; without intermediary or image. This process is not always easy, but if we search and strive, if we learn, if we ascend on an upward journey, then the Parsha promises:

"If you search there for the Lord your God, you will find him, if only you seek Him with all your heart and soul." (Devarim 4:29)

Shabbat Shalom.

Footnotes

[1] The basic approach here can be seen in greater detail in Rabbi Eliezer Berkovitz's book, God, Man and History pgs.57-62.

[2] See the Rambam's Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah ch.1

[3] See some strongly anti-Maimonidean sentiments by Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch in his commentary to Bereshit 6:6, 8:21.

[4] See Rav Breuer's approach in his article: The division of the Ten Commandments into verses and Dibrot. published in a volume entitled "Asseret Hadibrot BiR'ei HaDorot." Edited by BenTzion Segal. (Magnes Press 1985.)

© Alex Israel 5771

"