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## Ban on Idolatry

At the end of World War Two, Winston Churchill was asked if he was concerned about how historians would view his role in the war. He replied that he wasn't the least bit concerned, saying that, "history shall be kind to me, **for I shall write it.**" Ultimately, Churchill's words came true; his history of World War Two became one of the most popular books on the subject.

The attempt to shape and influence events is part and parcel of the human saga. All of us want to be players in the game of life. But while we can in fact **influence** events, we cannot control their **final outcome**. Ultimately, all is in the hands of the Almighty.

A central focus of this week's Torah portion, V'etchanan, is the **ban on idolatry**. The

Israelites are absolutely forbidden from worshipping or even making graven images. They should not intermarry with the surrounding nations lest they be drawn after their idolatrous ways. Jews are forbidden not only from making likenesses of **other gods**, but Jews may not even make an image which symbolically represents God Himself. This stricture is so great that a Jew should rather die than participate in pagan worship.

Why is idolatry seen as such a severe transgression? Some commentators see the Torah's stricture against making a graven image as a **preventive law**, to avoid the possibility that people will mistakenly come to worship this image as God Himself. The Ibn Ezra notes that our relationship with the Almighty is direct - **without any intermediaries**. The use of an image - even as a mere symbol to represent the Divine - would constitute an intermediary and is thus forbidden.

The commentators give another reason for the Biblical disdain of idolatry: It is **perversion** of the metaphysical order. Judaism teaches that we must subordinate our will to the Almighty's will. The nature of pagan worship is just the opposite. It is an attempt to influence and ultimately control spiritual forces. Jewish tradition says our purpose in this world is to achieve moral growth by emulating the Almighty's behavior - not to influence spiritual forces into helping meet our own **egotistical desires**.

In other words: Idolatry is wrong **because it is false!** A graven image is an inanimate object incapable of accomplishing anything. There is nothing "real" behind the wood and stone. Compare this to the Almighty Who is responsive to one's needs and holds the keys to

all success and failure. Says the Talmud: "**The seal of God is Truth.**"

Similarly, **revisionist history** is the wrong approach. We cannot escape "reality" with the stroke of a pen. So too with the Creator of the universe. We must strive not to fashion God in our own image, but rather to **fashion ourselves** in the image of God.



## How Do We Love God?

Love is one of the most powerful of all human emotions. It drives both personal and social change, and can transform the world. It is the active ingredient in our most important relationships - the relationship between husband and wife, between parent and child, between siblings, between friends, and of course, our relationship with God.

But the big question is - can love be cultivated? We usually think of love as a feeling. But what if it's something less abstract. What if love is not just something we feel, but something we do?

The question is especially significant when it comes to the love of God. In this week's Torah portion, Va'etchanan, we read of the mitzvah to "love God".

The verse states: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6,

verse 5) The verse also appears in the first paragraph of the Shema, which we recite every morning and evening.

And yet, how can we be commanded to love God? Isn't love an emotion - something we either feel or we don't? Many of our sages over the generations have grappled with just this question. The Rambam has one approach to answering it. He writes: "When a person reflects on His [God's] deeds, and wondrous and great creations, and sees from them His wisdom which is beyond assessment and without end, this will bring him to love and to praise and to glorify and to be filled with a great desire to know His great name. As David said: 'My soul thirsts for the living God'." (Laws of the Foundation Principles of the Torah, Chapter 2). The Rambam is teaching us that when we contemplate the sheer beauty and brilliance and perfection of the natural universe, our hearts will be filled with an overwhelming love and wonderment for the One who created it.

As Jews, we take nothing for granted. To attune our consciousness to the wondrous things going on around us, our sages enacted numerous blessings for us to recite. There are blessings on witnessing lightning, on hearing thunder, on seeing the oceans or an awesome mountain range, on noticing a rainbow with its brilliant colours, or the first blossoms of spring. There are blessings on more "mundane" natural wonders as well - a blessing before eating a piece of fruit or a vegetable, or a slice of bread. Of course, it's all equally wondrous.

Gemara actually compares the seemingly commonplace occurrence of rain to the revival of the dead, which is why both are mentioned together in the same blessing in the Amidah.

The only difference between miracles and laws of nature is the frequency with which they occur. But the point is, the more we perceive and recognise the love and energy and effort that God pours into creating this world, the more we are filled with love. Rabbeinu Yona (in his commentary on Pirkei Avot 1:3) has an approach that's subtly different. He says we can cultivate a love of God by recognising all of the personal kindnesses He has done for us. Starting with the mere fact that we are alive - the Talmud teaches that we are meant to give thanks for every breath of air. But, by meditating on the fact that everything we have - the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the roof over our head, the people in our lives, the knowledge and wisdom we've accumulated - is a gift from our Creator, we can develop a deep appreciation and love for Him.

Rabbeinu Yona says another pathway to loving God is to contemplate his greatness and grandeur - and the fact that, despite his unimaginable and ungraspable loftiness, He is nevertheless interested and involved in the goings on of our lives.

Rashi offers a third path to the love of God. Citing the abovementioned verse from this week's Torah portion: "And you shall love the Lord your God..." he notes that in the very next verse, it says: "And behold these things which I command you today shall be on your heart." Says Rashi, according to the interpretation of Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi, the verse is teaching us the formula for loving God, which is through the commandments of the Torah. How do the mitzvot bring us to love God? Love is predicated on knowledge, and that through the mitzvot we come to know God. Just as you can come to know a person by what he or she stands

for, and by the outcomes they want to be realised in the world, so too we can gain some understanding of God through the 613 mitzvot He gave to us, which are the revealed expressions of His will.

So, for example, when God commands us to be kind and compassionate, to deal sensitively with others, to be ethical in business, to rest and spiritually rejuvenate ourselves once a week, to uphold standards of truth and honesty and justice, this tells us something about who He is and what He wants.

But, perhaps performing the Torah's commandments isn't just about knowing God. Perhaps in some sense we are also giving to God. By living in accordance with the commandments, we are dedicating our lives to God's will; we are doing what He wishes us to do, what He created us to do. And this act of "giving" itself can generate love. Rav Eliyahu Dessler explains that giving is more than an expression of love, it's also what activates love. The more one gives, says Rav Dessler, the more one loves. He explains this is why parents tend to love their children more than children love their parents. Most of the giving goes in that direction - from parent to child - therefore the love also flows more powerfully in that direction. That giving and loving are two sides of the same coin is expressed in the Hebrew language by the fact that the root of the Hebrew word for love, *ahava*, is the word *hav*, which means to give. We see that any loving relationship must be rooted in giving; we can't speak meaningfully of loving another without giving to them. And so it is with God. We can't speak about loving God without giving to Him, which we do through the mitzvot.

So far, we've uncovered four approaches to loving God - through a sense of wonderment at the natural world He created; through an appreciation for the personal kindnesses he has done for us; through knowing Him by acquainting ourselves with - and carrying out - the commandments; and also through giving to Him by living our lives in accordance with His will.

The important thing to remember, however, is that loving God is our natural state of being. The Dubna Maggid captures this with a beautiful parable. He says just like when rescuing a trapped bird, one doesn't have to actively return it to its nest - one only needs to release it and it will find its way back there instinctively; so too, to return to - or rediscover - our innate love for God, all we need to do is release ourselves from whatever is impeding us. The strategies we've outlined here are ways of doing exactly that, catalysts for revealing what is already deep inside us.

The Torah says we are created in God's image; that our souls are in some way a reflection of the Divine. And it is this reflection of God within each one of us that naturally draws us close to Him. Like a bird flying home to its nest. The place that's warm and safe and comfortable. The place we belong. The place we love.



## Sometimes Less is More

Despite the fact that God has informed him that he will not be the one to bring the Jewish people home, Moses continues to teach them Torah ahead of their entry into the Land of Israel. Amidst his preamble to the Ten Commandments, Moses states: ‘You shall not add onto the matter that I command you and neither shall you detract from it’ (*Deut. 4:2*).

Two laws are included in this statement. The first is the prohibition against adding in any way to the commandments of the Torah. This means that it is forbidden, for example, to extend the festival of Sukkot by an extra day, to put a fifth set of strings on one’s *tzitzit* or to add an extra compartment inside one’s *tefillin* box. The second law is the prohibition against detracting in any way from the commandments of the Torah.

Both of these elements are perplexing. The first seems to be somewhat counterintuitive, whereas the second seems obvious. A desire to add to the commandments may stem from a person’s alacrity towards religious life and depth of connection to the Creator. Why would such a seemingly praiseworthy act be prohibited? And regarding the second proscription, given that the Torah states on many occasions that its laws are eternal, it is inconceivable that it would be permitted to detract from its commandments in

any way. So, what is the meaning behind this verse?

Sforno explains that the second element is indeed necessary, in order to prevent people from wrongly assuming that there are commandments that apply only in certain situations or to particular people. This was the case with King Solomon, who believed that contrary to the Torah's explicit command, many wives and many horses would not cause him to go astray (BT, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 21b). This tendency to believe that sometimes we are beyond the scope of a law occurs in our day-to-day lives. How many of us have driven slightly above the speed limit on a quiet deserted road, 'safe' in the knowledge that it is not really dangerous since we are in control? Even King Solomon, the wisest man to ever lived (*I Kings* 5:10), was not immune to the pitfall of assumed immunity when he knew the reasoning behind the commandment. Sforno explains that the verse teaches that there are no exceptions, and no one is 'above the law'.

An explanation of the prohibition against adding to the Torah's commands may be understood by way of an analogy that my father often recounts. A great architect designs an exquisite structure. He hands the plan to his foreman, who in turn instructs the labourers as to its implementation. Amidst construction, one of the labourers decides that if he increases the height of a certain fence slightly, the beautiful structure will be better protected. What results, to the dismay of the original architect, is that the wall now conceals some of the edifice's tremendous beauty. The architect may consider every minor detail and intend, 'to know what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offence' (Robert Frost, *Mending the Wall*),

but without this knowledge, by adding a little to the original design, the labourer detracted from the beauty.

Rabbenu Bachya explains that one should be careful not to presume that one's addition is the will of God, 'for the perfect Torah does not need addition or detraction, and whoever adds, [really] detracts.' The Talmud derives this idea from an episode at the beginning of the Book of Genesis (BT, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 29a). Soon after man is created, God permits free reign over the Garden of Eden, with one exception, 'from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, do not eat from it' (*Genesis* 2:17). In the first-ever addition to a divine commandment, Eve relays to the snake, 'God said do not eat and do not touch' (3:3). Rashi notes that her being more stringent than God's command was what led to man's ultimate downfall.

The rabbis, like an architect's foreman, are entrusted with the delicate methods of safeguarding the commandments, and a person can indeed choose to take upon oneself a specific stringency, within rabbinic guidelines. Nevertheless, there are individuals who press to universalise personal stringencies, thus hindering an appreciation of the true essence of the beautiful Torah that they seek to preserve. Through erecting supplementary 'fences' from within, they fence off much of what the Torah has to offer. Earlier on, Moses states explicitly that extra fortification and walls are a sign of weakness, as they reflect a lack of intrinsic strength and assurance (Rashi on *Num.* 13:18). And here, Moses warns the original Torah 'labourers', prior to their entry into the land, not to append anything to the perfect blueprint.



## Do Not Covet

Everyone knows that one of the Ten Commandments is "Do not covet" (Deut. 5:18). However, most people do not know how this works.

What is the difference between admiring another person's thing - perhaps even desiring it for yourself - and coveting? The Sages explain that the prohibition of coveting only occurs when you begin to plot how you could get it from the other person. Even if you intend to offer him a price way above market value, the mere planning of how you can make his property your own is a problem of "coveting." Of course, if he has previously indicated a willingness to sell something, there are no restrictions. But the Torah is very strict about something that is not on the market.

The idea is simple. We have to learn to respect the ownership of others to the point where we regard their things as completely and utterly untouchable under all circumstances. As soon as he puts the item on the market, it comes into our dimension in potential - but until that point, it is not even something to consider.

The Torah puts it very nicely: "Do not covet his property, nor his wife." His property should be as taboo as his wife. In the same way that no normal person would try to plot how to get someone to willingly give up their spouse, so

too his property.

The Sages explain why: If you believe on any level that you have a right to acquire the property of another even though he is happy with it, then you do not have absolute respect for his ownership. And not having absolute respect for his ownership is a first step on a very slippery path toward dishonesty and outright theft. So the next time you read about a hostile takeover on Wall Street, think about the Ten Commandments.

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