



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Yitro

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February 7, 2015

Yitro

**American Idol & the
Ten Commandments**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Why is idol worship such a cardinal sin? Who really cares if someone wants to foolishly serve a rock or a tree?!

When was the last time you worshipped an idol? When was last time you were even tempted to worship an idol?

No Jew, in his or her heart-of-hearts, believes in worshipping anything man-made, anything other than the One True God.

This is why so many Jews are atheists: not because they don't believe, but because they could only believe in the real thing. Thus, until they meet the real thing, a Jew remains skeptical.

Why then did the Torah feel compelled to dedicate one of the Ten Commandments to prohibiting idolatry?

The philosophers in Rome asked the great Jewish sages why God did not simply destroy all of the world's idols and remove false deities forever?

The sages replied: “Should God wreck His universe – the sun and the moon and the stars and the planets – because of fools?!

Herein lies the inner meaning and spiritual lesson of the commandment to refrain from idolatry – a lesson which is relevant to our lives today:

Our goal is to connect all creations with their Creator, not to short sell a creation by thinking it is the source of power.

The latter is a service foreign to the Jew. The former is the very essence of the Jew.

AMERICAN IDOL & THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

1. Three Converts (Joke)

Three Jews who had recently converted to Christianity were having a drink together in a posh WASP country club. They started talking about the reasons for their conversions.

“I converted out of love,” said the first, and noticing the dubious looks on his friends’ faces, he continued: “Not love for Christianity, mind you, but for a Christian girl. As you both know, my wife insisted that I convert.”

“And I,” said the second, “I converted in order to rise in the legal system. You probably know that my recent appointment as a federal judge may have had something to do with my new religion.”

The third man spoke up: “I converted because I think that the teachings of Christianity are superior to those of Judaism.”

“Are you kidding?” said the first man, spitting out his drink. “What do you take us for, a couple of *goyim*?”

2. Jews Are Unbelievable

No Jew, in his or her heart-of-hearts, believes in worshipping anything other than the One True God.

This is why so many Jews are atheists: not because they don’t believe, but because they could only believe in the real thing. Thus, until they meet the real thing, a Jew remains skeptical.

There is a famous story about Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, the Rebbe of Berditchev, who was once talking to a fellow Jew about religion. The man interrupted him by saying, “Rabbi, please don’t waste your time with me, I’m an atheist, I don’t believe in God.” To which the Rebbe replied: “My dear Jew, the God you don’t believe in, I don’t believe in either.”

When a Jew comes across some distorted or watered down version of truth, or when a Jew is taught only an immature version of God, the Jew finds it difficult to believe in such a thing. (And the great Jewish sages do also.)

If, God forbid, a Jew seems to believe in some form of faux deity, there is always a reason, either he or she was coerced or had some other motive – like joining a certain country club, or advancing in a certain financial firm. But no false god could ever quench the thirst of a Jew’s soul.

3. Idol Worship

With this in mind, when was the last time you or anyone you know worshipped an idol? When was last time you or anyone you know was even *tempted* to worship an idol?

Really, have you ever woken up in the morning with the urge to bow down to a stone or pray to a tree? Has anyone in your family ever wanted to praise the sun? Does anyone you know stop what they’re doing to supplicate a mountain?

And yet, in this week’s Torah reading, we find the following divine decree in a very prominent place. It is no less than the second of the Ten Commandments:

*You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness which is in the heavens above, or which is on the earth below, or which is in the water beneath the earth. You shall neither prostrate yourself before them nor worship them...*¹

Now, there are people in this world who do worship idols – take Christians and their crisscrossed symbols or the Hindus and their plethora of graven imagery – but no Jew today is an idol worshipper.

¹ Exodus 20:3-5.

Most Jews today fall into two categories: believers in God or believers in nothing. Today, a Jew is either a believer or an atheist (or, if undecided, an agnostic).

So was this commandment really necessary? And even if it was, did it have to be inserted in such a prominent place as the second of the Ten Commandments?

4. Relevance of the Second Commandment

Okay, we have to concede that at the time of Egyptian bondage, and the following 1,500 years or so, pagan idolatry was the world norm, so perhaps at that time, the second commandment was essential to make it clear to the Jews that they were a monotheistic nation.

And perhaps we can also say that this commandment was relevant during all those years that the Christians persecuted Jews and tried to force them to bow to their statues and accept their false “human god.”

But today, in 2015, no Jew is being forced to convert to any religion, idolatrous or otherwise. So how then is the second commandment relevant to our modern, progressive times? How is this commandment a fundamental underpinning to our spiritual Jewish experience when most Jews have no desire to make graven images of idols – either in the heavens above or on the earth below?

And certainly no one will ever accuse a Jew of worshiping anything other than himself (or maybe his mother), so is there a need for this commandment today?

Jewish law seems to think so. Indeed, Jewish law – which permits violation of 99.9% of the Torah in order to save a life – actually requires that we give up our life rather than commit murder, rape and (you guessed it) idolatry.

The first two are pretty much understandable. But why is one required to sacrifice one's life rather than worship idols? Who really cares about a little bowing to a stone if a life is at stake? Who really cares if someone wants to foolishly serve a rock or a tree?!

The answer is that idolatry is not what we think it is, and every second of every day all of us are indeed tempted to worship idols!

Shocked? Let me continue...

5. Roman Philosophers and Jewish Sages

There is an entertaining Talmudic passage² that may help us in our quest to understand what exactly idolatry is all about. This is what it says:

Roman philosophers asked the Jewish sages, "If your God doesn't want idolatry why does He not just eliminate it?"

The sages replied, "If people worshipped something that the world did not need, He would eliminate it. However, they worship the sun and the moon and the stars and the planets – should God wreck His universe because of fools?!"³

The Talmud then continues:

A certain philosopher asked Rabbi Gamliel: "It is written in your Torah, '*For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God.*'⁴ Why is He jealous of the worshippers and not the worshipped?"

² Avoda Zara 54b.

³ The Tosfos Yom Tov, R' Yom Tov Lipman Heller (1579-1654), asks a great question: Why didn't the Talmud follow up with an obvious question, "*Why didn't G-d destroy the fools?*" The Tosfos Yom Tov answer: in order to maintain Bechirah Chafshit, Free Will, God did not excise the fools. People have the choice to be fools or not.

⁴ Deuteronomy 4:24.

Rabbi Gamliel said to the philosopher: "I'll tell you a parable. To what is this analogous? To a king of flesh and blood who had one son, and this son raised a dog that he named after his father. Whenever he would take an oath he would say, 'On the life of this dog, my father.' When the king heard this, was he angry at the dog or at the son? Of course he was angry at his son!"

[The philosopher was not convinced and cited the following incident:] "One time, a spark fell in our town and the entire city was incinerated, but a certain house of idolatrous worship didn't burn!"

Rabbi Gamliel replied: "I'll tell you a parable. To what is this analogous? To a king of flesh and blood, against whom a province rebelled. When he waged war, against whom did he wage war – against the living or against the dead? Of course he waged war against the living!"

The philosopher said: "Dog you call it, dead you call it – if so, let Him eliminate it from the universe!"

Rabbi Gamliel: "If people worshipped something that the world didn't need, He would eliminate it. However, they worship the sun and moon, the stars and planets, the rivers and glens – should He wreck his universe because of fools?!"⁵

6. What is Idolatry?

Idolatry is much more than bowing to a false god. Idolatry is taking one of God's creations and turning it into something that it is not. It is creating a "god" on our terms. Instead of recognizing that we were created in the divine image, it is creating a god in our image.

⁵ Avoda Zara 54b.

The world consists of countless creations. Each creation itself consists of countless parts and particles. The role of the human being is to reveal the Creator in all of creation, to uncover a Higher Truth in all things, to unveil the essence of every particle.

We do this by joining with the creations around us and performing divine actions – called *mitzvot*, a word which doesn't so much mean "commandments" as "connections." Every time we do a physical mitzvah, we are connecting ourselves to the Creator and connecting the essence of the physical creation to its divine source.

Say, when we eat kosher, we are revealing the essential spark in that food item and connecting it to the source of all things, the Creator of all creation.

This is true for everything else in the universe – minerals, plants, animals, etc.

Now, what happens when someone does the exact opposite: instead of revealing the Creator in all of creation, someone worships a creation as if it were the Creator?

This is called idolatry.

7. Present Day Examples

Let us consider some present day examples:

You send hundreds of emails a week. Say one of the people to whom you sent an email responded, but instead of responding to you, the person responded to your computer, "Dear Computer, thank you so much for your email..."

After all, the person received the email from your computer; he or she is simply ignoring the fact that it was you who pushed the computer's buttons to send the email.

Another example: A doctor delivers a healthy baby. Mazal Tov! The father of the baby is so delighted that after everyone leaves the delivery room, the father walks over to the doctor and for that matter, all the machines in the room – the cardiograph, the sonogram, etc. – thanks them all and hugs them and kisses them. Is this healthy?

It's not normal but we all do it in one way or another. We take God's creations and we make them our gods. We take money and focus our lives around it. We take power and do anything to acquire it. We run after love, we worship envy, we bow to our careers.

We take the secondary elements of life, and we turn them into our primary objectives. We take the means and see them as our ends. We thank the frying pan instead of the chef.

This is called idolatry.

And it is a cardinal sin because it is in effect self-worship, which lies at the root of all iniquity and injustice: Once you worship yourself and the objects that you value, once you bow to the creations of the world – then what follows is that you will worship, above all, yourself and your choices. But when you submit yourself and all of creation to the true Creator that brought everything into being, then you accept a higher authority to define what is right and what is wrong.

8. Philosophers' Question

So, the Roman philosophers asked: "Why doesn't the Creator simply remove all of these secondary things and leave only the primary, God Himself?"

And the wise sages answered: "If they worshipped something that the world didn't need, He would eliminate it. However, they worship the sun and moon, the stars and planets, the rivers and glens – should God wreck His universe because of fools?!"

God created the sun to be a tool supplying solar energy to the world, so that we can turn that energy into divine ends and reveal how the sun's magnificence is divine. The Creator created rivers so that we can use them to water the earth, produce crops and elevate reality. The Creator created money so that we can transact with each other, bring peaceful cooperation to peoples, support the needy, and change the world for the better.

If someone wishes to use the sun, the rivers, or money for foolish ends – if someone wishes to worship the money, the job, the clothing instead of seeing them as the utensils they really are – should God then destroy the world?

9. Foreign Service

In Hebrew, the term for idolatry is *avoda zara*, which literally means “foreign service.” We can dedicate ourselves to things that are in sync with who we are as Jews, or we can dedicate ourselves to things that are foreign to who we are.

We were born to achieve a purpose, so of course we must forfeit our life rather than forfeit our purpose. If someone God forbid says to a Jew – “I will end your life if you don't bow to me or to something meaningless” – the Jew must respond: “If I bow to you or to something meaningless, my life has already ended.”

When you wake up in the morning, what is the first thing you think about? Is it the Creator or your job? Most things in life are foreign to your innate being, to your soul. It is your task to transform them, not to worship them.

You don't serve money; money serves you in your service of your Creator. You don't need your job as much as your job needs you to fulfill your divine purpose and reveal the holiness in your work.

This is why it is fundamental (not just then, when idolatry was common and rampant, but also today) to have the second commandment,

You shall not have any other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness which is in the heavens above, or which is on the earth below, or which is in the water beneath the earth. You shall neither prostrate yourself before them nor worship them...

Everything on this earth, from the highest peaks *in the heavens above*, to the lowest granules of matter *on the earth below* is meant to reveal the first commandment, *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*, "I am the Lord your God." And we are never to short sell any of God's creations by worshipping them instead of elevating them to their true source.

10. The Second Commandment (Conclusion)

As our opening humorous anecdote illustrated, no Jew desires to worship a foreign substance. It is called *zara*, "foreign," because it isn't close, indigenous, native, or familiar to us.

When we look into our hearts and souls with honesty and clarity, we know that there is only One God, One Creator, who creates everything and ties everything together.

We also know that it is our job in this universe to reveal how everything in the world is indeed tied together.

As a practical suggestion, perhaps it would be good idea if each of us would commit in our own personal way to doing mitzvahs that reveal how all creations are united under the banner of One Creator. When you look at a flower or a tree, at a bird or a fish, think about the Creator that vivifies that creature.

When you are ready to partake in a meal, instead of indulging and "worshipping" your hunger or the food, think of the Creator that provided you with that food, ensure that this food is aligned with the laws of kashrut, recite a blessing on the food, use the energy you derive from the food to help others.

Same and even more so in our interactions with others. Perhaps we could invite Jews who are seemingly “strangers” to our synagogue or for a Shabbat meal – to come partake in our shared legacy. Or perhaps we could ask a Jew if he would like to put on *tefillin*, or if she would like to light Shabbat candles, which is after all their birthright.

Lest we feel uncomfortable, or worried about imposing upon another, remember that all Jews really desire this – in their heart of hearts – and would be thrilled at the offer. Even if one of them does not immediately accept, he or she will be touched to the core that we went out of our way to think about them.

This is the opposite of “foreign service.” This is the service of the soul. And this is how we can, and will, change the world!

Shabbat Shalom!