

Drasha for Parashah Vaetchanan, July 29, 2023

This week when we observed Tisha B'Av, commemorating the destructions of the Temples, it is hard to feel safe. From the increasing effects of climate change with fires raging out of control and devastating heat waves, to threats to democracy from demagogues, autocrats and politicians trying to avoid jail, we can't avoid feeling that the foundations of our world are cracking. Spiritually and psychologically, this is also true, as according to Rabbi Alan Lew, our road to the Yamim Noraim began with Tisha B'Av. I can't address the external world, but I can help us look inward.

In this parashah, we again recite the 10 commandments. The Ten Commandments are important, not only to us, but to our American society. What I noticed this time, and what I want to look at today are the first three commandments, but especially idolatry, or what it means to have no other gods before God. Jews today do not often focus on idolatry. That seems to be the purview of Christian fundamentalists however it was also a matter of concern to the rabbis of the Talmud and Maimonides, though mostly focusing on the prohibition from making graven images. The Tractate Avodah Zarah, Strange worship, devotes a lot of thinking about how to live in a world with idols, and does not equate the destruction of idols as the destruction of idolatrous thinking. Surely every statue of Zeus or Aphrodite was not viewed as God incarnate, but as a means to help focus worship.

Rabbi Avi Killip of Hadar gives credence to the idea of the idol as a focus point for worship, not of God but of ideologies which usurp and replace God. She notes that Confederate statues today are focus points for an ideology of white supremacy. She quotes Rabbi Aviva Richman who wrote the following in August 2017:

“Seeing the conflict that arose over removal of confederate statues in Charlottesville and the ensuing aftermath, what is perhaps most striking to me after studying the laws of idol smashing this summer is that those monuments, I grew up with are not in fact nullified; there are still people who consider what these statues represent to be a sacred part of their identity and inheritance.” Smashing the idols; removing the statues, renaming the buildings – these actions are not sufficient to nullify idolatry, but they do call it out and name it.

Tish Harrison Warren, an Anglican priest, wrote in the New York Times several months ago about another sort of secular idolatry – a cultural faith that guns provide security and safety. Guns then become sacred objects and gun ownership an inalienable right and a part of the identity of gun owners. She is careful to point out that secular idolatry is not a flaw only on the right side of the political spectrum – the common thread being a disordered worship of power and of individual rights. She notes that ideas like freedom and individual rights can be good and valuable but become idolatrous when they harm others because they are valued to the exclusion of other goods.

The notion that idolatry encompasses ideologies and not just physical objects is implied in the commandment: You shall have no other Gods before me. Abraham Joshua Heschel has defined an idol as “any God who is mine, but not yours”. He stated in a lecture at a Christian seminary, that “religion is a means, not an end”. And “To assume that there is only one valid way of responding to God is to equate a religious means with the divine end.” He writes in his book *Man is not Alone* that “To rely on our faith would be idol-worship. We have only the right to rely on God “ This leads me to conclude that to use our faith to justify heinous acts is truly idolatry. We see this today with Christian Nationalism, which is being decried by many Christian church leaders as a political ideology whose leaders worship a God made in their own image. And we cannot point fingers given the image, from March of this year, of Israeli settlers praying Maariv after trying to burn down Huwara, a Palestinian village, as well what is being called a pogrom in June at Turmusa’ya, another Palestinian village. Many of our own rabbis have denounced this as hillul HaShem, and a worse way of taking God’s name in vain, than merely swearing.

Our Etz Chaim commentary states that the commandment to “not make for yourselves a sculptured image” can also be read to say, “You shall not make yourselves into an idol and come to believe that you are God”. This is a topic much discussed by Christians, at least as suggested by my Google search on the topic of idolatry. There were many articles on the danger of the worship of self, which is found to include the altar of materialism and the acquisition of money and possessions. It also includes the drive for career success as it feeds the ego, instead of focusing on moral or spiritual goals. And there is also the worship of the power of science to address all our needs – that through science, we can be

the masters of our fate. Materialism, workaholism, worship of science – all of these are ways that we try to convince ourselves that we are in control of our lives.

In the same vein, one reason that Idols are created and worshiped is so that people can feel that they have some control over God and God's actions; worship in that case is a transactional experience – If I sacrifice or offer this prayer to this God, I will gain something that I want. James Kavanaugh, a former priest, addressed this in a poem, implying that, if we only pray to God for individual needs, we are not treating God as God, but as “King of the Welfare Doles”. I am not saying that petition prayers are not valid – only that our prayers to God should not be transactional but based on an ongoing relationship. I am sure that we have all prayed to God for good outcomes from illness, accident, or other traumatic events which have befallen ourselves or others. We have undoubtedly also tried some form of bargaining – if this happens, I will be better, do better, etc. After all, even Jacob promised to build an altar and worship God, if God protected him on his journey and this was after his dream of the stairway to heaven! The point is that prayer can do so much more in our lives, if it is part of an ongoing relationship with God, however confusing that relationship can be.

This brings me to another passage from this week's parashah – the Shma. Shma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad. Translated by some as God is our God and is the only God. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer wrote in a drash this past week, that the Shma is a statement of love between God and the people of Israel. It is preceded liturgically by Ahavat Olam, a prayer about God's love for us. and followed by the V'Ahavta, instructions about how we can show our love for God, reminders that we are in relationship with God.

Returning to the issue of idolatry, Heschel understands the prohibition on physical representations of God because we, humans, are made B'Tzelem Elohim, in the image of God. We are the only images of God which are allowed. This is not the same as worshipping ourselves but recognizing that a spark of God exists in each of us. It then behooves us to treat every person as bearing the image of God. We should treat each human being with “the honor due to a likeness representing the King of Kings” (or in my words,) with at least the respect with which we treat the Torah, which represents the word of God. Think of the difference that would make.

While we know that God is not incarnate, we, as humans, have trouble praying to an invisible, omnipresent God. Our imaginations are limited. This was dramatically portrayed in the episode of the Golden Calf, to which God responded by manifesting as a cloud by day and a fire by night. We do not have that assurity today. As God is reported to have spoken to us, each in the way that we could hear, so most of us have an image of God in our minds when we pray. And the common cultural image that we start out with is that of an authoritarian, usually white, patriarch, most commonly invoked as Avinu Malkeinu – our Father, our King. This image gives comfort to many but has also led others to idealizing a white patriarchal society. We know that this is idolatry, but it is hard to eradicate it from our minds. We are made Btzelem Elohim- in the image of God and we, as Jews, are in covenant with God. Internalizing the image of a patriarchal cis gender male God excludes and delegitimizes most members of our community. But the Torah gives us a guide in the many names that are used for God – not many gods, but many names and metaphors. Elohim is used for the transcendent God; Adonai for when God is more personal. There is El Shaddai, the nurturing God of the breast. Our siddur points out that there is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – noting that we each call to the different aspects of God that we need in every moment. Rabbi Sandy Sasso uses this in her children’s book In God’s Name, in which every person calls upon God in a familiar image- parent, shepherd, farmer, etc. but all realize in the end that they are praying to the same God. God is One. Adonai Echad.

Feminists in the 1980s began to use Shekinah, the image of God which accompanies the Jewish people into exile. It is a feminine image and a protective one. Marcia Falk, in her Book of Blessings, also uses Source of Life which does not indicate gender, but function, as does the name: Healer of Broken Hearts. Our siddur uses Creator of All Flesh. Others believe that we should expand our metaphors for God to nonanthropomorphized images. While we are made in the image of God, God is not made in our image. To think so is to limit God. Tova Spitzer in her book God is Here states that we need different images for God in a world that is faced with climate change. She notes that the Torah has many metaphors for God that come from nature: water, wellspring, fire streams; cloud, Rock, and the Place, to name a few. We should take these metaphors seriously.

These nature images are not God but represent God's power and presence as powerful and dangerous, as well as positive and healing, necessary for life.

I am sure that many of us have sought out places such as Muir Woods, Tennessee Beach or other nature areas to pray and to feel closer to God than we usually feel in our urban areas. I had the privilege of visiting Iguazu Falls in between Argentina and Brazil. When I saw majestic water falls across the river as far as I could see and on either side of me, and I felt the spray on my face, I was overwhelmed by the sense of God's presence. I felt surrounded by God's majesty and burst into prayer in awe and gratitude for God's wondrous works. Wouldn't it be great if we could fully feel God's presence in our everyday lives. When we limit our images of God and fail to see God in all parts of our world, we risk destroying what we most value. I think that this is the reason, we are encouraged to recite blessings multiple times daily.

I have spoken today about how idolatry is more than statues and how we should not conflate the names we call God with the totality of God. But God has given us the name that God calls Godself - Yud Hay Vav Hay – God is what God is, or God will be what God will be. God meets us where we are and leads the way for us to come closer to where we need to be. Rivka Miriam, in our siddur, on page 205 captures this in her poem about the names by which we call God, based on our emotional states and needs at different moments in our lives. As our needs and understanding changes, our relationship with God changes too, if we are open to it.

As we prepare in the coming weeks to meet God in God's kingly aspect, may we come to recognize God in each other, in ourselves and in the world. In that day, may it be soon, then all shall realize the God is one and God's name is One.

Shabbat Shalom.