

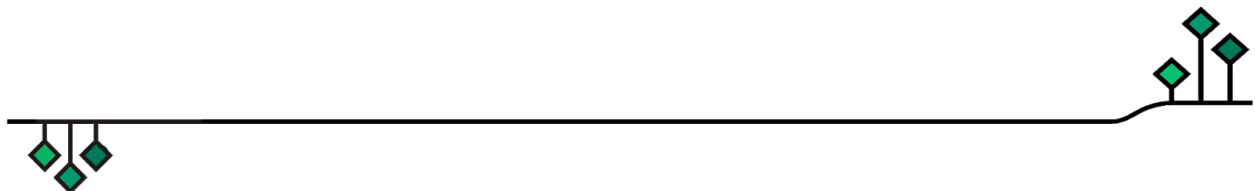
## What Can We Learn From the War on Idolatry?

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### Parashat Re'eih 5781

In the Bible, the ultimate conflict is between true worship of God and idolatry. Indeed, the Torah declares all out war on idolatry, and nowhere as totally as in our *parashah*. Yet, if we study the biblical record, it shows that all out war did not work at all. Since the Rabbis did succeed in overcoming idolatry among Jews, we should analyze the secret of their success and the reason for the Bible's failure.

In my forthcoming book, *The Triumph of Life*, I describe the intensity of the contradiction. God is the God of life, the One God Who loves life and sustains it wherever it is found. Idolatry takes something human—a project/idol/deity manufactured or generated by humans—and absolutizes it, but this finite, human artifact cannot sustain the infinity of life. In Rav Soloveitchik's view, when the dignity of life is anchored in a finite human foundation, then that same human power can take away or deny its irrevocable dignity. This undermines the unlimited, non-negotiable value of life. In my view, the Infinite God literally sustains all living by pumping vitality and energy into the fabric of universal life. No human creation, no finite



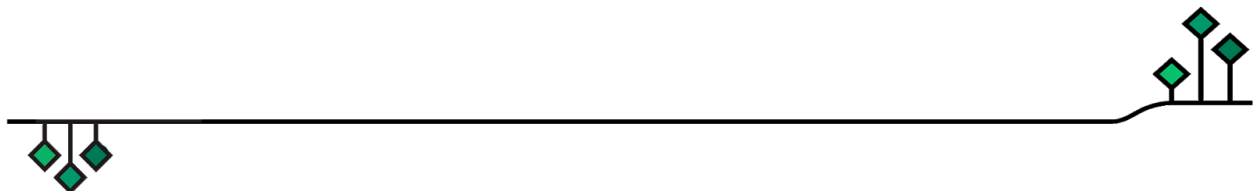
force can sustain life—so it shrivels and dies. From all these interpretations, it follows that idolatry is the religion of death.

The Holocaust offers an example of the absolute contradiction of Judaism and idolatry. In Nazism, a human Führer is elevated to the status of God—the one who decrees policies, decides what is right and what is wrong, determines who shall live and who shall die. But the Führer is only a human. The only way that the Führer can be infinitely wiser, infinitely more than any human, is by reducing the human to zero. This was done, starting with the Jews. In the process of reducing humans to zero value, in what Elie Wiesel calls the “Kingdom of Night,” the Kingdom of Death was created. In this world—especially in the concentration camps—all the forces and systemic interactions were designed to degrade and belittle the prisoners, to reduce their value toward nothing,<sup>1</sup> even as they were pushed toward death and finally murdered.

In Parashat Re’ei, the Torah confronts idolatry with all its guns blazing. “You shall utterly destroy all the places [where idolatry was practiced]... you shall overthrow their altars, break their pillars, burn their *asherim* [sacred trees] with fire, cut down the carvings of their gods, and wipe out their name from the place [they were worshipped]” (Deuteronomy 12:3). The Torah warns Israel that, after God cuts off the idolatrous nations, “Do not inquire after their gods, [asking:] how did these nations serve their gods?” Because “every abomination... which [God] hates have they done for their gods, even their sons and daughters they have burned in the fire for their gods...” (12:30-31). Note that here too idolatry is identified with

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<sup>1</sup> The Nazis literally worked on reducing the cost of killing Jews and switched from bullets to lower-cost gas and then from carbon monoxide to Zyklon-B, a cheaper pesticide. In the summer of 1944, they brought down the cost of killing to half a penny per person. See Irving Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire,” in Eva Fleischner (ed.), *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* (Ktav, 1977), pp. 9-10.



death and the ultimate horror of sacrificing children—equal to killing a burgeoning life and ending a chain of life—in the name of worshipping the gods.<sup>2</sup>

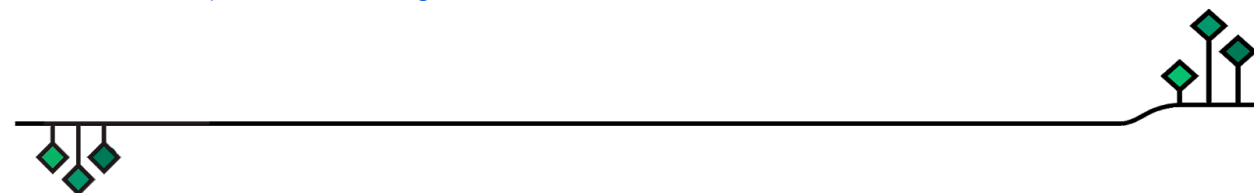
So total is the offensive against idolatry that our *parashah* gives three cases of potential idolatry and prescribes execution to end the threat. If “a prophet or dreamer of dreams” urges Israel to follow idolatry, he is put to death (13:1-6). If a wife or close relative urges you to serve foreign gods, “you shall not listen, nor shall your eye pity him... you shall kill him, your hand should be first” to put the idolatry seducer to death (13:7-12). Finally, if a whole city chooses to worship foreign gods, then the inhabitants of the whole city shall be put to the sword (13:13). The city and all in it shall be *herem* (destroyed completely with nothing taken for use by others), never to be rebuilt (13:17-18).

The call for destroying idolatry is terrifying in its intensity, and the policy of stamping it out comes across as bloodthirsty. The question is: Did this war succeed? One would think that the all-out war must have wiped out idolatry. The answer found in the biblical record is: no. In fact, the total war was largely ineffective. The biblical books of Judges and I and II Kings show that the Israelites regularly, continuously, turned to neighboring idolatrous religions. The repeated divine punishments and sending of oppressors to grind down the Jews led to periodic repentance as the Israelites turned back to God. Unfortunately, repentance was often followed by backsliding and a new cycle of oppression and punishment.

Why did the war on idolatry fail? One contextual reason is that idolatry was embedded in the cultural consensus surrounding the Israelites, so they found it natural to believe in the

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<sup>2</sup> On the importance of the chain of life in the Torah, see my essay on Parashat Pinḥas, “The Chain of Life,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/chain-life>.



efficacy of a Baal who brought rain, crops, and blessings in return for idol worship. There is also a more global reason: Coercion and force—even all-out violence—rarely succeed in changing minds, or turning people’s hearts in a more constructive direction.

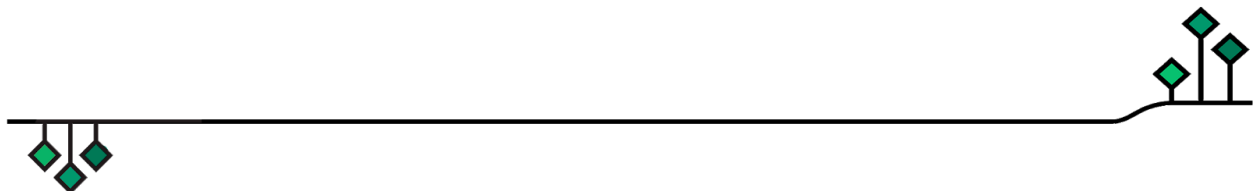
Idolatry was finally defeated in the age of the Rabbis.<sup>3</sup> They accomplished this goal, first and foremost, by educating the Jews to love God and Jewish worship. In biblical times, the Israelites were mostly an ignorant peasantry, religiously compliant largely due to God’s awesome miracles and interventions. However, such people could be easily impressed by pagan gods’ displays of power, as reported by their believers or as interpreted in those cultures. The Rabbis educated the people to understand what is true divinity and the good life. With their new understanding, the people’s minds were engaged and they were less credulous and less open to the seduction of other gods and religions. The Rabbis made *talmud torah* (the study of Torah) a central *mitzvah* in Jewish life. Rabbinic Jews turned less to God as maker of miracles. Instead, they were taught to find holiness and the sacred in every aspect of life, and that “*olam ke-minhago noheg*,”<sup>4</sup> that the world runs by a natural order, and that “bribing” God—or the local gods of nature—is not the way to get a good crop.

The Rabbis were helped by the spread of Hellenistic culture, which was more sophisticated. A somewhat greater sense of a scientific universe, and a more abstract understanding of a Creator God, weakened the credibility of the pagan, idolatrous religions. In short, the Rabbis

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<sup>3</sup> See Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 84a. The Rabbis spoke of finally destroying the evil urge to idolatry after the Destruction of the Second Temple. I shall not discuss here the fanciful *aggadah* of how the evil imp/urge of idolatry is captured and imprisoned—only to discover that without the evil urge, many important civilizational activities will not take place.

<sup>4</sup> See Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 54b. For more on the purpose of this idea in religious life, see my essay on Parashat Noah, “Covenant,” available here: [www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenant](http://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenant).



reacted with good educational policies, and were able to take advantage of the changing culture, in order to erase the credibility of idolatry.

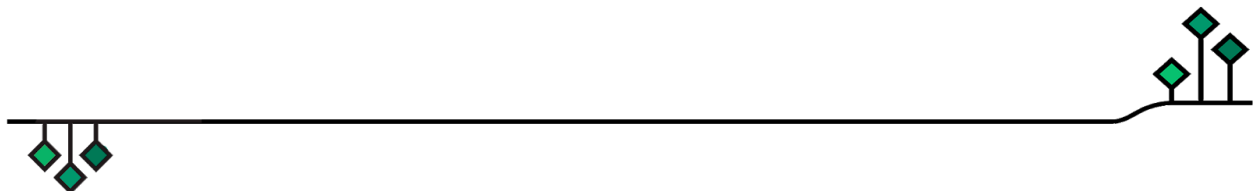
The Talmud captures the reality that the change of culture enabled the Rabbis to overcome the appeal of idolatry and other alternate religious ways. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 102b) tells of Rav Ashi<sup>5</sup> announcing a coming lecture on three kings who were great sinners—they turned to idolatry—but “they were Torah scholars like us.” That night King Manasseh, the worst of the idolatrous kings, appeared to Rav Ashi in a dream and angrily demanded: “By what right do you claim that you and your colleagues are equal to us in Torah learning?” In the dream, Manasseh shows him that he was a greater scholar than Rav Ashi and his colleagues.<sup>6</sup> Rav Ashi is thus persuaded that Manasseh and the other Kings were far greater scholars than his own generation. He then asks: “Since you were so wise [in Torah], what is the reason that you engaged in idol worship?” Manasseh replies: “Had you been there [in my time], you would have taken and lifted the hem of your cloak and run after me.” The wicked king insists that Rav Ashi would have the same fierce desire to engage in idol worship, due to its appeal and the fact that it was the consensus faith.

The lesson of the historical record of idol worship confirms a truth that is the cornerstone of democracy. Coercion and force can evoke submission and fellow travelling, but education and voluntary understanding evokes a true loyalty and a deeper commitment. That is why democracies outlast dictatorships. Soldiers in democratic armies fight harder, and put their lives more fully at risk, because they believe in their cause and identify with their political

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<sup>5</sup> He was one of the greatest of the Amoraim (sages of the Talmud, 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries). Traditionally, he is ascribed the role of putting together the Gemara, although modern scholarship has shown that this is not the case. Even so, the fact this traditional picture arose gives a sense of his immense stature.

<sup>6</sup> This follows the Talmud’s aggadic approach in which all biblical figures—including warriors, judges and kings—are re-imagined as Torah scholars. This effect is sometimes called “Rabbinization.”



community. Taxpayers in democratic countries pay a higher percentage of their tax obligations than do citizens in dictatorship or authoritarian systems. People feel a greater dignity and a greater sense of self-investment when they are able to influence their system, and their views are heard and respected. Voluntary acceptance leads to a higher level of commitment.

Even God had to learn this lesson. God was not able to stop the Israelites' attraction to idolatry by force. Perhaps this explains the stages of the covenant. In the second stage, God self-limits, gives up much of the divine powers of coercion, and invites humans to take on more responsibility.<sup>7</sup> This includes that humans become shapers and teachers of God's Torah, who must win their following through persuasion and role-modeling. The Rabbis defeated idolatry where the Torah failed, because they did not rely on force or coercion. Autonomous people are the most committed to the causes they accept. This is the great discovery and application of the war against idolatry in our time.

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<sup>7</sup> For more on this transformation of the covenant over time, see my essay on Parashat Eikev, "The Great, Mighty, and Awesome God Isn't What S/He Used to Be," available here:  
<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/great-mighty-and-awesome-god-isnt-what-she-used-be>.

