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The Problem of Idolatry in the Rabbinic Mind: Fictions and Fears

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Digest

The problem of idolatry in the rabbinic mind is complex and difficult to decipher. Despite the fact that many scholars consider the issue of idolatry to be obsolete by the rabbinic period, the sages are stuck on idolatry as a real threat. This study seeks to find answers to the following question: what is the *real* meaning of idolatry in the rabbinic mind? Each chapter presents hypotheses with regard to the underlying significance of idolatry as portrayed in rabbinic literature.

Chapter One is an overview of the problem of idolatry in the rabbinic mind. What are the rabbinic attitudes toward idolatry? How important is the prohibition of idolatry in the hierarchy of rabbinic law? Is idolatry obsolete for the rabbis? Is the problem merely theoretical, or is there a practical concern? This chapter delves into the definition of the "error" of idolatry – is it the right worship of the wrong "god" and/or the wrong worship of the right God? What defines idol worship as a concrete or metaphysical phenomenon? Chapter One offers some suggested solutions to these questions.

Chapter Two discusses the notion that idolatry is the worst offense to God and Judaism. Judaism is defined in contradistinction to idolatry. The rabbis glorify God, and magnify themselves and their tradition, by vehemently condemning the practice of idolatry. In building fences around the Toraitic prohibition of idolatry, the rabbis are preserving the authority of their teachings, the sovereignty of God, and the integrity of the Jewish tradition.

Chapter Three introduces the idea that idolatry represents the gravest of transgressions in the rabbinic mind. The rabbis use metaphors of adultery and political

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Chapter One

An Overview of the Problem of Idolatry in the Rabbinic Mind

The Rabbinic Problem with Idolatry

I. Rabbinic Attitudes Toward Idolatry

The problem of idolatry in the rabbinic mind is complicated and difficult to define. From the biblical period, the rabbis inherit a tradition of vehement opposition to idolatry, although they do not necessarily inherit a clear definition of the parameters of idolatry. That is to say, "if Judaism speaks with a single voice on the evils of idolatry, it does not speak with a single voice on what idolatry is."[1] Therefore, the rabbis see it as their job to define the limits and boundaries of both idolatrous practice and idolatrous thought.

As Jacob Neusner points out, our religious rituals and actions are evidence of our theology.[2] The rabbis are staunch monotheists. As such, they despise idolatry, which they view as a threat and a toxin to pure monotheism. The rabbis use the term *avodah zarah* to refer to idolatry: strange worship. Halbertal and Margalit assert that "from their term for idolatry alone ('strange worship') we can infer the negative character the monotheists ascribe to the phenomenon. In the Jewish tradition a positive description of

[1] Seeskin, Kenneth. *No Other Gods* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, Inc., 1995) 16.
[2] Neusner, Jacob. *The Theology of Rabbinic Judaism: Prolegomenon* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 21.

idolatry is not only non-existent, it is forbidden."[3] Post-biblical names for idolatry are quite expressive of the rabbinic loathing of idolatry. In addition to *avodah zarah*, there are terms such as *avodat elilim*, 'worship of worthless gods,' and *avodat gilulim*, 'worship of heaps of excrement.'[4] Plus, the rabbis use terms for idolaters that reveal their fears of idolaters and idolatry. For instance, an idolater is called *kofer b'ikar*, one who goes against the Essence (God) or *poshet yad b'ikar*, one who puts forth his hand against the Essence (God).[5]

Not only is it forbidden to express or possess positive opinions about idolatry, the rabbis advocate an active condemnation of idolatry and all of its trappings. In the *Bavli, Sanhedrin* 63b, we learn: "R. Nahman said: All sneering is forbidden, except the sneering at idolatry, which is permitted." In this active condemnation, the rabbis create a genre of literature that is replete with venomous polemics against idolatry. George Foot Moore states that "the satire on idolatry which begins in the prophets is a commonplace of Hellenistic polemic; by its side are denunciations of it as the most heinous of sins, giving to the work of men's hands the honor that belongs to the God that made heaven and earth."[6] The rabbis fundamentally believe that any act or thought of idolatry represents a betrayal of the One True God. The rabbis constantly reiterate the dominance of God in juxtaposition to the futility of idols:

> Everywhere you find that the Holy One, Blessed be He, requites the kingdoms only after He first requites their idols and their princes. Thus

[3] Halbertal, Moshe and Avishai Margalit. *Idolatry*. Trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 7.
[4] Kogan, Barry S. "Judaism and the Varieties of Idolatrous Experience." *Proceedings of the Academy for Jewish Philosophy*. Novak, David and Norbert M. Samuelson, eds. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992) 170.
[5] Urbach, Ephraim E. *The Sages*. Trans. Israel Abrahams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) 28.
[6] Moore, George Foot. *Judaism*. Vol. 1. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927) 362-3.

> Scripture first says, "It shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord will punish the host of the high heaven on high" (Isa. 24:21), and after that, "And the kings of the earth upon the earth" (ibid.).[7]

God will win. The rabbis can, in fact, experience vicarious victory by association with the One True God. If they are faithful to God, then the rabbis too shall dominate the people around them.

Furthermore, the rabbis perceive that idolatry is associated with the ribald and licentious lifestyles which are contrary to Jewish observance. In their tireless attempts to dissociate themselves and their Jewish adherents from those types of behaviors, the rabbis engage in a battle of words against idolatry. The rabbinic attitude here represents an attitudinal transformation of the biblical attitude. Seeskin explains that "in the biblical period, idolatry was interpreted as a sign of Israel's unfaithfulness, and thus the prophets often compared it to prostitution or marital infidelity. In the rabbinic period, however, it became a sign of the ignorance and brutish nature of other peoples."[8] As is evidenced by Seeskin's teaching, the rabbis used idolatry to symbolize other serious sins. Idolatry represents the gravest of sins in the rabbinic mind.

Rabbinic xenophobia and fear of assimilation became manifest in their writings. The rabbis, in particular, view "the other" as foreign and silly at best, corrupt and dangerous at worst. Only idiots would worship idols: "pagan idols, the gods of other nations, were not only false, but deficient in the all-important area of existence. They simply did not exist; those who worshipped them had been deceived by demonic

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[7] *Yalkut*, Isa., 418; *Yalkut* Jer., 331.
[8] Seeskin 16.

powers."[9] Anyone who would be fooled into idolatry has been influenced by evil, according to the rabbinic view. Idols are futile and useless:

> "Should a people seek their god, one who is dead, on behalf of the living?" (Isa. 8:19). The verse may be understood, said R. Levi, by the parable of a man whose son disappeared and who went looking for him in a cemetery. A clever man who saw him asked, "Was your son who disappeared alive or dead?" "Alive." "You are the biggest fool in the world. It makes sense that those who are dead be sought among the living – but the living among the dead? Everywhere the living attend to the needs of the dead, but do the dead attend the needs of the living?" So, too, our God lives and endures forever. But the gods of those who worship idols are dead, as it is said, "They have mouths, but they speak not" (Ps. 115:5). Are we to leave Him who lives forever and prostrate ourselves before the dead?[10]

The rabbis characterize a person who would worship idols as "the biggest fool in the world." The difference between the One True God and the idols is best compared to the difference between the living and the dead. Our God lives, your "gods" are dead; we are wise and clever, you are the biggest fools in the world. The rabbis are not subtle. They often couch their intolerance for the other in their intolerance for idolatry. But, it is unclear whether the rabbis have greater disdain for the act of idolatry, or the idolater himself.

Despite the rabbis' clear and cutting hatred for idols, they concede that the "rules" of idolatry are somehow easier than the procedure for worshipping the High and Hidden God. People need theological aids. Idolatry is tempting in that it provides a concrete, corporeal picture of a god – it makes it easier for the worshipper to direct his thoughts and prayers toward the deity. "The idolater seeks to overcome the barrier between himself and his god – and it is irrelevant whether he is a monotheist or not – by creating

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[9] Scott, J. Julius, Jr. *Customs and Controversies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995) 64.

some means of communication."[11] The rabbis realize that a person could be a faithful and dedicated monotheist, but in striving to apprehend his God, he waxes idolatrous in his practices. So, again, the rabbis set boundaries which define the limits of idolatry. For example, there is much discussion in the Talmud about the use of art and ritual adornment. The problem, as Seeskin elucidates, is that "to the degree that art inspires awe, it can also become a rival to God. If people were asked whether the Ark *is* God, no one would have said yes. On the other hand, the Ark has one advantage God does not: people can see it."[12] Although the rabbis may wish that people had no need for physical, tangible theological aids, they bow to the inevitable. In the end, it seems that the rabbis would rather make rules that will be followed, than create stringencies to which their followers are unable to adhere.

II. Is Idolatry the Most Important Commandment in the Rabbinic Mind?

In order to understand the roots of the rabbinic fascination with idolatry, we must first examine the sages' attitude toward the Ten Commandments set forth in the Torah. Roger Brooks notes that despite the fact that the Ten Commandments are only mentioned specifically twice in the Mishnah,[13] rabbinic literature does contain material relevant to the Ten Commandments scattered throughout. Apparently, the framers of the Mishnah had no intent to analyze the Ten Commandments as a literary unit, but they do perceive

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[10] Leviticus Rabbah 6:6.
[11] Kochan, Lionel. "Towards a Rabbinic Theory of Idolatry." *The Jewish Law Annual* VIII (1989) 101.
[12] Seeskin 63.
[13] *M. Tamid* 5:1 and *Ta'anit* 4:6.

the content of the commandments to be of utmost importance.[14] There are two main issues of interest in the study of the Ten Commandments in rabbinic law. First, the content of the rabbis' moral arguments reveals the deeper principles of rabbinic theology. Second, is the mode of moral argument. The mode flows from the content and reinforces it with the mind of nascent rabbinism.[15]

Thus, the Ten Commandments become a very important issue for the rabbis. The second and third commandments deal with idolatry specifically. According to Steven Schwarzschild, "idolatry is easily defined. Anything is idolatry that violates the Second and Third commandments of the Decalogue....In less Biblical language, idolatry is the belief in, the worship of, and acting on the demands perceived to be issued by any god other than God."[16] The rabbis use the Decalogue as the basis for their authority to prohibit all forms of idolatry as *they* define it. The existence of the second and third commandments allows the rabbis to craft an entire body of literature condemning idolatry in its many different forms. Idolatry becomes an issue of greater proportion as the rabbis expand its significance: "Idolatry is as uniquely decisive in Judaism in a negative way as faith in God is in a positive way....That is why the sweep and the elaborate technical details of the prohibition of idolatry occupy the priority and go to the lengths that they do."[17] The problem of idolatry takes up a great deal of space in the rabbinic mind.

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[14] Brooks, Roger. *The Spirit of the Ten Commandments* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990) 40-42.
[15] Ibid. 115.
[16] Schwarzschild, Steven S. "De Idololatria." *Proceedings of the Academy for Jewish Philosophy*. Novak, David and Norbert M. Samuelson, eds. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992) 213.
[17] Ibid

Interestingly, scholars debate whether or not it is safe to say that idolatry is the *most* important commandment in the rabbinic mind. On the one hand, the rabbis' faith in God is the paramount issue; and, their faith is defined by the rejection of idolatry. On the other hand, the rabbis are reticent to assign a hierarchy to the revealed Law of the Torah. After all, who are they to decide which law God meant to be the most important? But, the rabbis emphasize that the Ten Commandments are central and paradigmatic.[18] In the end, Brooks concludes that the Decalogue is, in fact, the heart of Judaic theology, but the commandments in the Decalogue can be no more *important* than any other portion of revealed law.[19] In any case, the sages place enough emphasis on the problem of idolatry that we can assume it was at the forefront of the rabbinic mind.

III. The Use of Rabbinic Hyperbole in Defining Idolatry

The best example of rabbinic hyperbole as it relates to the problem of idolatry is found in many places in the Babylonian Talmud. That is: one must allow himself to be killed before committing idolatry, adultery, or murder.[20] We learn, however, that rabbinic principle of *pikuach nefesh*, saving a life, must be observed no matter what happens. Hence, it is difficult to believe that the rabbis really expect a human being to die before succumbing to forced idolatry. But, it seems that the rabbinic dictum was taken seriously.[21] Rabbi Akiva is the famous example of one who martyred himself rather than allowing his religious dignity to be threatened by the practice of idolatry. Akiva is held

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[18] Brooks 30, 35.
[19] Ibid. 36.
[20] See *BT Sanh.* 61b, 62b, 64a, 74a.
[21] Neusner, Jacob. *The Theology of Rabbinic Judaism: Prolegomenon* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 10.

up as an example of greatness – one who would go to the farthest extreme of human sacrifice to fulfill the commandment of his God (or His rabbis!).

Jacob Neusner emphasizes that rabbinic literature as a "collection" indicates cultural values and acceptance of ideas. The corpus of talmudic law communicates to us "what a group of people wished to preserve and hand on as authoritative doctrine about the meaning of the Mishnah and Scripture."[22] In this sense, the rabbis may have been using hyperbole to emphasize their teachings. What do the rabbis wish to communicate about idolatry? It must be avoided at all costs. The rabbis hoped to preserve this value with the appropriate emphasis – their condemnation is clear with their use of hyperbole.

Also, we know that the rabbis wrote their literature with certain assumptions. For example, the Mishnah is written as if the Temple were still standing. Thus, it is difficult to deduce the *reality* of practice and observance from reading rabbinic literature. Robert Goldenberg speaks to this problem:

> The rabbinic sages of late antiquity moved toward the abandonment of Israel's ancestral struggle with idolatry....they developed a model of society that in theory forbade anyone to worship deities other than Israel's; in practice, however, violations of this rule pervaded the ancient world but Jewish community under rabbinic leadership desisted from doing anything about them.[23]

The sages function in a clear tension. Much like in the case of allowing ritual adornment, the rabbis understand that people will inevitably transgress their doctrine. Whether they choose to fight the battle of disobedience is not clear in the rabbinic literature. Moreover, many scholars recognize that the sages write with the intention and

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[22] Neusner, The Theology of Rabbinic Judaism: Prolegomenon, 10.
[23] Goldenberg, Robert. The Nations that Know Thee Not (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 97.

expectation that their teachings are timeless – to be used in future generations for the preservation of Jews and Judaism: "all of talmudic literature was read as presenting a single body of authoritative teaching, any portion of which might be adopted as a suitable basis for Jewish life in other times and places."[24] The rabbis operate with a sense of pride and certainty about their authority.

IV. The Rabbinic Prohibition of Idolatry: A Problem of Belief or Practice?

Many scholars argue that despite the structure of rabbinic authority, the sages were not effective in controlling thoughts or beliefs. This is perhaps one of the rabbis' greatest religious frustrations, particularly in the realm of idolatry. The problem of idolatry has two facets: belief and practice. The sages recognize both of these facets, and they try to control both belief and practice. According to some, the attempt to control belief is fruitless and futile. "Supervising beliefs is important only as a manifestation of the wish to control people. There is no special importance to the beliefs involved – their content is secondary."[25] In other words, any legislative body that attempts to mandate belief is swimming upstream, so to speak. The only thing that is attained is a show of control. No one can control the thoughts of another person – even with the talents of rhetorical persuasion evinced by the rabbis.

Furthermore, we must ask the question of whether or not belief is controllable at all – even by the individual believer. "If belief is the sort of thing that is not under a person's control, then you can note the fact that someone holds an idolatrous belief, but

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[24] Ibid. 5.
[25] Halbertal and Margalit 164.

you cannot blame the person for this fact."[26] On the psychological side, one could argue that thoughts and feelings are not a matter of choice. How can one be punished for having beliefs? Do beliefs just appear in one's mind?

Of course, one would think that belief leads to practice, so forbidding idolatrous belief would necessarily eliminate idolatrous practice. But this is not the case. The rabbis struggle much harder against idolatrous practice than idolatrous belief. Remember, the sages are interested in preserving their authority, "and since it is authorities rather than beliefs that are involved, the essence of the struggle is against idolatrous practice rather than idolatrous belief, as it is easier to identify worship than belief."[27] The method of worship is well under rabbinic control.

V. Rabbinic Laws Against Idolatry: More Theoretical than Pragmatic

Roger Brooks defines rabbinic legalism as a process involving behavior and intellectualism.[28] Note, he does not describe the rabbinic lawmaking process as a legislative imperative. The Talmud is characterized by argumentation and debate. The midrash collections relate many different exegeses of the same verses. So, we are faced with the question: what is the purpose of rabbinic law? Brooks explains the rabbinic aims of Talmud Torah as follows: to shape an individual's character, to teach the student how to think, to provide a casuistic framework, and to spell out possible choices.[29] For the most part, rabbinic law serves a didactic purpose. Despite the legalistic language, and the threats of punishment outlined should the rabbinic word be disobeyed, the reader is

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[26] Ibid. 173.
[27] Ibid. 164.
[28] Brooks 22.
[29] Ibid. 19-20.

left unsure of the final conclusion as to the purpose of rabbinic law. In Brooks' analysis the sages were teachers first, and *maybe* legislators second. If the rabbis were primarily legislators, then we would have an easier time distilling their directives. Goldenberg articulates the confusion:

> It is...very difficult to extract from the rabbinic corpus a coherent statement of 'the rabbinic attitude' toward any important question. Any rabbinic statement can be contradicted by another, and most rabbinic statements come without clear indication of their original context or reference, such as might have helped to clarify their meaning.[30]

Legal codes are written to be clear and concise. The Talmud and Midrash are not concise, and often unclear. In the end, some scholars believe that the legislation to prevent idolatry was not considered practical,[31] but educational and polemical.

The Errors of Idolatry in the Rabbinic Mind

I. The Right Worship of the Wrong "God" or the Wrong Worship of the Right God

The definition of idolatry is debated by the rabbis. Some of the rabbinic literature indicates that the rabbis were concerned that Jews would commit the ultimate sin of using exclusively Jewish rituals to worship the gods of the idolaters. Other selections of rabbinic writings suggest that the rabbis were concerned about Jews actually worshipping God in the wrong way. "The adjective in 'strange worship' has two senses. One is the strangeness of the object toward which the worship is directed, not the 'proper god' but other gods. The other refers to the method of worship...."[32] A person could violate the laws of idolatry by either worshipping the wrong "god" in the correct way, or

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[30] Goldenberg 81.
[31] Moore 363, n4.
[32] Halbertal and Margalit 3.

worshipping the correct God in the wrong way. Barry Kogan reiterates that there are two parts to the prohibition of the second commandment: first, forbidding the worship of any and all foreign divinities, and second, forbidding idolatrous worship of Israel's God.[33]

For example, the threat of the Egyptian gods was perceived by the rabbis of the Midrash. The rabbis were worried that Israelites might begin to worship Egyptian gods as if they were the One True God. Thus, the sages had to produce a ban on the deification of humans. Pharaoh was a particular example of this potential deification:

> Why did Moses meet Pharaoh by the water? That evil man would claim to be a god without human needs; therefore he would get up early in the morning [when no onlookers were around] and go down to the river to satisfy his [human] needs [for eliminating].[34]

The rabbis are fearful that Jews would ever consider anything other than God to have divine powers. This midrash represents the rabbinic illustration that no human can have any godly powers – even Pharaoh has to go to the "bathroom." Thus, treating any mere human as a god, worshipping anything other than God, constitutes idolatry in the view of the sages.

In the *Bavli, Sanhedrin* 61b, there is a dispute between Raba and Abaye over the definition of punishable idolatry:

> It has been taught; If one engages in idolatry through love or fear [of man, but does not actually accept the divinity of the idol], Abaye said, he is liable to punishment; but Raba said, he is free from a penalty. Abaye ruled that he is liable, since he worshipped it; but Raba said that he is free: only if he accepts it as a god is he liable, but not otherwise.

Raba's position is based upon the notion that one must actually accept an "idol" as a deity

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[33] Kogan 170.
[34] Exodus Rabbah 9:7.

in order to be punishable for the sin of idolatry. Abaye is more concerned about worship in its appearance, but Raba is more lenient. The issue at hand appears to be intention. Halbertal and Margalit speak directly to this issue:

> The first question is whether worship is constituted by intention – whether worship reflects belief and an internal relation to the object of worship – or whether it is completely defined by ritual actions, with no importance attached to the intentions accompanying the act of worship.[35]

Abaye would say that the intention is of no consequence – any ritual act of worship that appears to be directed toward anything other than the One True God is idolatry. Raba disagrees. Raba believes idolatry must include intention – "an internal relation to the object of worship."

II. What Defines Idol Worship?

Idol worship itself is subject to extensive discussion. What exactly constitutes idol worship? In the Mishnah tractate of *Sanhedrin*, the sages strive to develop a working definition of the varieties of idol worship. Customary worship is defined by worshipping an idol the way pagans do – behaving like the pagans toward a pagan object. Temple worship is defined by worshipping an idol in the same way that one would worship God. In other words, offering sacrifices or libations according to the Jewish custom, but directed toward another "deity" – that would be an idolatrous act. Prostration is yet a third type of idol worship that is performed by bowing down with at least the knees and head touching the ground. Prostration before an idol is considered a form of idol worship by the rabbis of the Mishnah.

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[35] Halbertal and Margalit 202.

Throughout history, Jews have confronted "other gods." The presence of idols and idol worshippers in the Israelite midst has prompted a good many questions: Are other gods "real," or is their worship based only on delusion? If they are real, are they demonically evil, or merely God's own subordinates receiving well-intentioned honor they did not deserve? Gentile peoples have worshipped other gods for centuries; is such worship a legitimate ancestral way of life for *them*, or was the worship of other gods always wrong for everyone? If the latter, do those who maintain such worship do so out of innocent error or perverse wickedness? If the former, would those committed to God try to get everyone to come along?[36] Additionally, we might ask of the sages, "do those who forbid the worship of other gods deny their existence, or do they admit their existence while forbidding their worship?"[37] Of course, all of these questions are complicated.

Unfortunately, we cannot glean uniformly consistent answers to these questions. As is well proven by the dispute in *Sanhedrin* 61a stated above, the rabbis do not come to consensus even for the sake of the authority of their own ordinances. The Midrash and Talmud go to great lengths to convince us that any "other god" is nothing but a fictitious construct; "the idol has no reality."[38] But, at the same time, by devoting so much time and energy to combating the power of these "gods," the rabbis are tacitly lending legitimacy to their "power" – even if their only power is the deceptively alluring lifestyle that accompanies idolatry. The sages are divided on the question of whether idols are

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[36] Goldenberg 1-2.
[37] Halbertal and Margalit 182.
[38] Urbach 25.

"demonically evil." Some sages are more relaxed about the Gentile practices that surround them; some are more threatened, and therefore, engage in more proselytizing. The individual chapters of this study will include a close examination of the rabbinic opinions on these and other controversial subjects.

III. Idolatrous Transgressions

Philo, a contemporary to some of the sages, records Jewish history and culture of his time. He establishes "grades" of idolatrous violation:

1.) Those who worship the heavenly bodies

2.) Those who worship humans as demigods

3.) Those who worship images which they themselves have made

4.) Worst of all, those who worship the gods of Egypt - mere animals - the worship of which is barely conceivable[39]

The rabbis, who may have observed many of the same practices as Philo, also are particularly interested in defining the sin of idolatry. The rabbinic mind seeks categories into which idolatrous transgressions can be placed. Lionel Kochan explains the three main categories of idolatry:

1.) The idolatrous practices that distract from God

2.) The idolatrous practices that suggest idolatrous action

3.) The idolatrous practices that lend themselves to false doctrine[40]

Let us look at examples from these three categories. In the first category, the rabbis discuss iconography and synagogue art. Does the use of ritual embellishment add to or

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[39] Goldenberg 52-3.
[40] Kochan, "Towards a Rabbinic Theory of Idolatry," 102.

detract from the worship of God? The rabbis set limits on the use of ritual adornment so as not to transgress into idolatrous practices that distract from God. In the second category, the rabbis are strict about restricting the way in which ritual adornment is used. For instance, it is verboten to create any ritual object depicting a human form. Human forms smack of idolatrous worship – this appearance must be avoided completely. Similarly, "it is somewhat akin to the figures on a fountain with the faces of idols where one does not bring one's mouth close to their mouth and drink, for it would seem like kissing them."[41] The third category is best exemplified by the use of the signs of the Zodiac in synagogue decor.[42] Sites such as Beit Alpha exemplify this phenomenon. As far as the rabbis are concerned, the signs of the Zodiac are "false teaching" because the surrounding cultures hailed the power of the sun, moon, and stars as divine.

In the *Bavli, Shabbat* 72b, the rabbis discuss the transgression of idolatry. The following passage refers back to the dispute between Raba and Abaye of *Sanhedrin* 61a: how can one be culpable for the sin of idolatry? What does the sin involve? The rabbis decide the case thusly:

> Now, how is an unwitting and unintentional transgression of idolatry possible? Shall we say that one thought it [sc. an idolatrous shrine] to be a synagogue and bowed down to it — then his heart was to Heaven! But if he saw a royal statue and bowed down to it — what are the circumstances? If he accepted it as a god, he is a willful sinner; while if he did not accept it as a god, he has not committed idolatry at all!

Suppose a person happens upon a building. It is the time to pray, and the building looks like a synagogue. So, the person takes out his prayerbook and faces toward the building;

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[41] Ibid. 103.
[42] Ibid.

and, in prayer, he bows toward the building. All the while, the man is praying to God, and assuming that the building is a synagogue. In the end, it turns out, the building is an idolatrous shrine! What is a person to do? In this case, the rabbis absolve him as making a practical error, but not an error of intention. He never practices actual idolatry.

But, what about a person who comes upon a royal statue and bows down to it? This is a more complicated case, since no statue could ever be confused with something to which it is acceptable to bow. His heart could not be to God while bowing down to an idol. But, he still may not have accepted it as a deity. In that case, the rabbis declare that this person has not committed idolatry. Now, we have a problem. Remember, the rabbis have declared that one must surrender his own life before giving in to idolatry. The rabbis may just fear that this use of rhetorical hyperbole might be taken seriously! How do they solve this problem? From the *sugya* in *Shabbat* 72a, it looks as though someone could literally bow down to an idol - without actually accepting the idol as a god - and be innocent of the sin of idolatry. In other words, if idolatry was forcibly imposed on a person, that person would not be guilty of idolatry. This is very helpful to know! It is only unfortunate that all of the martyrs, such as Rabbi Akiva, were not aware of this ostensible escape clause.

Is Idolatry Even a Real Problem in Rabbinic Times?

I. Idolatry Has Been Uprooted - It is No Longer a Problem

A great deal of textual evidence suggests that, in fact, idolatry was not a tangible threat at the time of rabbinic writing. Even in the intertestamental period, some literature

reveals that idolatry had been destroyed in the midst of the post-biblical Jews. For instance, the apocryphal book of Judith recounts:

> Never in our generation, nor in these present days, has there been any tribe or family or people or town of ours that worships gods made with hands, as was done in days gone by. That was why our ancestors were handed over to the sword and to pillage, so they suffered a great catastrophe before our enemies. But we know no other god but Him (Judith 8:18-20).

This type of account would appear to inform us of the non-existence of idolatry, even before the sages' time. Halbertal and Margalit confirm the teachings in the book of Judith:

> The fight against idolatry, which was a central theme in biblical religion, disappeared during the period of the Second Temple. 'The temptation for idolatry was slaughtered,' records the Talmud, and a legend tells that the Rabbis of the Great Assembly shut it up in a barrel.[43]

Dorff speaks about the "historical fact that after the Maccabees, there was little tendency on the part of the Jews to succumb to idolatry in its physical forms."[44] After all, the rabbis themselves teach, "God created two inclinations in the world, that toward idolatry and the other toward incest; the former has already been uprooted, [but] the latter still holds sway."[45] In this selection, the rabbis themselves make the bold statement that

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[43] Halbertal and Margalit 2.
[44] Dorff, Elliot N. "In Defense of Images". Proceedings of the Academy for Jewish Philosophy. Novak, David and Norbert M. Samuelson, eds. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992) 131.
[45] Song of Songs Rabbah 7:8.

idolatry has been uprooted. Not only do the sages consider the problem to be eradicated, but Barry Kogan states that idolatry had even lost its temptation.[46] A vast majority of scholars all concur on this point: no one was worried about a real threat of idolatry during the rabbinic period.[47] In the *Bavli, Chulin* 6b, we read: "Surely Asa and Jehosophat destroyed every form of idolatry in the world!" So, of course, we are left with a very perplexing situation: why would the rabbis spend so much time and energy in their own writings preventing and punishing the practice of idolatry?

The rabbis, in their tireless commitment to anachronism,[48] combat the problem of idolatry – even if it is not *totally* necessary. For instance, in the *Bavli, Avodah Zarah* 55a, the rabbis discuss the problem of whether or not idolatry is efficacious – and what should be done if the community is fooled into faith in idols:

> [An Israelite named] Zunin said to R. Akiba: 'We both know in our heart that there is no reality in an idol; nevertheless we see men enter [the shrine] crippled and come out cured. What is the reason?' He replied, 'I will give you a parable: To what is the matter like? To a trustworthy man in a city, and all his townsmen used to deposit [their money] in his charge without witnesses. One man, however, came and deposited [his money] in his charge with witnesses; but on one occasion he forgot and made his deposit without witnesses. The wife [of the trustworthy man] said to [her husband], "Come, let us deny it." He answered her, "Because this fool acted in an unworthy manner, shall I destroy my reputation for trustworthiness!" It is similar with afflictions. At the time they are sent upon a man the oath is imposed upon them, "You shall not come upon him except on such and such a day, nor depart from him except on such and such a day, and at such an hour, and through the medium of so and so, and through such and such a remedy." When the time arrives for them to depart, the man chanced to go to an idolatrous shrine. The afflictions plead, "It is right that we should not leave him and depart; but because this fool acts in an unworthy way shall we break our oath!" This is similar to what R. Johanan said: What means that which is written, And sore and

[46] Kogan 175. See also *Talmud Bavli, Yoma* 69b.
[47] Halbertal and Margalit 2, 167; Seeskin 16; Kogan 171; Urbach 22, 23, 479;
[48] Goldenberg 85.

> faithful sicknesses? (Deut. 28:59) — 'Sore' in their mission and 'faithful' to their oath.

The rabbis use the parable about the illness often in their literature, because many people would depend on superstitious and idolatrous practices to lift them out of dire straits. The rabbis need to make the point that God's divine plan determines the arrival and departure times of an illness. If a person enters an idolatrous shrine to pray for the illness' cure on the very same day that the illness is scheduled to depart anyway, that person might mistakenly believe that his trip to the idolatrous shrine was efficacious. But, of course, that cannot be. In the end, any goodness that is granted to humanity is the act of the One True God. Idolatry should not be an attraction.

II. Idolatry Has Not Been Uprooted - It Remains a Real Problem

The mere presence of the rabbinic obsession with idolatry indicates that the problem of idolatry - at least in the imaginations of the sages - has not been eradicated. In fact, the threat of idolatry is very real in the rabbinic mind. Max Kadushin cites Saul Lieberman's reminder that there were Jews in the rabbinic period who became idolaters "under duress or for lucrative reasons."[49] These Jews were only human; they were affected by their surroundings. Even the most faithful Jews were influenced by the cultures in which they lived. If the other cultures were not "idolatrous" in the literal sense, the rabbis were still aware of the strong propensity for the assimilation of their followers.

In truth, the neighboring cultures were not idolaters in the strictest sense:

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[49] Kadushin, Max. The Rabbinic Mind. 2nd ed. (New York: Blaisdell Publishing Company, 1965) 349, n39.

> Polytheism did not confront them, however as a theoretical pluralism of gods – in *theory*, most educated Greeks in that age were not pluralists – but practically as the worship of a multiplicity of gods represented by images or, as among the Egyptians, by living animals. Idolatry was the universal concomitant of polytheism, and the Jews made no difference between them.[50]

The problem for the rabbis was the "otherness" of those who practiced different religions. Even if the idols were not fetishes, or if people were just polytheists without idols (i.e., worship of the sun, moon, and stars), the rabbis were disdainful.

Additionally, the scholars who assert that idolatry had been uprooted are speaking of idolatry in its *physical* forms – "the rabbis clearly did not mean that psychological forms of idolatry had vanished, for human beings in all ages have made a whole host of objects of finite worth their gods. They may not physically bow down to them or even call them gods, but they surely treat them as such with equally devastating effects."[51] The rabbinic fixation on the problem of "idolatry" - in whatever form they perceived it - betrays their worry. Urbach explains that "the extreme gravity ascribed to slander and the retribution attached to it simply testify that this sin was very widespread at all times."[52] Is this not a principle that could similarly be applied to the problem of idolatry? Idolatry, in the rabbinic literature, is given the dubious honor of the gravest of sins. Could it not be assumed, too, that the extreme gravity ascribed to *idolatry* and the retribution attached to it simply testify that this sin was very widespread at all times? The rabbinic attitude toward idolatry appears to testify to its prevalence.

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[50] Moore 362.
[51] Dorff 131.
[52] Urbach 355.

In fact, historical evidence supports this hypothesis. Archaeologists have uncovered a Jewish grave in *Beit Shearim* from the Mishnahic period with a relief sculpture of Helios, the sun god. Archaeologist Nachman Avigad posited that this could be an innocent decoration, ignorant of meaning. But, Erwin Goodenough strongly disagrees, calling the grave an expression of a living symbol.[53] Knowing the archetype of the human condition, it seems unlikely that the Jews who constructed this ornate grave would have no concept of the significance of Helios as an adornment. Just living in Hellenistic culture would be sufficient to absorb the meaning of such a symbol. The question arises: do the Jews blindly get lured into the practices of the surrounding cultures, or is there a conscientious choice to betray rabbinic teachings? Of course, the answer is likely to include some of both.

After all, starting with the biblical account, we observe a historical pattern of Israel falling into sin[54] – a stiff-necked, if not a slightly rebellious people from the outset. But, perhaps it was just a process of giving in to a seductive temptation to fit in with the neighbors:

> The [Jewish] temptation to yield a little bit and offer some perfunctory show of worship must have been constantly present and sometimes irresistible. Even when technically excused from any obligation to take part, individual Jews must often have been inclined to bend. Rabbinic authorities evidently hoped that by taking a strong line and placing every possible obstacle in the way of such compromises they could hold them to a minimum.[55]

In this sense, while the rabbis surely hoped that the problem of idolatry had been

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[53] Halbertal and Margalit 75.
[54] Scott 58.
[55] Goldenberg 95

eliminated, that hope may have been a fantasy. So, their plan of attack is to try to minimize the effects of assimilation. To that end, the rabbis drive a hard line against idolatry, both in principle and in practice.

Summary:

The problem of idolatry in the rabbinic mind is not an easy one to define. The rabbis have undoubtedly negative attitudes toward idolatry and its many implications. Some scholars make the persuasive argument that idolatry is the most crucial commandment in the rabbinic mind. The rabbis use their trademark rhetorical technique of simile and hyperbole in order to communicate the gravity and severity of the sin of idolatry. The rabbis do not reveal whether or not they believe it is possible to mandate belief. In the meantime, they focus most of their energy and attention toward action oriented prohibitions. Historical uncertainty regarding the "real" threat of idolatry begs the question of whether the rabbis created legislation against idolatry for practical application or merely for theoretical argumentation and didactic explanation. Despite the contradictory evidence of the obsolescence of idolatry, the rabbis are endlessly interested in the problem. The following chapters will delve deeper into the many facets of the problem of idolatry in the rabbinic mind.

Chapter Two

Idolatry as An Offense to God and Judaism

Defining God in Contradistinction to Idolatry

I. God in the Rabbinic Mind

The rabbis were very protective of God. Their love and commitment to the worship of God - in prayer, in study, in living a life of *mitzvot* - were manifest in their steadfast effort to avoid insulting their One True God. Idolatry, of course, was the most profound insult to God, and Judaism. In formulating their teachings, the sages were very clear about the difference between worshipping God, and not worshipping God. In many cases, the definition of God could be best expressed as "not idolatry." In other words, God was often defined in contradistinction to idolatrous practices.

First of all, we must endeavor to find the rabbinic view of God, for "the way people depict God says a great deal about the way they conceive God."[1] The rabbinic concept of God is a difficult one to pinpoint. Max Kadushin states, "the rabbinic concept of God...is neither a cognitive, nor a valuational, nor defined concept."[2] The rabbis do not set out to give us a clear framework within which we can even define God. But, what is clear to the rabbis is where the boundary is crossed into area which is "not God". In

[1] Seeskin 32.
[2] Kadushin 201.

keeping with Kadushin's explanation, we see that God is often defined by what God is "not". Furthermore, we see that "the notion of the alien, or false god shapes the concept of God."[3] We know that different ideas of God affect different ideas of *alien* worship of God. Without a doubt, this definitional problem is tautological. We cannot explain the rabbinic understanding of God without their concept of idolatry, and vice versa.

Another way to gain insight into the rabbinic understanding of God is to study the use of God's names in their literature. The rabbis use three main terms for God, which pervade the rabbinic literature. They are: *'El, 'Eloha,* and *'Elohim*. These terms occur particularly when the difference between God and the pagan deities is emphasized.[4] The problem is that the rabbis also use these three terms to refer to pagan deities. It is difficult to interpret whether these terms are used for a nominal or conceptual purpose.[5] The rabbis acknowledge this difficulty – while they wish they did not even have to use the word "god," since the pagans consider them to be gods,[6] they have to use the word. Certainly, it pains them to do so.

It may seem like a worthwhile task to compare how these terms are used in various rabbinic texts. But, in the end, the best parallel may be found in English, in the difference between god and God. Steven Schwarzschild clarifies that "God is one and universal. That is why he is called God....Any deity that can be called 'a god' is not God."[7] The words are the same, but the concept gets shifted with the usage, and the

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[3] Halbertal and Margalit 236.
[4] Kadushin 206.
[5] Ibid. 200.
[6] Ibid. 198
[7] Schwarzschild 215.

capitalization of the first letter. God and gods are everywhere in rabbinic literature – the sages are constantly fixated on this theological tension. Kadushin confirms that the God-concept in rabbinic literature is so ubiquitous – "presenting all the data on a valuational concept is quite like presenting all the data contained in the daily 'stream of consciousness.'"[8] God was an ever present main character in rabbinic stories.

The image of a "main character" betrays the fact that the rabbis do subscribe to a highly anthropomorphic image of God. God is like a human, but more so. God is wise, but the wisest man imaginable. God is powerful, but beyond even a superhero. And, God has emotions. The examples go on and on:

> God plaits Eve's hair and serves as best man for Adam: B. *Berakhot* 61a. God wears phylacteries and wraps Himself in a prayer shawl: B. *Berakhot* 6a; B. *Rosh Hashanah* 17b. He prays to Himself and studies the Torah during three hours of each day: B. *Avodah Zarah* 3b. He weeps over the failures of His creatures, visits the sick, comforts the mourner, and buries the dead: B. *Haggigah* 5b; *Gen. R.* 8:13.[9]

There can be very little doubt that the rabbis have a picture of God that looks very much like a religious Jew – very much like themselves! The rabbinic conception of God's anthropomorphism is important to accept in order to understand how the rabbis explain the problem of idolatry:

> A personal, anthropomorphic God is essential in order for it to be possible to speak of the sin of idolatry. If God were not a person, then it would be difficult to speak of betraying him. And if God had not created an attitude of loyalty toward him within the framework of a specific history of human relations, then there would not be any betrayal. It is this kind of God that gives the story of the Exodus from Egypt its importance as a basis for the prohibition of idolatry. The event of the Exodus is the foundation of the relation of obligation between Israel and God.[10]

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[8] Kadushin 46.
[9] Dorff 151.
[10] Halbertal and Margalit 21.

This "obligation" between God and Israel is built at the foundation of the relationship in biblical literature. Without an investment in this relationship, God could not be "offended" by idolatry, or "jealous," or even "angry." And the rabbis fear all of these responses from God – thus, they work hard to keep us away from idolatry.

II. Monotheism and Monolatry

There is a historical disconnect between the religion of the Bible, and the system created by the rabbis. The Israelite religion of the Bible was not monotheistic in the pure form we have today. In the process of the Israelites becoming weaned from a pagan culture, it appears that God made some concessions, allowing the Israelites to worship only God, while simultaneously acknowledging the existence of other gods. We know this based on numerous biblical passages, which the rabbis finesse in order to downplay the possibility of other "gods" at all. But, the quandary remains: does one God mean *only* one God? Steven S. Schwarzschild sifts through some of the confusion:

> The oneness and universality of God in turn provide us with one additional step in the direction of sorting out God from the gods (= idols). If we start out with 100 gods, eliminate 99 of them as idols or non-gods (cf. Hosea 8:6: "A craftsman made it, and it is a non-god;" cf. also ibid. 13:2, and Is. 44:10f.), and are thus left with only one – have we then achieved monotheism in our sense? Obviously not. What we have achieved is monolatry.[11]

Of course, the problem is that the rabbis detest the concept of monolatry, and they would never stand for it. So, they have to construct something more monotheistic – which, in turn, involves an even more vehement rejection of anything that sounds like the worship

[11] Schwarzschild 216.

of other gods. God is in a different category, and cannot be included in a class with other "gods."

It is in the Hellenistic period that we can begin to observe a transformation in thinking – away from monolatry, toward monotheism. Philo wrote that the tendency to deify natural objects, or even the handiwork of man, resulted from pride and an inability to form a connection to the One God. In fact, Philo linked polytheism with atheism, a profound insult indeed. In essence, if you choose "not-gods" you are choosing no god at all. Philo saw polytheism as "reflecting a refusal to honor the one true God, the only real Existent (*ho on*), uniquely worthy of receiving divine honors."[12] These are harsh words, a firm polemic against idolatry in proto-rabbinic literature.

Furthermore, we learn that there are really two kinds of monotheism percolating during the Hellenistic period, which is important in elucidating the rabbinic theology to come. The two kinds of monotheism are distinguished by the scholar Harry A. Wolfson as follows: "positive" monotheism involves recognizing the unity of God; "negative" monotheism necessitates rejection and avoidance of all other gods. It seems that the people of Judea were in conflict about these two different forms, as the transition from monolatry to monotheism took its course.[13] Wolfson argues that Jewish monotheism is necessarily negative. I would offer the counter-argument that in order to have "negative" monotheism, the "positive" component must be in place. Goldenberg concedes that there is a difference between Jewish *adoption* of these philosophies and Jewish *tolerance* of different customs. Rabbinic literature reveals a very low Jewish tolerance of anything

[12] Goldenberg 51-52.
[13] Ibid. 41.

other than the purest form of monotheism - to the exclusion of all other "tainted" theologies.

Monotheism is, indeed, paramount to Jewish self-definition. Truly, there are certain dogmatic tenets of Judaism which do not falter – monotheism is the best example of such a tenet.[14] The rabbis seem to take comfort in reassuring themselves and their readership that "anyone who believes in the one, unique, and commanding God cannot be an idolater."[15] In the end, it is important to note that both monotheism and idolatry went through identity changes throughout the ages,[16] but the interplay between them remains a source of constant tension.

III. There is Only One God

The prohibition of idolatry was meant to emphasize the oneness of God. In the words of Ephraim Urbach, "the concept of Absolute Unity was deemed climactic in the understanding of God."[17] Some scholars argue that this emphasis was the main purpose of the rabbinic tirade against idolatry: "the ban on idolatry is an attempt to dictate exclusivity, to map the unique territory of the one God."[18] There is only one unique God.

Israel is in a biblically based covenantal relationship - a protective treaty - with this one God. Even to concede to the existence of other gods is a profound insult to the exclusive Protector of Israel.[19] This protective image is developed even further by the

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[14] Scott 63.
[15] Schwarzschild 221.
[16] Seeskin 113.
[17] Urbach 21.
[18] Halbertal and Margalit 5.
[19] Ibid.

rabbinic image of *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim* – the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingship of God. The dominance of God's unilateral rulership is a recurring theme in rabbinic literature. We recite the desire in our daily prayers, based on rabbinic theology, that "the time will come when 'the idols will be utterly cut off' and when all the inhabitants of the world 'will accept the yoke of Thy Kingship.'"[20] Again, the oneness of God and the validation of idols are mutually exclusive.

The One God of the rabbis was personal as well as powerful. This notion of divinity was foreign to the philosophies prevalent in the Hellenistic world. The power of an invisible God who is immaterial stood in sharp contrast with the Hellenistic view of gods as impersonal powers found in people and objects. The innovation in rabbinic thought was the notion that God is a power that transcends the existential system – a God who is One, separate and above the physical world.[21]

The rabbis have an entire vocabulary for the oneness of God – and another vocabulary for those who negate that fundamental principle. One who denies the One God is called *kofer ba'iqar* – literally, one who denies the Essence or Root.[22] God is the Essence and Root of all things – to deny such a reality is ignorant and insulting. Another rabbinic idiom describing an idolater is *poshet yad ba'iqar* – one who puts forth his hand against the Root.[23] The rabbis were vehement about preserving honor and reverence toward the One God. Their faith propelled them to attempt to convince the world of the correctness of their vision.

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[20] Kadushin 197.
[21] Urbach 98.
[22] Ibid. 26.
[23] Ibid. 28.

The rabbis wanted everyone to accept the One True God: "The idea of only one God has for its corollary one religion.... The Jews were the only people in their world who conceived the idea of a universal religion and labored to realize it by a propaganda often more zealous than discreet..."[24] The rabbis were not delicate about the communication of their beliefs. This is expressed in Tannaitic midrash expounding the *Shema*: "The Lord is our God" – over us, "the Lord is One" – over all mankind.[25] Thus, the rabbis highlight the concept that it is not enough for us to accept God as *merely* the God of Israel. God is supreme over all people. Their indefatigable contention that God is one had far reaching effects on the nature of the Jews, as well as their perception of the nature of God.

The Effect of Idolatry on the People Israel

I. The Ten Commandments Define God's Relationship with Israel

Let us now look at how the rabbis view the relationship between God and Israel as it unfolds in the Bible. The rabbis recognize that, as a people, we entered into relationship with God at Sinai. Despite the patriarchal covenants made prior to this grand revelation, the Israelites were not bound by any real conditions until the Law was delivered to Moses, and in turn, to the people Israel.

The rabbis see the Ten Commandments as the pinnacle of the revelation, especially in defining our relationship to God. The rabbis appear to focus their attention on some of the Commandments, while allowing others to fall into a place of diminished

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[24] Moore 22.
[25] Urbach 21. (Taken from *Sifre* Deut. 31, *Sifre* Num. 134)

importance.[26] This is easy to understand, since their choice of thematic emphasis naturally reflects their social, cultural, and religious concerns. The rabbis use the biblical text as a veritable playground of prooftexts, and they often make their selections based on how the text will best serve their exegetical needs. This method certainly is not arbitrary; rather, the rabbis are quite artful and intentional as they engage in the process.

Of course, the opening words of the Ten Commandments already give the rabbis a smooth hermeneutical entry into crafting the relationship of God and Israel. The revelation begins with the assertion of God's presence and uniqueness. Roger Brooks indicates that the key to the opening appellation in the Decalogue is "to promote Israel's relationship to the one God and to prohibit idolatry."[27] The bottom line, according to the rabbis, is established from the very outset. Also, the rabbis see the recitation of the Ten Commandments as a renewal of the covenant between God and Israel. In fact, the *Shema* represents a recitation of sorts – it is a summation, in prayer form, of the first two commandments.[28]

The Ten Commandments become very important in the rabbis' understanding of our history and culture as well. The process of revelation grew to symbolize much more than one singular event. Rabbinism allows the theophany at Sinai to lend insights into the ever evolving Jewish truths and teachings. The rabbis, thus, create "theological links between the generations"[29]. In doing so, the rabbinic tradition sculpts its theology. For instance, the rabbis assert that there is good reasoning behind the second commandment

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[26] Brooks 51.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Urbach 20.
[29] Goldenberg 109.

immediately following the first: "'I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt,' is the reason for the prohibition immediately following: 'You shall have no other gods besides Me' (Exodus 20:2). According to this reading the first commandment is not God's identity card but his bill of ownership."[30] Again, rabbinic theology often defines itself as "not idolatrous" – and the Decalogue is a good source for crystallizing that theology based on a most authoritative source. God owns us, and the rabbis like it that way.

II. Rabbinic Polemic Against Idolatry Creates Jewish Self-Definition

It is not only theology that the rabbis identify in defining the relationship between Israel and God. The process of rabbinic hermeneutics reveals the formulation of their own Jewish identity as well. It just so happens that the Israelite/Jewish identity is inextricably connected with God. In fact, the Jewish identity created by the rabbis supposes the tightest possible relationship with God. In turn, the fact that the Jews are so close to God "coincidentally" glorifies their own position in the world. Goldenberg explains this phenomenon well: "The reader of Scripture is often hard pressed to distinguish between theological assertion that means what it says and national pride in the form of exaggerated praise for the national deity.... Israelites naturally thought highly of their god...because this was a way of thinking highly of themselves".[31] A similar process is revealed in rabbinic literature. If the Israelites are so committed to God, perhaps God will favor them as well. If they believe in God, perhaps God will believe in them.

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[30] Halbertal and Margalit 21.
[31] Goldenberg 18.

If the rabbis continually emphasize the efficacy of God, maybe it will effect God's grace upon them. An idol simply does not have the same Divine power. It is as if the rabbis surmise that by emphasizing their adamant *disbelief* in the power of idols, God will reward them. This is well documented in many midrashim, but let us look at just one example here which illustrates many elements of the rabbinic mindset:

> R. Phineas said: It once happened in Damascus, where there was an idol-shrine, which had a priest called Abba Gulish, who ministered to the idol many years. Once trouble came upon him. He cried to the idol many days, but to no avail. Thereafter he went out at night, and said: 'Sovereign of the Universe, hearken unto my prayer and redeem me from my trouble.' Forthwith (God) hearkened to his prayer and he was healed; he then stole away and came to Tiberias and was converted to Judaism; he zealously kept the commandments and was appointed administrator of the poor. Now when money came into his custody, the hands that were accustomed to pilfer in the idol-house pilfered also the sacred funds; immediately one of his eyes began to hurt him and he went blind. Once again he misused the sacred funds, and his other eye began to pain and became blind. When compatriots of his came to Tiberias and saw that he was blind, they said to him: 'Abba Gulish, to what purpose did you mock the idol and forsake him?...' what did he do? He said to his wife: 'Arise, that we may go to Damascus.' She took hold of his hand and they went. When they reached the hamlets in the vicinity of Damascus, people gathered about him and said: 'Lo, it is Abba Gulish.' And they further said: 'The idol was right to blind your eyes.' Said he to them: 'I, too, have come only to entreat him and to make my peace with him; perchance he will restore my sight. Go and gather together all the people of the state.' They went and multitudes upon multitudes assembled in the idol-house and (even) went up on the roofs. When the place was full, he asked his wife to stand him upon a pillar he knew was there. He went and stood upon it and said to the assembly: 'My brethren, citizens of Damascus, when I was a priest and ministered to the idol, people used to leave deposits with me, and I subsequently denied receiving them, because the image has neither eyes to see nor ears to hear, so that he might punish me. Now I went to a God whose eyes roam the whole world, and no plot is hidden from Him, and my hands wished to pilfer and take as they were accustomed to do, but I scarcely managed to carry out my intention when He punished me; hence He blinded my eyes.' R. Phinehas ha-kohen bar Hama said, and R. Abbun also reported in the name of our teachers: Before ever he descended from the pillar the Holy One, blessed be He, gave him better sight than he had

> enjoyed before, so that His name might be sanctified in the world; and thousands and myriads of Gentiles were converted through him.[32]

This midrash speaks to the issue of Israel, God, and idolatry. The rabbis wish to teach many lessons with this parable. First, idols don't work; only God works. God glorifies those who live with that paradigm and punishes those who do not. Everyone who tries worshipping idols will eventually come around to accepting God, since God is the only one who really wields power in the universe. In the above story, Abba Gulish prays to the Israelite God only when he notices that his idols do not provide what he needs. The rabbis are deliberate in creating that "suspense" in the tale. Once someone has experienced the power of God, it is easy to give up idols – it quickly becomes clear how much better God is than mere idols.

Concurrently, it becomes clear how much better Jews are in comparison with idolaters. Since the Jews fully understand and accept God's power and dominion, they must be smarter and better than idolaters. It is a logical proof set forth by the clever rabbinic mind. The beauty of the logic is in its simple, yet subtle, creativity. The rabbis rarely miss an opportunity to disparage the character of idol worshippers, either implicitly or explicitly. In this case, their statement was rather explicit: Abba Gulish was accustomed to pilfering in the idol-house, so his hands were programmed to do so when he served God as well. This is the nature of idol worship in general: it programs bad habits into otherwise good people. Conversely, the worship of God will set a person straight. The Jews are righteous because of their connection to God. And Abba Gulish, to his credit, was able to choose the better way of being. In fact, in his process of *vidui* and

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[32] Urbach 105-6. (Taken from *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Exodus, ed. Hoffman, p. 17).

teshuvah, he was rewarded in the end with "better sight than he had enjoyed before." His blindness (a well chosen affliction) was alleviated by his ability to see the merits of God and Israelite practices.

In point of fact, the Talmud speaks of idol worshippers as below humanity. This is evident in a passage from the *Bavli, Yevamot* 61a: "For it is said, And you My sheep, the sheep of My pasture (Ezek. 34:31), are men; you are called men but the idolaters are not called men." Those who belong to God are the "real men." Idol worshippers do not belong to the category of "men" according to the rabbis. Their opinion is very staunch and dogmatic – the only way to join humanity is to choose God and reject idolatry.

III. Idolatry is the Rejection of God; God is the Rejection of Idolatry

God and idolatry are mutually exclusive – defining one necessarily negates the other. Let us take a closer look at how the rabbis' anthropomorphic views of God enhance the powerful image of idolatry as a rejection of God. This phenomenon begins in the Bible. The Israelites are characterized as *am k'shei oref* - a "stiff-necked people." As a group, they have a habit of resisting God. This motif is crucial in understanding the *modus operandi* of the rabbis; they hope to put an end to this biblical behavior. Seeskin points out that "despite all the steps God takes to ensure that the people know what they are doing, each act of acceptance seems to be followed by an act of betrayal."[33] The rabbis acknowledge this betrayal by constructing stringent rules to prevent it.

The rabbinic writers begin by explaining that when we reject God, God rejects us. This is a big threat, which they claim was realized in the destruction of the First Temple:

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[33] Seeskin 102.

"The First Temple was destroyed because the Jews worshipped idols; humankind rejected God:"[34]

> Why was the first Sanctuary destroyed? Because of three [evil] things which prevailed there: idolatry, immorality, bloodshed. Idolatry, as it is written: For the bed is too short for a man to stretch himself and the covering too narrow when he gathers himself up.[35]

In essence, the rabbis teach that God felt the Temple got too crowded when the Israelites brought in idols. There simply was not enough room for both God and the idols. Commentators suggest that when the evil, idolatrous king Menasseh introduced idols, God withdrew – and he took His Temple with Him! The rabbis explain the Destruction as the result of our ultimate rejection of God. In turn, God rejected us with His severe punishment.

Likewise, the rejection of idolatry directly implies the acceptance of the One True God. Let us look at a talmudic midrash from *Yevamot* 47b that makes this point clear. The context to this midrash is as follows: When counseling potential proselytes, we should neither entice them, nor dissuade them – we should simply be honest about our practices and beliefs. Of course, our practices and beliefs are difficult to accept sometimes, as seen in this parable based on the experiences of Naomi and Ruth:

> It is written, And when she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking unto her (Ruth 1:18). 'We are forbidden,' she (Naomi) told her (Ruth), '[to move on the Sabbath beyond the] Sabbath boundaries!' — 'Whither thou goest' [the other replied] 'I will go.'
> 'We are forbidden private meeting between man and woman!'— 'Where thou lodgest, I will lodge.'
> 'We have been commanded six hundred and thirteen commandments!' — 'Thy people shall be my people.'

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[34] Blech, Benjamin. *Understanding Judaism.* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1991) 59.
[35] *Talmud Bavli - Yoma* 9b. Soncino Trans.

'We are forbidden idolatry!' — 'And thy God my God.'[36]

In order for Ruth to accept Naomi's religion, she must disavow any connection to idolatry. Rhetorically, the talmudic writer builds up to this point In doing so, he creates a literary flourish that teaches a lesson: even after accepting 613 commandments, a proselyte cannot be "one of us" without accepting God *and* rejecting idolatry.

Moreover, the rabbis enlarge the picture to state that idolatry is the rejection of Torah and Judaism: "idolatry and study of Torah exist in inverse relation to one another. Nothing is worse than idolatry, because idolatry is the denial of Torah; nothing is better than study of Torah, for this alone leads to the life of holiness. The rabbis adjure the talmudic student: don't cease study of Torah, God's own revelation, for to do so would be to ignore God's special relationship to the people of Israel, as found in the First Utterance."[37] God's will is found in the Torah. The rabbis teach that we need only follow closely the words of the Torah (properly interpreted by the rabbinic sages!) to convey proper acceptance of God.

IV. *Kiddush ha'Shem* – Martyrdom as the Ultimate Acceptance of God/ Rejection of Idolatry

The laws regarding martyrdom were instituted by the talmudic sages of Lod many centuries ago.[38] The rudimentary function of martyrdom was to demonstrate to God – and the community – the powerful commitment that Jews felt toward their deity. Rabbinic literature reflects a profound love for God, noting that the rabbis "made love to

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[36] *Talmud Bavli. Yevamot* 47b. Soncino Trans.
[37] Brooks 90.
[38] Blech 122.

God the one supremely worthy motive of obedience to his law."[39] The rabbis use the biblical verse in Deuteronomy 6:5 as a prooftext for their precept that Jews must be willing to serve God with their lives – even if that means actually *sacrificing* their lives. "A Jew must be prepared to demonstrate a love for God even in the most incomprehensible way of all, by giving up one's very soul."[40]

There are three sins for which one must die before committing: murder, incest/adultery, and idolatry. Naturally, our discussion will focus on the connection between choosing martyrdom over idolatry. There is no question that the rabbis glorify the heroics of our ancestors who died rather than bowing down to false gods. Of course, the rabbis intend to teach a lesson by elevating the martyrs of our people. Let us examine an illustrative midrash found in the *Bavli, Gittin* 57b:

> Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel, or it may be R. Ammi, or as some say it was taught in a Baraitha; On one occasion four hundred boys and girls were carried off for immoral purposes. They divined what they were wanted for and said to themselves, If we drown in the sea we shall attain the life of the future world. The eldest among them expounded the verse, The Lord said, I will bring again from Bashan, I will bring again from the depths of the sea (Ps. 68:23). 'I will bring again from Bashan,' from between the lions' teeth. 'I will bring again from the depths of the sea,' those who drown in the sea. When the girls heard this they all leaped into the sea. The boys then drew the moral for themselves, saying, If these for whom this is natural act so, shall not we, for whom it is unnatural? They also leaped into the sea. Of them the text says, Yea, for thy sake we are killed all the day long, we are counted as sheep for the slaughter (Ps. 44:23). Rab Judah, however, said that this refers to the woman and her seven sons. They brought the first before the Emperor and said to him, Serve the idol. He said to them: It is written in the Law, I am the Lord thy God (Exod. 20:2). So they led him away and killed him. They then brought the second before the Emperor and said to him, Serve the idol. He replied: It is written in the Torah, Thou shalt have no other gods before me (Exod. 20:3). So they led him away and killed him. They then brought the

[39] Moore 19.
[40] Blech 122.

> next and said to him, Serve the idol. He replied: It is written in the Torah, He that sacrifices unto the gods, save unto the Lord only, shall be utterly destroyed (Exod. 22:19). So they led him away and killed him. They then brought the next before the Emperor saying, Serve the idol. He replied: It is written in the Torah, Thou shalt not bow down to any other god (Exod. 20:5). So they led him away and killed him. They then brought another and said to him, Serve the idol. He replied: It is written in the Torah, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One (Deut. 6:4). So they led him away and killed him. They then brought the next and said to him, Serve the idol. He replied; It is written in the Torah, Know therefore this day and lay it to thine heart that the Lord He is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is none else (Deut. 4:39). So they led him away and killed him. They brought the next and said to him, Serve the idol. He replied: It is written in the Torah, Thou hast avouched the Lord this day . . . and the Lord hath avouched thee this day (Deut. 26:17, 18); we have long ago sworn to the Holy One, blessed be He, that we will not exchange Him for any other god, and He also has sworn to us that He will not change us for any other people. The Emperor said: I will throw down my seal before you and you can stoop down and pick it up, so that they will say of you that you have conformed to the desire of the king. He replied; Fie on thee, Caesar, fie on thee, Caesar; if thine own honour is so important, how much more the honour of the Holy One, blessed be He! They were leading him away to kill him when his mother said: Give him to me that I may kiss him a little. She said to him: My son, go and say to your father Abraham, Thou didst bind one [son to the] altar, but I have bound seven altars. Then she also went up on to a roof and threw herself down and was killed. A voice thereupon came forth from heaven saying, A joyful mother of children (Ps. 113:9).

This midrash has two *mashalim* that expound the same verse of text – Psalms 68:23. For the midrashists, the verse teaches that for the sake of God we could be killed– and that would be an honorable thing. In the first *mashal*, the children figure out for themselves that they would be glorified by martyring themselves in the depths of the sea, before allowing themselves to be exploited for "immoral purposes" (perhaps sexual). In the second *mashal*, brought by R. Judah, a mother has a chance to experience "joy" - in the words of Ps. 113:9 – by watching her children die for the cause of magnifying God's name rather than succumbing to the ultimate insult: idolatry.

In a classic case of rabbinic hyperbole, the rabbis communicate their message by citing an extreme example of how one could observe their teaching. The first *mashal* is not enough – only four hundred children died for God. No, the second case is better – again, the literary style takes the reader through a barrage of martyrdom – heart-wrenching and emotional. The heroes of the story exhibit the faithful and unwavering choice of God and death over idolatry and life. What kind of life would it be, anyway? Living with idolatry is no way to live!

In fact, this rabbinic ordinance held firm for centuries; and Jews took much pride and religious satisfaction from the opportunity to simultaneously denounce idolatry and venerate God. It is an honor to offer our souls back to the One who created them:

> When Rabbi Akiva, one of the Ten Martyrs for public execution, knew that he faced his last moments on earth, he smiled even while enduring the most painful torture. When his students asked how he could possibly accept his affliction in such manner, he said, 'I rejoice because all my life I recited the words *U-vekhol nafshekha* [with all your soul] and could not be certain if ever the time came for me to demonstrate my willingness to fulfill them, that I would be able to do so. I thank God that I have found within myself the spiritual power to demonstrate my love for God, with all my soul.'[41]

In this case, according to Blech, "*u-vekhol nafshekha*" represents a "total commitment to God, to the exclusion of other gods. Be prepared to die so that you properly fulfill love of the Lord, your God."[42] Again, rather than view martyrdom as a sad or grotesque image, the rabbis translate the act into an exaltation. What an opportunity! Choose God – and give Him the ultimate compliment. Rather than seeing the surrender of life as a slap in the face to God's creation, the rabbis considered martyrdom to be returning the

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[41] Blech 116-117.
[42] Ibid. 124.

favor, so to speak. It would be a slap in the face to deny God, even if preserving life *appears* to affirm God's handiwork.

Apparently, the rabbis feel quite confident in the efficacy of their didactic techniques. In their clear prescription for martyrdom over idolatry, they successfully convey the importance of this prohibition to the people Israel. In other words, it stuck:

> It was taught, R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: Every precept for which Israel submitted to death at the time of the royal decree, e.g., idolatry and circumcision, is still held firmly in their minds. Whereas every precept for which Israel did not submit to death at the time of the royal decree, e.g., tefillin, is still weak in their hands.[43]

The rabbis give themselves a vote of confidence by emphasizing that their threat of mandatory death had a powerful impact on the Jews' propensity to observe their laws. The rabbis are proud of the fact that the Jews have not forgotten the importance of rebelling against secular decrees that contradict Jewish law. They are very firm about certain truths – idolatry is at the top of the short list of those very certain truths. The sages have chosen their battles wisely – neglecting tefillin, as it turns out, is not as worrisome an offense as bowing down to false gods.

The Effect of Idolatry on the Perception of God

I. The Rabbis Underscore the Impossibility of More than One God

In their writing, the rabbis express the fear that humanity could perceive that there is more than one Divinity in the world. They work consistently to dispel that myth, and reassure their audience that God is One: "Our Rabbis taught: Man was created alone. And why so? — That the Sadducees might not say: There are many ruling powers in

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[43] *Talmud Bavli. Shabbat* 130a. Soncino Trans.

Heaven."[44] In this selection, the Sadducees are considered to be heretics in the eyes of the rabbis. Rabbinic interpretation of the Torah indicates that man was created last so that no one would think that God had a partner in creating – and no human being "helped" God create the world. God alone is the Creator. In commenting on the talmudic passage in the *Bavli, Yoma* 85b from R. Akiva, Herman Cohen emphasizes that humans should never be deified:

> No person purifies you; and even no person who is said at the same time to be God. No son of God shall purify you, but your Father alone. And also before no other intermediate being shall you purify yourself, but only if God is the sole and unique object of your self-purification...."[45]

This selection reveals the rabbinic fear that the Jews would be swayed by other emerging religions, like Christianity. But, the rabbis are intent upon using the authoritative texts of our tradition, especially the Bible, to prove the idiocy of accepting a human deity.

The sages were also fixated on delegitimizing any possibility of dualism. Despite the rabbinic use of Satan as a literary device, they do not consider Satan an equal of God. Rather, he is a pesky adversary. The Talmud illustrates the rabbinic caution against dualism:

> MISHNA. ... 'WE GIVE THANKS, WE GIVE THANKS', HE IS SILENCED.
> GEMARA. We understand the prohibition of saying 'WE GIVE THANKS, WE GIVE THANKS' (in the Aleinu prayer), because he seems to be addressing two Powers...[46]

The rabbis view dualism as a true affront to monotheism, which is yet another example of idolatry in their minds.

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[44] *Talmud Bavli. Sanhedrin* 38a. Soncino Trans.
[45] Kochan, Lionel. "Towards a Rabbinic Theory of Idolatry" 101-2.
[46] *Talmud Bavli. Megillah* 25a. Soncino Trans.

Idolatry is powerfully insulting to God. The rabbis are not flexible in their stance against worshipping other gods, even in conjunction with God. In condemning idolatry, the rabbis condemn any variation of theology or worship: "The opposition to idolatry based on dogmatic maintenance of the metaphysical principle of one God gives way to the orthodox insistence on one form of worship, to one object and in one way. This is the source of the intolerant nature of the monotheistic tradition."[47] The rabbis are the authors of the "intolerant monotheistic tradition."

II. God is Minimized by the Idolatrous Attempt to Represent Him in Physical Form

The rabbis do not end their polemic with the assertion that God is one. For, even if a Jew accepts God's oneness as a fundamental truth, he could still violate the rabbis' injunction against idolatry, and insult God through representation. The rabbis do not like the idea that God can be encapsulated in a mere image – "everything material is finite whereas God is not...to conceive of God in material terms is to limit God."[48] The insult of limiting God is highly offensive to the rabbis; in the process of trying to depict God, God is necessarily lessened. In other words, God would certainly "lose his uniqueness in the process of representation... and his value would decline, just as the value of a work of art declines when there are many reproductions of it."[49] Again, this metaphor of devalued reproduced artwork parallels the contention that God is one and unique. There is no such thing as a reproduction, according to our sages.

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[47] Halbertal and Margalit 186.
[48] Seeskin 11.
[49] Ibid. 47.

According to Halbertal and Margalit, the offense of diminishing God through representation and imagery is a difficult one to pinpoint. They ask, if God does actually have an image, why is it forbidden to represent this image? As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the rabbis have an anthropomorphic image of God. That being the case, it should not be offensive to them to have God depicted in an anthropomorphic way. But, it is offensive. Why? First, the rabbis do believe God has an image, but since no one has seen it, there is a danger of the representation being incorrect.[50] Second, even if someone had seen God, he would be forbidden to make a representation of Him, since any representation necessarily diminishes the "Real Thing" - thus, insulting God.[51]

Anthropomorphic metaphors do generate a problem for the rabbis – a problem they have imposed on themselves! Again, Halbertal and Margalit provide insight into this conundrum:

> There are two aspects to the problem of anthropomorphism. One is whether it provides an erroneous picture of God. The other... is whether anthropomorphism provides a disrespectful and inappropriate picture of God. The midrash often discusses the problem in its second aspect, and the answers it provides concern the understanding of the relationship between God and Israel. God's confinement within the small bush in the desert is an expression of his sharing in Israel's pain, and his going before the people in a pillar of cloud is an expression of his affection for them.[52]

The inappropriateness and disrespect of conveying God in human form is that it serves, again, to glorify us. How can we be so self-aggrandizing as to presume that God looks like us. Despite the fact that we are told that we were created *betzelem Elohim*, in the

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[50] Note: Even though Moses "speaks" to God face to face (Exodus 33:11), we also learn that humanity cannot see God's face and live (Exodus 33:20)! The rabbinic conclusion appears to be that humans have never actually seen God.
[51] Halbertal and Margalit 47.
[52] Ibid. 64.

image of God, we cannot define the parameters of that image. The rabbis do not think that an anthropomorphic metaphor for God is an erroneous one, but they do believe that any physical image of God in a human-like form would be insulting and disrespectful. This is a difficult corner into which our sages have painted themselves!

Thus, the rabbis use many linguistic metaphors to represent God. They like words, not pictures. Descriptions and verbal illustrations are encouraged by the rabbis – they do it all the time. They build a fence around potential idolatrous practice by disallowing any form of physical portrayal. And, despite the rabbinic anthropomorphic view of God, they do understand that God is not an *actual* human. At the same time, though, the rabbis seem to find a connection with God by presuming that God has very human-like qualities. This brings comfort to the rabbinic psyche. Seeskin provides some psycho-social insight into this tendency: It is tempting for men and women to think that God likes what they like, shares their view of current events, prefers their way of life to all others, and contemplates the universe from their perspective.[53] Even though Seeskin's context is a modern one, we can see how the rabbis would have felt the same way. As discussed earlier, the elevation of God elevated the rabbis and Jews. Likewise, if the rabbis create a God character who is in complete agreement with rabbinic theology, their rabbinic authority is similarly strengthened.

It is important that rabbinic authority is strong and unchallenged. The rabbis need the Jews to follow their laws of governance. Barry Kogan explains the danger in idolatry – it challenges that authority, lessening both God and humans:

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[53] Seeskin 36.

> Idolatry poses a danger above and beyond that of propagating false opinions because it is also useful in institutionalizing them for the purpose of governance. In this respect, it prevents both the recognition of God as God and the perfection of human beings as human. But because the perfection of human beings as such can only be achieved through the recognition of God as God...the first intention of the Law is inevitably to put an end to idolatry.[54]

On the surface, it appears that the rabbis fear minimizing the greatness of God. But, upon closer examination, it seems that there is a level of self-preservation that the rabbis endeavor to achieve. They have psychological, sociological, religious, and cultural interests in outlawing idolatry along with all of its trappings. Again, we can conclude that the relationships between God and humanity, idolatry and monotheism, exist in an organic tension which cannot be resolved. Meanwhile, as the rabbis exist in this tension, they spend a great deal of time defending their God against the ignorance of paganism – and trying not to incite God's fury.

III. Idolatry Makes God Jealous

The rabbis are quite concerned about the anger and jealousy that God feels when His people are tempted by idolatry. The rabbinic writings reflect the rabbis' protecting God's feelings. But, the rabbis run into an inevitable problem in their concern for God's jealousy – jealousy is a weakness. Is God so weak as to be jealous of a mere idol? How could the One True God lower Himself to the level of jealousy? Halbertal and Margalit address this point by explaining that there are two sides to the jealousy issue: a threat to God's power and a threat of humiliation. Jealousy often results from a compromise of power – "therefore God's jealousy arouses the suspicion that the idol must have some real

[54] Kogan 180-81.

substance if it can disturb the equanimity of the omnipotent."[55] How could the rabbis concede that the idol has the power to upset God? Or perhaps the problem is better described as God's humiliation – illustrated by an adultery metaphor. For example, when a wife leaves her husband for a man who is not as smart, handsome, or wealthy than he, he suffers not from jealousy but from humiliation.[56] Perhaps God may experience the same "feelings" as the rejected husband.

The most prevalent metaphor that the rabbis use to express the "jealousy motif" is that of an adulterous relationship. The rabbis have a way of manipulating the metaphor to allow God to be jealous of idols, even if they are inferior to Him:

> The General Agrippa asked R. Gamaliel, 'It is written in your Torah, For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God. Is a wise man jealous of any but a wise man, a warrior of any but a warrior, a rich man of any but a rich man?' He replied, 'I will give you a parable: To what is the matter like? To a man who marries an additional wife. If the second wife is her superior, the first will not be jealous of her; but if she is her inferior, the first wife will be jealous of her.'[57]

In this parable, Rabban Gamaliel is defining "jealousy" differently. In his explanation, if the Israelites had found a divinity greater than God, God would have no reason to complain or get angry. But, God's jealousy is provoked when His ignorant people choose gods that are for naught. In this case, Rabban Gamaliel is using "jealousy" to mean "humiliation" as expounded above.

In another talmudic selection, Gamaliel refutes a philosopher with a slightly different approach:

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[55] Halbertal and Margalit 27.
[56] Ibid. 28.
[57] *Talmud Bavli. Avodah Zarah* 55a. Soncino Trans.

> A philosopher asked R. Gamaliel, 'It is written in your Torah, For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire, a jealous God. Why, however, is He so jealous of its worshippers rather than of the idol itself?' He replied, 'I will give you a parable: To what is the matter like? To a human king who had a son, and this son reared a dog to which he attached his father's name, so that whenever he took an oath he exclaimed, "By the life of this dog, my father!" When the king hears of it, with whom is he angry — his son or the dog? Surely he is angry with his son!' [The philosopher] said to him, 'You call the idol a dog; but there is some reality in it.' [The Rabbi asked], 'What is your proof?' He replied, 'Once a fire broke out in our city, and the whole town was burnt with the exception of a certain idolatrous shrine!' He said to him, 'I will give you a parable: To what is the matter like? To a human king against whom one of his provinces rebelled. If he goes to war against it, does he fight with the living or the dead? Surely he wages war with the living!' [The philosopher] said to him, 'You call the idol a dog and you call it a dead thing. In that case, let Him destroy it from the world!' He replied, 'If it was something unnecessary to the world that was worshipped, He would abolish it; but people worship the sun and moon, stars and planets, brooks and valleys. Should He destroy His universe on account of fools![58]

In this parable, the difficulty is shifted from the idol itself to the people Israel. God is not jealous of useless idols, God is furious with His people for being tempted by such ridiculousness. God cannot just get rid of the idols of the world – almost anything is a potential idol. Plus, God has no time to fool around with silly idol shrines – why fight the "dead" when He still has a fighting chance to regain the allegiance of the "living?" God has to teach the people a lesson – in the people God has hope. The idols themselves are beyond the scope of God's concern. Interestingly, to the outsider (in this case, the philosopher) God looks like a wimp if he fails to confront the idol itself (sun, moon, stars, brooks and valleys). On the other hand, if God does address the idol, God assigns tacit legitimacy to that idol. It is a difficult predicament indeed.

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[58] *Talmud Bavli. Avodah Zarah* 54b. Soncino Trans.

But, it is important to note that the rabbis mitigate their emphasis on God's jealousy by indicating that God is so powerful that He often suppresses His anger and jealousy. Halbertal and Margalit illuminate this element of rabbinic strategy:

> God's honor becomes associated primarily with his ability to restrain himself, rather than with his ability to demand restitution when he has been insulted. God is counted among those who are insulted and do not return the insult....It is interesting to note that the motif of restraint as a type of honor appears in the words of the sages in the context of the battle against idolatry. A person who sees an idol that has not been destroyed but remains standing is supposed to pronounce the blessing, "Blessed is He who is slow to anger" (*Tosefta, Berakhot* 7,2).[59]

Rather than destroying the idols, the rabbis instructed the people to praise God – who has respectfully declined the opportunity to rage against idolatry. Thus, even as we stand in the presence of an idol, we are to recognize the sovereignty of God.

Moreover, the people must realize that God sees all of the misdeeds of Israel, but does not always punish them:

> R. Abbahu said: There are three [evils] before which the Curtain is not closed (i.e. God is always watching!): overreaching, robbery and idolatry. Idolatry, for it is written, A people that provokes me to anger continually before my face; [that sacrifices — sc. to idols — in gardens, and burns incense upon altars of brick] (Isaiah 65:3).[60]

The rabbis teach that God sees it all, and God's honor is evident in His restraint. God knows of all the transgressions committed by the people – the rabbis emphasize that in their didactic technique. They hope that the threat of God's constant vigilance will scare the Jews into compliance. Even if we have a jealous God, the rabbis recognized that

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[59] Halbertal and Margalit 33 (See also, *Petikhta, Eikha Rabbah* 24 on Rachel teaching God a lesson in humility, patience, and restraint).
[60] *Talmud Bavli. Bava Metzia* 59a. Soncino Trans.

God's jealousy was not always manifest in the physical world – especially when He chose to withhold it. But, that is no excuse for people to defy God's command.

IV. Idolatry Threatens God's Supremacy and Might

One of the rabbis' main fears about idolatry is that people will mistakenly think that idols have powers that only the One True God can possess. The rabbis teach that the people must exist in a state of constant affirmation of God's power over the world – which can often be done through a condemnation and/or denial of idols. There are external practices that the sages mandate in order to fulfill this affirmation. For example, while pagans observed the ritual of ripping hair from their heads upon hearing tragic news, Jews were forbidden to rip hair from their heads (Deut. 14:1 – "You are the children of Adonai, you shall not cut yourselves, nor make any baldness between your eyes for the dead"). Instead, the rabbis utilize the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* to counteract the urge to tear our hair out – "on the very place where pagans rip out their hair as a sign of both frustration and condemnation, the Jew places his phylacteries in recognition of a Superior Intelligence who rules the world."[61] The Jewish purpose, according to the rabbis, is to promote the sovereignty of God, through thought, word, and deed.

Surprisingly, we are even allowed to use idols to prove the might of God:

> GEMARA. It was stated: If an idol broke to pieces by itself, R. Johanan says it is still prohibited [for use]; Resh Lakish says it is allowed....'Resh Lakish holds it is allowed', for [the idolater] surely thinks: If the idol did not save itself, how could it save me.[62]

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[61] Blech 121-22.
[62] *Talmud Bavli. Me'ilah* 14a. Soncino Trans.

The rabbis love the opportunity to, once again, prove that idols are null and powerless. A useless idol is a great teaching tool! If the idol could be destroyed, how could it have any saving power for humans. The idol would ultimately need a human to fix it!

Although the previous section explored God's glory in being slow to anger, there are times in which the rabbis would rather accentuate God's power than His benevolence. This type of teaching is exemplified in the following passage:

> 'Be silent, for one must not make mention of the name of the Lord.'(Amos 6:10). [He said this] because his father and mother had not taught him [to serve the Lord], and straightway he brought forth an idol from his bosom, embracing and kissing it, until his stomach burst, his idol fell to the earth, and he upon it, thus fulfilling the verse, And I shall cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your idols (Lev. 26:30).[63]

If a person has not been raised to worship God, his fate is uncertain. After all, God has promised that our own carcasses shall fall upon the "dead" idols – we will end up going down with the proverbial sinking ship! The more affection we show toward idols, the more dramatic our demise shall be – this is how the rabbis see the world. Of course, the whole phenomenon is based on the rabbinic reality that God has the power to effect such destruction – "if the divine ruler is god [sic], then obviously all other, mere mortal men must implicitly obey him."[64] The rabbis need to make sure that God wins.

Summary:

In the end, it is clear that idolatry is an "explicit confrontation between the idol and the one God.[65] The rabbis live vicariously through this confrontation, creating a

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[63] *Talmud Bavli. Sanhedrin* 64a. Soncino Trans.
[64] Schwarzschild 220.
[65] Kochan, Lionel. *Jews, Idols, and Messiahs* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990) , 132.

confrontation of their own. Rather than standing on the sidelines, the rabbis insert themselves into the center of the battle itself. In many ways, they see themselves as both the generals and the foot soldiers in the war against idolatry. They wish to preserve the relationship between God and Israel, and to protect both God and Israel from the perils of idolatrous practice. They find idolatry to be the ultimate insult to God and Judaism. They must ward off this insult – their mission is clear, and their purpose is noble.

Chapter Three

Idolatry as Symbolic of the Most Extreme Offense

Idolatry is the Most Extreme Offense

I. Idolatry is Antithetical to Judaism

As established in the previous chapter, idolatry is most reprehensible because of its profound insult to the fundamental essence of Judaism. The rabbis expound upon this idea in many of their writings, making it very clear that if a person chooses to involve himself in idolatry - in any way - he will not be considered a Jew. The very notion of idolatry is antithetical to Judaism, as Alfred L. Ivry points out:

> Idolatry in the classical Jewish sense is thus equivalent existentially to non-Jewish, i.e., non-halakhic, behavior. The rabbis looked at such behavior with undisguised animosity. Much of internal Jewish history constitutes civil war waged by the guardians of the faith against those they regarded as heretics, worshippers of an alien tradition, and hence putative idolaters....[1]

The constant battle that the rabbis fought against idolatry was waged on the supposition that idolatry presented a particular kind of threat that scared the rabbis – the threat of shattering the foundation upon which the entire system of Jewish thought is predicated.

The Talmud provides much textual evidence for the rabbis' fear. For instance, in

[1] Ivry, Alfred A., "The Inevitability of Idolatry." *Proceedings of the Academy for Jewish Philosophy.* Novak, David and Norbert M. Samuelson, eds. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992) 195.

the *Bavli, Kiddushin* 40a, we learn: "Master said: Idolatry is so heinous that he who rejects it is as though he admits [the truth of] the whole Torah." Likewise, the same text is found in *Nedarim* 25a and many variations on this theme emerge throughout rabbinic texts. In *Megillah* 13a the rabbis teach: "anyone who repudiates idolatry is called 'a Jew.'"[2] Is this rhetorical technique, or actual belief? Is this mere rabbinic hyperbole? We may not be able derive the answers to these questions – but we can discover that the rabbis' didactic concerns were focused on the elimination of idolatry at all costs.

II. Idolatry Requires the Most Extreme Punishment

Idolatry, in the rabbinic mind, is the most offensive sin possible. This belief is evident throughout rabbinic literature. It carries the highest penalty, which is intended to reflect the severity of the transgression. The Talmud often discusses the number of penalties incurred for specific misdeeds. For example, in Mishna *Yoma* 8:3, we read: "If a man both ate and drank in a single act of forgetfulness, he is liable for one sin offering only. If he ate and also performed an act of work, he is liable for two sin offerings."

This is a typical example of the ongoing debates about the nature and magnitude of punishment for sins. In the case of idolatry, both the nature and magnitude of punishment are very intense, indicating the severity of the offense. Robert Brooks explains how this works:

> ...idol worship constitutes so serious an offense that a stringent standard applies, especially when one worships the graven image as if it were the one true God, by bowing down or sacrificing to it. Accordingly, to underscore the extreme nature of the transgression, each act is taken

[2] See also *Hullin* 5a; *Sifre* to Deut., *Re'eh*, 54; Deut. Rabbah, *Va'etchanan*, 2:18; *Sifre* to Num., *Shelach*, 111.

> disjunctively: each constitutes a separate and individual charge of worshipping an idol, with its individual penalty or punishment.[3]

Usually, the rabbis consider many similar offenses to be punishable with one general form of atonement or restitution. But, this is not the case with idolatry. Each time someone commits any type of sin connected with idolatry, he is accountable for each offense.[4]

In the *Bavli, Sanhedrin* 40b includes a discussion of the hierarchy of death penalties. Stoning is considered the worst and most painful form of the death penalty; and stoning is the method used to punish an idolater – an injunction based on Deuteronomy 19:21. In *Sanhedrin* 49b, we learn that blasphemy and idolatry are considered parallel in the rabbinic mind:

> Stoning is severer than burning, since thus the blasphemer (Lev. 24:14-16) and the idol-worshipper (Deut. 17:2-5) are executed. Wherein lies the particular enormity of these offenses? — Because they constitute an attack upon the fundamental belief of Judaism.

What is the fundamental belief in Judaism? The undeniable existence of the one true God. Urbach emphasizes that, according to some Tannai'm, the direct desecration of God (*chilul ha'Shem*) is the only sin graver than idolatry.[5] But, some rabbis simply consider idolatry tantamount to *chilul ha'Shem*. As discussed in Chapter Two, one cannot commit idolatry without insulting and/or denying God. The rabbis become very nervous around the possible defamation of God. Thus, they amplify the "enormity of these offenses," hoping to scare the Jews into compliance with their teachings. In fact,

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[3] Brooks 78.
[4] See *Talmud Yerushalmi, Nazir* 6:1, 54c – as expounded in Brooks, p. 80-82.

the Talmud teaches that only three wrongdoings incur both the death penalty *and* a fine:

> Has it not been taught: If he has stolen and slaughtered [an animal] on Sabbath [and has thus incurred the death penalty], or has stolen and slaughtered [an animal] for idolatry [and has thus incurred the death penalty], or has stolen an ox that is to be stoned (Exod. 21:28) and slaughtered it, he shall pay fourfold or fivefold (Exod. 21:37) This is the view of R. Meir (i.e., R. Meir holds that one must both pay the fine and succumb to the death penalty).[6]

This teaching is referenced intertextually in *Gittin* 53b. The rabbis revisit the problem of the double punishment cited above, but explain that "this is because of the special seriousness of the sin of idolatry.... because of the seriousness of the sin of idolatry people keep clear of it." That is, the rabbis hope and pray that the Jews will "keep clear of it." Idolatry is among the problems that cause the rabbis to respond with exaggerated stringency. Their usual system of penalty requires either a fine or a physical sentence – but not both. In the case of idolatry – and a few other heinous offenses – the rabbis double the infliction.

Furthermore, the rabbis sentence the punishment for idolatry to last for eternity. Like many of their musings about the world to come, this probably reflects the awareness that people often observe a world full of injustice, where the bad guys sometimes win. Thus, the rabbinic principle of *midah k'neged midah* can only be observed in the afterlife. Urbach makes the following observation:

> In antithetic parallelism to the first Mishna of *Tractate Pe'a*, which enumerates 'things whose fruits a man enjoys in this world while the capital is laid up for him in the world to come', the Tosefta states: 'For which things is a man punished in this world, while the fundamental

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[5] Urbach 357.
[6] *Talmud Bavli. Ketubot* 33b. Soncino Trans.

> retribution is kept in store for him in the world to come? For idolatry, incest, murder and also for slander.[7]

So, the rabbinic bases are covered. They can enforce their own punishments in this world. But, if for some reason their proscribed penalties do not serve as enough of a deterrent to idolatry, they threaten eternal misery – with God as their warden! In that case, the fundamental retribution" may be much worse. To borrow a form of rabbinic rhetoric, I must ask: to what can this be compared? Imagine the stereotypical scenario of an angry mother who imposes disciplinary measures to her child – but if those measures are not effective, she threatens the child with the father's punishment: "Just wait till your father gets home!" This is precisely this kind of threat that the rabbis are making.

The rabbis are so worried about the violation of their prohibition against idolatry, that they proclaim that a person should submit to death rather than transgress. As discussed in Chapter Two, the cardinal rabbinic sins are: murder, adultery/incest, and idolatry. But, the rabbinic overlay on this problem is that these are the gravest, most offensive sins to Judaism and its law makers. In fact, as Benjamin Blech interprets the rabbinic injunctions, "Life is meaningless if these laws cannot be observed."[8]

Idolatry is a Slippery Slope

I. Rabbis Warn: Stay Far Away from Idolatry

The rabbis attempt in many ways to dissuade Jews from even approaching idolatry or idolatrous practice. One way is through constant threats of punishment – warning of punishment to come (i.e., through rabbinic ordinance, or in the world to come) and blame for past punishment (i.e., the destruction of the Temple). Another way is

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[7] Urbach 355.

through the process of glorifying those historical and biblical heroes who manage to resist idolatrous practices. Especially in the wake of the golden calf episode, the rabbis are even more laudatory toward those who keep themselves in line with God's commands. Urbach brings a midrash from *Sifre* to Numbers (section 67), along with his commentary, to illustrate this point:

> The Tanna R. Simeon b. Yohai accepted the words of the prophet Amos (5:25), 'Did you bring Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness?' etc. as a fact and interpreted it as a punishment upon Israel. The Israelites - he said - did not offer sacrifices. To whom then did the tribe of Levi sacrifice, for it is said "They put incense before You, and whole burnt offering upon Your altar" (Deut. 33:10)... The Israelites served idols, but the tribe of Levi did not worship idols, as it is said "For they have observed Your word" (Ibid. v. 9).[9]

By specifically honoring the Levites, the rabbis are raising them up as an example of Jewish perfection. Even in the face of temptation, they stayed faithful to God. These types of rabbinic writings certainly reveal a similar struggle – the rabbis must have been faced with the challenge of their community straying from God. Once an *am k'shei oref*, always an *am k'shei oref*. Surely, the Jews were equally as stiff-necked in rabbinic times.

Another way the rabbis taught the Jews to stay away from idolatry is by offering them alternatives. The sages suggest religious rituals and practices that Jews should be performing instead of practicing idolatry:

> The Amora R. Levi did not refrain from explaining in this way the precept of offering sacrifices in the Tent of Meeting: 'Because the Israelites were avid idolaters in Egypt, and offered their sacrifices to demons... and the Israelites used to transgress the prohibition of high places in offering up their sacrifices...(therefore) the Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'Let them

[8] Blech 107.
[9] Urbach 535-536.

> offer their sacrifices to me at all times in the Tent of Meeting, and so they will abstain from idolatry....[10]

The rabbis nimbly interpret the process of weaning from idolatry as a sort of "distraction" method. If the Israelites were busy enough constantly offering sacrifices ("at all times") to God in the Tent of Meeting, they would not be distracted by idolatrous practices. To what can this be compared? To a small child who is too young to understand her own boundaries. Her parents and care-takers must always set limits for her. But, rather than constantly saying, "NO!" we learn to redirect children to an activity that is permissible. We give the child something to distract her, something positive, stimulating, and age appropriate. This is the same type of thing that the rabbis try to accomplish. Ideally, the Jews would be so busy worshipping God that they would not even have the time to worship idols, even if they wanted to. In the rabbinic mind, this directive eliminated two problems: first, Jews could constantly express their love for God through sacrifices, and second, they could stay out of trouble!

Yet another way the rabbis try to keep the Israelites far from idolatry was by building a "fence" around it. This phenomenon is much in keeping with the way the rabbis habitually build a *siyag la'Torah*, fence around the Torah. They are dedicated to protecting the commandments and keeping the Israelites far from violating them. Many texts support this endeavor, but let us look at just one example now:

> HE WHO VOWS OR SWEARS BY ITS NAME VIOLATES A NEGATIVE PRECEPT. Whence do we know this? — It has been taught: and make no mention of the name of other gods (Exod. 23:13). This means, one must not say to his neighbor 'Wait for me at the side of that idol'; neither let it be heard out of your mouth (Ibid.): one should not vow

[10] Lev. Rabbah xxii, 8, as quoted in context from Urbach, p. 368.

> or swear by its name nor cause others [sc. heathens] to swear by the name.[11]

One is not allowed to make a passing reference about an idol, or even use it as a landmark. The rabbis would prefer that the Israelites ignore them entirely. In fact, they even condemn the apparent acts of violence against them. The Israelites are forbidden even to desecrate idols, which is really counter-intuitive. We might have thought that the rabbis would quite enjoy if the Jews would defame the idols, but we find out that this is not necessarily so:

> If a man excretes to Ba'al Pe'or[12] (Num. 25:3) [he is to be stoned, because] this is how it is worshipped. He who throws a stone at *Merkolis* [is to be stoned, because] this is how it is worshipped.[13]

This is a strange prohibition; the rabbis consider defecating or throwing stones at these particular idols to be actual idolatry. For, these are the ways that one shows love for these idols. Even if the Jews were intending to mock the idol, it is still prohibited. Heaven forbid, the Jews should be perceived as engaging in the worship of those idols. In the end, the rabbis simply want the Israelites to stay far away from the idols. Once more, to bring a modern example: to what can this be compared? To a school child who is "bullied" by the presence of pests. Rather than advise the school child to beat up the pests, or torment the pests, parents usually advise the child just to ignore them – do not associate with them at all, lest anyone think the child had chosen those bully-pests for his friends! Likewise it is with the teaching of the rabbis.

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[11] *Talmud Bavli. Sanhedrin* 63b. Soncino Trans.

[12] The Hebrew, *po'er atzmo*, is a word play with Ba'al Pe'or, and it has a few possible translations. Danby considers it "open himself wide" – as in defecation. Others translate *po'er atzmo* as exposing oneself, getting naked.

II. Idolatry is Alluring – Sexually Seductive

The lifestyle of the idolater held a certain allure to the Jews of the rabbinic period. The Talmud deals extensively with the seductive nature of idolatry – using terms like a "seduced city" for areas that have succumbed to idolatry.[14] There is a sexual tone in the rabbis' description of the problem of idolatry; they compare the allure of idolatry to a sexual temptation. The problem of exposing a person to idolatry is:

> ...that of infusing her with sensual lust. For R. Johanan stated: When the serpent copulated with Eve (in the Garden of Eden), he infused her (and, consequently all of humanity) with lust. The lust of the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai (and experienced the purifying influence of Divine revelation), came to an end, the lust of the idolaters who did not stand at Mount Sinai did not come to an end.[15]

The rabbis express that God is an antidote to the negative influence of lust. Idolaters, unfortunately, are still plagued by the insatiable lust that they inherited from Eve's "experience" with the serpent. The Israelites, on the other hand, have been rescued from that terrible lifestyle. So, the world of idolatry is still raging with lust!

Thus, it becomes clear that the rabbis were concerned not only with actual idol worship, but also with the lifestyle associated with such practices. Halbertal and Margalit explain that "the attraction of idolatry is embedded either in the erotic temptation of idolatry itself, or in the lifestyle accompanying idolatry. The decision to worship idols reflects a way of life rather than a particular metaphysical worldview."[16] Naturally, the Israelites were attracted to the looser, more indulgent lifestyle of the "idolater."

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[13] Mishna *Sanhedrin* 7:6. {Note: *Merkolis* was "a pillar surmounted by the head of Hermes. In this guise he was the patron deity of wayfarers." - Herbert Danby, The Mishna (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933) 392.

[14] See *Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin* 67a.

[15] *Talmud Bavli. Yevamot* 103b. Soncino Trans.

[16] Halbertal and Margalit 24.

The rabbis posit that it is not because of an error in thinking that Jews are swayed toward idolatry. It is not because they do not know better. It is because they want to do the things permitted in the world of idolatry. The Jerusalem Talmud addresses this in the very beginning of Tractate *Avodah Zarah*:

> When Jeroboam reigned over Israel he began to seduce the Israelites and say to them, "Come and worship idols, idolatry is permissive...The Torah says, 'The fat of My feast [offering] shall not remain until morning' (Exod. 23:18), while idolatry says, 'Bring your offerings every morning.' (Amos 4:4) The Torah says, 'It shall be eaten on the day you sacrifice it, or on the day following' (Leviticus 19:6), while idolatry says, 'For three days out of ten.' (Amos 4:4) The Torah says, 'You shall not offer the blood of My sacrifice with anything leavened' (Exodus 23:18), while idolatry says, 'Bring your thanks-offering with leaven.' (Amos 4:5)"....[17]

We can see from this text that idolatry is tempting because it is easy and convenient. If the people become idolaters, their rituals become be less burdensome and strict. Plus, life would be much more enjoyable!

Let us turn now to another text which exemplifies the sexual temptation for idolatry:

> When the Israelites had their fill of the spoils of war they began wasting them, tearing garments and throwing them away, because they did not want anything but gold and silver vessels, as it is written "We retained as booty all the cattle and the spoil of the towns." (Deut. 3:7) They went and dwelled at Shittim – in the place of *sh'tuth*, of foolishness. At that time, the Amonites and the Moabites arose and built themselves markets from Beit Yeshimoth until the mountain of snow, and they put women there to sell all kinds of delicacies, and the Israelites would eat and drink. At that time a man would go out for a walk in the marketplace and would ask for a certain article from the old woman and she would sell it to him at its market price. Then the young woman would call to him from inside the shop and say, "Come here and get it for less," and he would buy it from her that day and the next day. On the third day she would say to him, "Come inside and see for yourself if you are a member of the family." And he would go in with her and there would be a stone jar full of Amonite

[17] *Talmud Yerushalmi. Avodah Zarah* 1:1. Neusner Trans., adapted.

> wine next to her. At that time the wine of Gentiles had not yet been forbidden to the Israelites, so when she asked him if he wanted to drink some wine, he would drink it, and the wine would burn within him. And he would say to her, "Do my bidding," and she would take out an image of [the idol] Ba'al Pe'or from her bodice and say to him, "if you want me to do your bidding, bow down to this." Then he would say to her, "I do not bow down to idols," and she would answer him, "What do you care if you only expose yourself to it?" And he would expose himself to it. Therefore it is said, "Exposing oneself to Ba'al Pe'or is the way of worshipping it."[18]

The midrashist is highlighting the fact that the Israelites were cognizant of the prohibition of idolatry, but that awareness was not enough to deter them from falling into the traps of idolatry. Again, we see that the unsuspecting Jew could end up doing something idolatrous by the mere act of getting naked in front of an idol. He could not resist the wiles of the woman in the market place, and the wine burned within him. The key is that he was lured into the whole scenario by an idolater with a lifestyle he thought would be fun – "it is the tempting power of this lifestyle that leads to idolatry."[19]

The Talmud speaks of the "motivation for the adoption of idolatry, which is orgiastic license." The rules are indeterminate for idolatrous religions; they are not based on written law.[20] By the end of late antiquity, the rabbis did not consider that their constituents would be tempted actually to bow down to a carved idol. Goldenberg notes that "by the close of late antiquity, rabbis came to believe that Jews were generally immune to the temptations of idolatry, except for the most insidious temptation of all, the offer of religiously sanctioned sexual gratification."[21] As the rabbis saw it, idolatry meant

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[18] *Sifre* on Numbers, sec. 131. Halbertal and Margalit Trans.
[19] Halbertal and Margalit 25.
[20] Ibid. 116.
[21] Goldenberg 85.

that people were having ritual sex on a regular basis. Naturally, this appealed to *amcha* much more than Torah study!

The Talmud reveals this rabbinic fear of licentiousness – *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 63b addresses it directly: "Rab Judah said in Rab's name: The Israelites knew that the idols were nonentities, but they engaged in idolatry only that they might openly satisfy their incestuous lusts...." Again, it was not the actual worship of idols that the rabbis fear in this case, but the behavior that was sanctioned by idolatrous ritual. But, the Talmud does "suggest that the initial motivation for idolatry – evading constraints on sexual relations – in time led to actual belief in and attachment to the idols."[22] The rabbis were afraid that the people would become addicted to idols – it all starts with meaningless sex, but where does it lead?

III. Idolatry is a Slippery Slope: The Rabbis Set Limits

At the end of the preceding *sugya* in *Sanhedrin* 63b, the rabbis explain that by caving in to their "incestuous lusts" the people then became addicted to idolatry. The Soncino translation comments in a footnote (#30) to this passage: "At first it [idolatrous practice] was only a pretext to satisfy their lust. But having engaged in idolatry, they were ensnared by its allurements and really believed in it." This is a rabbinic nightmare come true! Furthermore, the possibility of this nightmare being realized causes the rabbis to make stringent rules prohibiting anything even close to idolatry. For, even "an ideal perverted may turn into idolatry."[23]

For example, the rabbis forbid the making of any human image:

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[22] Halbertal and Margalit 23.
[23] Blech 207.

> 'Of all faces are permissible except that of a human face'! — R. Judah the son of Rab Joshua said: From the discourse of R. Joshua, I learnt: You shall not make *itti* ['with me'] — [this should be rendered as though it was] 'you shall not make Me' [*othi*].[24]

The problem in the rabbinic mind is that in Genesis 1:27, we learn that humans were made in the image of God – *b'tzelem Elohim*. So, if we "make" ourselves, it is as if we are making the actual image of God. (Again, this is rooted in the very anthropomorphic God imagery discussed in Chapter Two). The rabbis use the larger theme of *b'tzelem Elohim* as well as some grammatical hermeneutics to arrive at their conclusion. But, the bottom line remains: it is most absolutely *verboten* to create an image of God.

Yet, they do not stop at the mere prohibition against the creation of a human form:

> But are the other attendants permitted? Behold it has been taught: You shall not make with Me, i.e., you shall not make according to the likeness of My attendants who serve before Me in the heights, as, e.g., the Ophannim, Seraphim, holy Hayyoth and Ministering Angels!(Ezek. 1)— Abaye explained: The Torah only prohibited the reproduction of the attendants who are in the highest stratum [of Heaven, i.e., angels]. Are, then, those in the lower stratum permitted? Behold it has been taught: That is in heaven (Exod. 20:4) — this is to include the sun, moon, stars and planets; above this is to include the Ministering Angels! — That teaching alludes to serving them. But if it is a matter of serving them, even a tiny worm is also [prohibited]! — That is so, and [the thought] is derived from the continuation of the verse; for it has been taught: Or that is in the earth — this is to include seas, rivers, mountains and hills; beneath — this is to include a tiny worm. But is the mere making of them (i.e., without the intention of worshipping them) permitted? Behold it has been taught: You shall not make with Me, i.e., you shall not make according to the likeness of My attendants who serve before Me in the heights, as, e.g., the sun, moon, stars and planets! — It was different with R. Gamaliel because others (non Jews) made [the chart] for him.[25]

This *sugya* is an excellent example of the rabbis taking a wild ride down the slippery slope! They are trying to make a boundary around the definition of an idol, but they keep

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[24] *Talmud Bavli. Avodah Zarah* 43b. Soncino Trans.

tightening their parameters. So, they state, it is not permitted to create an image of a human figure. But, what about those slightly above humans – the angels? Not really allowed. But, what about the celestial bodies, which we know were actually worshipped as gods? No, that is not really allowed either. Rabban Gamaliel used to teach about the new moon cycle from charts - which the rabbis have to justify as a pedagogic tool - made by Gentiles. In that case, Gamaliel is not in violation. It is unclear as to whether the rabbis are almost poking fun at themselves with the "worm" section. Could it really be, the rabbis ask, that a tiny worm could be off limits to the sculptor/artist? Their answer is, technically, yes. Who knows where that worm could lead? Idolatry leads us down a very slippery slope!

Once more, we have reached a problem of boundaries. In the rabbinic mind, the average Jew has a great deal of trouble keeping things straight. Therefore, the rabbis spend a lot of energy discussing the process of clarifying categories. The category of idolatry is no exception. Kenneth Seeskin describes the problem of the slippery slope as it applies to idolatry:

> The problem is that once tangible symbols are developed and begin to attract loyalty, people may pay more attention to the symbol than they do to the reality; in a religious context, they may begin to worship the symbol and forget about God. Another problem is that people may come to regard the symbol as part of God or a vessel in which God is housed. Even if these traps are avoided, there is always the possibility that someone will imbue the symbol with magical significance....With this type of problem, there is no simple formula for deciding where the line should be drawn.[26]

The rabbis fear many things. One of their fears is connected with the notion that, even if

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Seeskin 53.

the idol were to be allowed for decorative or artistic purposes, there might be confusion and the people might actually start believing that the idol has powers that are reserved for the one true God. Halbertal and Margalit agree with Seeskin's analysis, and emphasize the rabbinic fear:

> The nonpagan's great fear of similarity based representation is the possibility of a substantive error in which the idol ceases to be the representation or symbol of God and comes to be seen as God himself or part of him. In such a case, the idol is regarded as a fetish that slowly and gradually acquires the traits of the thing it is representing. In a certain sense it becomes the body of the god, the residence of its soul, and an independent object of ritual worship....[27]

The rabbis are concerned ultimately with the fetishist adoption of idols as gods. They fear that a mundane object could so easily (albeit gradually) become the object of worship, rather than God. Thus, their debate about the boundaries between the Jews and idolatry continues.

Despite the difficulty in setting rigid boundaries, the rabbis do not seem to grow tired of the process. They engage with the struggle throughout their writing. Rabbinic culture has an affinity for setting limits; and often idolatry becomes a way of clarifying the limits of their own religious beliefs.

Metaphors For Idolatry

I. Idolatry is *Yetzer Ha'ra*

The rabbis believe that idolatry is inherently evil. Hence, whatever it is within humanity which propels us toward idolatry is evil as well. Often, idolatry is considered synonymous with the "evil desire."[28] This evil desire has led to idolatry among the Jews,

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[27] Halbertal and Margalit 41.
[28] Ibid. 24.

and as a consequence, they have been punished. Let us now examine some texts which reveal this rabbinic thinking:

> And [they] cried with a great [loud] voice unto the Lord, their God (Neh. 9:4). What did they cry? — Woe, woe, it is he (the evil desire, the tempter for idolatry) who has destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us! Thou hast surely given him to us so that we may receive reward through him (i.e., for resisting him successfully, Israel would be rewarded). We want neither him, nor reward through him! Thereupon a tablet fell down from heaven for them, whereupon the word 'truth' (i.e., 'I agree with you; you spoke the truth) was inscribed. (R. Hanina said: One may learn therefrom that the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth). They ordered a fast of three days and three nights, whereupon he (the evil desire, the tempter for idolatry) was surrendered to them. He came forth from the Holy of Holies like a young fiery lion. Thereupon the Prophet said to Israel: This is the evil desire of idolatry, as it is said: And he said: This is wickedness (Zech. 5:8).[29]

Here, the rabbis again display their didactic genius. God is in battle with the "tempter for idolatry," and of course, God wins. But, as the Soncino translation relates (footnote #15 to this *daf*), the evil desire for idolatry is also the evil desire for immorality. The two necessarily go together. In this story, the rabbis emphasize that it is not idolatry itself that destroyed the Temple, it is the evil inclination toward it that incurred God's wrath. The rabbis understand that God will not destroy idols or idolatry. At the same time, God absolutely will not tolerate the human flaw of temptation for idolatry. It is that temptation that the rabbis hope will be eliminated.

The rabbis, then, take the evil inclination metaphor to another level. Not only is it a source of temptation for idolatry, it can be worshipped like a god in its own right! The rabbis explain that submitting to the power of the evil inclination is, in fact, a form of

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[29] *Talmud Bavli. Yoma* 69b. Soncino Trans. (Also, see parallel story in *Sanh.* 64a)

idolatry. Urbach offers an exposition of this quintessentially rabbinic concept, based on the *Talmud Yerushalmi, Nedarim* 9:1 (41a):

> He may consider the Evil Inclination itself as his god, as R. Jannai put it: 'Whosoever listens to his (Evil) Inclination is, as it were, an idolater. What is the reason? "There shall be no strange god in you; neither shall you worship any foreign god" – make not the stranger within you your sovereign.' The enthronement of the Evil Inclination is idolatry; and the prayer customarily recited in the School of R. Jannai, 'that You may give me...a good inclination', and similarly formulated supplications implied the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, and was an expression of readiness to fight against the Evil Inclination.[30]

The Evil Inclination, when allowed to dominate a person, can be considered sovereign much like God is sovereign. An idolater, in the rabbinic construct, is someone who allows his Evil Inclination to rule over him. Magnifying the power of *yetzer ha'ra* leads to idolatry. Thus, the rabbis create a prayer - instituted in the School of R. Jannai - that begs for God to grant us a good inclination, and the power to resist the temptation of idolatry in the form of the Evil Inclination. If one can resist the Evil Inclination, he can resist idolatry, the ultimate sin in the rabbinic mind.

Conversely, the elimination of the Evil Inclination is equivalent to the elimination of idolatry. This is expressed by the rabbis in Tannaitic midrashim, such as this one, explained by Urbach:

> The Tanna R. Nehemiah expresses, in an interesting form, the view that any distance or partition introduced between man and his God creates a domain for the activity of the Evil Inclination. He declares: 'When Israel heard (the words) "You shall have no (other gods)," the Evil Inclination was eradicated from their hearts.[31]

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[30] Urbach 482.
[31] Ibid. 473.

In this illustration, the other gods are the Evil Inclination because they drive a wedge between God and humanity. It is interesting to note, again, the pedagogic approach that the rabbis employ – even the everyday Jew can understand the concept of "evil." Other gods are evil; they are bad. It is that simple.

However, it is more than just evil that upsets the rabbis. It is the dimension of the evil, and the power that idolatry seems to have over the rabbinic mind. Idolatry becomes an obsession. The sages express their concern with the slippery slope in the *Yetzer Ha'ra* metaphor as well:

> The very fact that 'other gods' are identified with the Evil Inclination is evidence of the power attributed to him, and the consoling thought that he would be eradicated in the future was insufficient to put their minds at rest, and many, indeed, investigated his devices and methods. To R. Akiba, the teacher of R. Nehemia, already was ascribed a simile 'At first he is like a thread of a spiderweb, but in the end he becomes like a ship's hawser, as it is written "Woe unto them who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, and sin, as it were with cart ropes"' (Gen. Rabbah 12:6); and continuing his thought, the Amora R. Isaac said 'At first he is like a transient lodger, then a guest, and after that the host' (Ibid.)[32]

The rabbis continue with these metaphors – each expressing a similar theme. The Evil Inclination will grow and grow inside a person, if it is allowed to thrive. It must be eradicated. Likewise it is with its parallel, idolatry. It must be eradicated. It is an unwanted "transient lodger," and the rabbis would hate to see the day on which idolatry becomes a "host."

II. Idolatry is Adultery

Because of the highly anthropomorphic imagery which the rabbis envision for God, the relationship between God and Israel is likewise personified. Hence, when the

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[32] Ibid.

rabbis describe the sins we commit against God, they use ideas such as betrayal and disloyalty,[33] capitalizing on flawed human relationships to help elucidate the problem of idolatry.[34] One of their favorite metaphors is that of adultery. In the rabbinic mind, the relationship between God and Israel is exclusive;[35] there is no room for any paramour. After all, "God and the Jews enjoy a relationship of lovers....man and woman as lovers symbolize the highest demonstration of love possible" – and Song of Songs is the homiletical affirmation for the rabbis' understanding of this amorous dynamic.[36]

Many rabbinic writings demonstrate the rabbinic attitude toward God and Israel. There are midrashim which imagine that when Israel came to receive God's law, God lifted Sinai above them as the veritable *chuppah* of the wedding ceremony between Himself and the Israelites. They consider Shavuot to be our actual *nisuin*, while Passover represents our betrothal – *kiddushin.*[37] Yet again, the rabbis are brilliant teachers. They choose a metaphor that everyone can understand, and then craft their lesson around a common cultural norm. The whole idea behind using a marital construct is based on the assumption that adultery is a well known offense to the morality of the society.[38]

The rabbis see a physical schematic of the Ten Commandments: they are listed with the first five in one column and the second five in a parallel column. When they are set up that way, the second commandment is directly across from the seventh. So, "You shall have no other gods beside Me" stares at "You shall not commit adultery." The

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[33] Halbertal and Margalit 1.
[34] Ibid. 9.
[35] Ibid. 21-22
[36] Blech 69.

midrash in *Mekhilta, Bachodesh* 8 expounds on this "coincidence:"

> On the one it was written, "You shall have no other gods," and opposite it, "You shall not commit adultery" – Scripture thus teaches that whoever worships an object of foreign worship is regarded by Torah as if he had committed adultery against the Omnipresent, for it is said, "you were like the adulterous wife who welcomes strangers instead of her husband" (Ezek. 16:32); "The Lord said to me further, 'Go befriend a woman who, while befriended by a companion, consorts with others, [just as the Lord befriends the Israelites, but they turn to other gods and love the cups of the grape'" (Hos. 3:1).[39]

The rabbis want to be perfectly clear: if a Jew chooses idolatry over God, he has been disloyal to the relationship with God. Halbertal and Margalit call this "moral monotheism" as dictated by the rabbis. Interestingly, the rabbis presume that the people are adhering to God's laws out of a dedication to God (see Chapter Two). So, they are morally compelled by the rabbinic metaphor of a marriage relationship. "The moral element exists because the very obligation to worship one God stems from the fact that God in Heaven chose Israel on earth as His wife, and so according to the norms of marital life idolatry was forbidden for Israel."[40] They go on to explain that the rabbis' target audience had to have an awareness of the importance of marital fidelity, or the rabbinic metaphor would have been useless.[41]

The rabbis do indicate, however, that there is a limit to the anthropomorphism in the adultery metaphor. There is a problem for the rabbis: God has specifically stated that a man who divorces an adulterous woman cannot go back to her. So, what happens when

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[37] Ibid.
[38] Halbertal and Margalit 10.
[39] Brooks 70.
[40] Halbertal and Margalit 22.
[41] Ibid.

the Israelites inevitably betray God? Can we be forgiven, or does the disloyalty create an insurmountable chasm in our relationship? The rabbis were apparently very worried about this metaphor being taken too far. They did not want the Jews to fear that they would be unable to repent. *Sifre* on Deuteronomy, 306 speaks to this very rabbinic concern. The rabbis predict that the Israelites will remember the above stated divorce prohibition, and ask, "Lord of the Universe, you have already written, 'If a man divorces his wife, and she leaves him and marries another man, can he ever go back to her?'" And God says, "What I wrote was 'a man,' but it has already been written, 'For I am God, not man.'"[42] The rabbis do not want the people to understand God as too anthropomorphic – for God does not embody the same frailties as humanity, nor does He have to follow our rabbinic laws! This is an interesting tension that the rabbis have to untangle.

Interestingly, in the process of breaking faith with God, the Israelites are likened to an adulterous woman. But, in their repentance, they are compared to children.[43] The rabbis use a biblical text to formulate their own metaphors:

> I have resolved to adopt you as My child, and I gave you a desirable land – the fairest heritage of all the nations; and I thought you would surely call Me "Father," and never cease to be loyal to Me. Instead you have broken faith with Me, as a woman breaks faith with a paramour, O house of Israel – declares the Lord. Hark! On the bare heights is hear the suppliant weeping of the people of Israel, for they have gone a crooked way, ignoring the Lord their God. Turn back, O rebellious children, I will heal your afflictions! "Here we are, come to You, for You, O Lord, are our God!"[44]

As the Jews come begging back to God, we approach as children would to a

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[42] Ibid. 20.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Jeremiah 3:19-22.

disciplinarian parent. God has the patience and mercy to shift the metaphor. We started out as an adulterous wife, but we endear ourselves to God when our identity changes to mere mischievous children who can make amends.

The adultery metaphor is one of the most common in rabbinic writing. It is a natural extension of the rabbinic expression of idolatry as a sexual sin – sexually enticing and tempting. Likewise, idolatry is like the licentious mistress that comes between God and Israel. Idolatry is the ultimate betrayal of God – misdirected affection and wasted attention.

III. Idolatry is Political Treason

Beyond the adultery analogy, the rabbis created another metaphor in which the Jews betray God through idolatry: it is the metaphor of idolatry as political treason. This rabbinic comparison requires that the first Jews accept the rulership of God. God is the

King *par excellence*; and to betray the King is to commit supreme political and social disloyalty. In the adultery metaphor, the idolatry intrudes on the exclusive relationship between God and Israel. In the political metaphor, idolatry intrudes on the authority that God holds over the Jews. Thus, because the structure of the relationship is different for husband and wife than it is for king and subject, the dynamics of the metaphor are likewise modified: "The political model of God as king does not require absolute exclusivity. Monarchy is an authority that can be granted to others, unlike marital status."[45] Even though the position of king can be held by many different humans, the

[45] Halbertal and Margalit 221.

role of ruler is to be respected without qualification. Idolatry is the paramount example of a fundamental challenge to the position of God as King.

The rabbis consider the Tower of Babel story to be a prime illustration of the people's uprising to challenge the sovereignty of God:

> Elazar said, "Which is worse, the person who says to the king, 'Either you or I in the palace,' or the person who says, 'Neither you nor I in the palace'? The one who says 'Either you or I' is worse. Thus the generation of the flood said, 'Who is God that we should worship Him?' but the generation that built the Tower said, 'Will he choose the upper world for Himself and give us the lower world? Therefore let us make a tower for ourselves and put an idol at its top and put a sword in its hand, so that it will look like it is making war on Him.'"[46]

In this midrash, the rabbis understand Genesis 11:4, "Let us make a name for ourselves," as "Let us make an idol."[47] The rabbis believe the sin of the flood generation was their skepticism about God's existence. They didn't seem to believe in God. But, the good news is that they did not want to *be* God. In their "atheism" they did not threaten God's sovereignty with political upheaval. Therefore, the rabbis consider the Tower generation to be more "idolatrous," because they actually wanted to de-throne God. By building a tower that extends all the way up to God in Heaven, they audaciously presume to be reaching a level equal to that of God. Humanity wants to reach the "upper world" – accusing God of a kind of selfish "hogging" of the upper world! It appears that the people are motivated by a jealousy of God – they want what God has.[48] This is a form of idolatry.

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[46] Genesis *Rabbah* 38:11a.
[47] Halbertal and Margalit 222.
[48] Ibid.

The political metaphor drawn in the above midrash portrays the rabbis' view of idolatry in a different way:

> Idolatry is a challenge to God's exclusive position as king, and the sin represents a crisis in a political system. The political model provides us with a different understanding of the sin of idolatry. Instead of whoredom and nymphomania, instead of the forgetful woman who loses her identity, it uses the image of a rebellious slave who becomes a pretender to the throne when he is driven insane by jealousy and craving for power.[49]

The system of authority in rabbinic Judaism is a hierarchy. God is at the top, the rabbis work to interpret God's will. If the system spins out of its balanced organization, the rabbis are threatened, and worried about the challenge to God's supremacy. "The starting point for the prohibition of idolatry is the exclusivity of the worship of God – the ban on worshipping other gods. The discussion of idolatry and politics leads us to an extension of this exclusivity from ritual worship to the relationships of political loyalty and sovereignty."[50] So, over and again we see that the technical rabbinic prohibition on idolatry represents much greater fears than simple mistakes in ritual worship.

Many Acts are Called Idolatry - The Use of Rabbinic Hyperbole

The rabbis have a remarkable tendency to equate many violations with idolatry.[51] In the rabbinic mind, the gravest sins boil down to a disregard of God – which they consider to be idolatry. In the previous section, we looked at how idolatry becomes defined by creating analogy with other culturally and socially understood transgressions, particularly adultery and political treason. Once the rabbis have firmly established the

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[49] Ibid. 223.
[50] Ibid. 216.
[51] Brooks 46.

severity of the sin of idolatry, the meaning of idolatry becomes part of their social and cultural vocabulary.

There are really two meanings for idolatry in the rabbinic understanding: one is a literal meaning (image worship) and the other is more figurative, in which a wide variety of activities end up in the category of idolatry.[52] Kogan explains that "the term [idolatry] can be applied in any age to virtually any form of behavior, religious or secular, that expresses devotion to values deemed false, distorted, or debased."[53] Thus, the rabbis can expand the way they use idolatry in their writings. In this sense, idolatry becomes a great vehicle for their didactic hyperbole:

> Idolatry is the rubric in Judaism under which all types of strange, alien behavior and worship...is subsumed. As such it goes well beyond the creation of statutes or painted images and worshipping them (cf. Ex. 20:4, 23). Conversely, non-idolatrous worship, authentic monotheism, is in traditional Jewish terms to be found in observing the law, obeying the commandments. One who breaks the law intentionally is seen as breaking the covenant and repudiating God. In the eyes of traditional Judaism, he has adopted an alien way of life, and is like an idolater.[54]

The rabbis do not like behaviors that fall to the outside of their well demarcated boundaries. When they find these behaviors to be absolutely intolerable, they label them "idolatry." In fact, Schwarzschild defines *avodah zarah*, literally "alien service," as "acting weirdly or immorally."[55]

Many rabbinic writings reflect the sages' typical attitude toward idolatry as the classification for serious sin:

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[52] Kogan 170.
[53] Ibid. 175.
[54] Ivry 195.
[55] Schwarzschild 222.

> Shesheth said on the authority of R. Eleazar b. 'Azariah: He who despises the Festivals (by doing unnecessary work on the intermediate days - Rashi) is as though he engaged in idolatry, for it is said, You shall make no molten gods for yourselves (Exod. 34:17), which is followed by, The feast of unleavened bread you shall keep (Exod. 34:18).[56]

This comparison relates to the overarching principle of neglecting God and God's commandments. If one sees fit to neglect the Festivals ordained by God, he might as well be worshipping idols.

Another example of the rabbis' instructive and symbolic use of idolatry is found in the *Bavli Niddah* 13a:

> R. Johanan stated: Whosoever emits semen in vain deserves death, for it is said in Scripture: And the thing which he did (by spilling semen on the ground - Gen. 38:9) was evil in the sight of the Lord, and He slew him also (Gen. 38:10). R. Assi said: He (one who emits semen in vain) is like one who worships idols.

Once more, by committing a sin against God's negative commandment, a person has, in effect, betrayed God. The rabbis call this idolatry.

The examples of this understanding of betrayal go on and on. In the *Bavli Berachot* 31b, R. Eleazar teaches: "a man who says the Tefillah drunk is like one who serves idols." Why? Because praying to God in a compromised state, desecrating the institution of prayer with drunkenness, is an affront to God and God's holiness. Bringing the profane into the realm of worship constitutes idolatry in the rabbinic mind.

The rabbis even go as far as to compare Diaspora living with idolatry. "R. Shimon b. Eleazar: 'Israelites living outside the Land of Israel are idolaters."[57] Even lesser sins are similarly classified: "whoever leaves the Land [of Israel] in peacetime and

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[56] *Talmud Bavli. Pesachim* 118a. Soncino Trans. (See also *Makkot* 23a).
[57] *Tosefta Avodah Zarah* 5:4-5.

goes abroad, he is accounted an idolater...'[58] Of course, the rabbis consider a Jew's departure from *Eretz Yisrael* to be a departure from his faith, his purpose, and the immanence of his God. All of these acts, therefore, are considered idolatrous.

Furthermore, the Talmud speaks of other transgressions of law as idolatrous. In the *Bavli Ketubot* 68a, they take it to a hermeneutical extreme:

> Furthermore, R. Hiyya b. Rab of Difti taught: R. Joshua b. Korha said, Any one who shuts his eye against charity is like one who worships idols, for here (in connection with the duty to assist the poor) it is written, Beware that there be not a base thought in thy heart etc. [and thine eye will be evil against thy poor brother] (Deut. 15:9) and there (concerning idolatry) it is written, Certain base fellows are gone out (Deut. 8:4), as there (concerning idolatry)[the crime is that of] idolatry, so here also [the crime is like that of] idolatry.'

Through the rabbinic technique of *gezerah shavah*, the rabbis are able to make a comparison between neglecting the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*, and idolatry. But, again, it all hearkens back to the neglect of God's commands. Roger Brooks confirms this theory by pointing out that in the *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 11:6, the rabbis equate three violations: idolatrous prophecy, fornication, and defamation of character – "all three transgressions involved the denial of the Torah's most basic commandments."[59] The rabbis have a very focused lens through which they view disobedience. Anything that appears to be a rebellion against God is called idolatry.

Summary:

The rabbis understand idolatry as a most extreme offense. They use their

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[58] Ibid.
[59] Brooks 99.

literature as a canvas to paint a picture of idolatry using a colorful palate of metaphor and analogy. Their didactic method ultimately accomplishes their goal. The Jews are socially, culturally, and religiously aware of the severity of the sin. Hence, they are able to apply the gravity of other sins to the principle of idolatry, and vice versa. In the end, the rabbis demonstrate their fear of the slippery slope – just about anything can lead to idolatry, and idolatry can lead to just about anything!

Chapter Four

Idolatry as a Threat from the "Other"

The Threat of the "Other"

I. A Historical Perspective

The Jews' fear of the "other" was evident even in pre-rabbinic literature. Despite the fact that Jews have traditionally lived as a minority among other vital and developing religions, it does not appear that Jewish leaders have ever reconciled how to coexist with the *umot ha'olam*, other nations of the world. A large part of the conflict is rooted in fundamental contradictions in religious beliefs. That is to say, the Israelites wanted to win a sort of "battle of the gods."

This battle has a long Jewish history. The Bible is replete with this imagery. Some would argue that even the ten plagues of the Exodus story represents the triumph of our God over the Egyptian gods.[1] In the story of Balaam, our God's blessing wins again. The prophets rail against idolatry. Biblically, "the term 'alien gods' became a generic description embracing all forbidden deities, that is, all deities other than YHWH."[2] The books of the Maccabees even record the antagonistic way in which Jews reacted to gentiles even when the Jews held the political or military power:

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[1] The Nile god was defeated when the water turned to blood; the god of light, Re, was defeated by the plague of darkness. Dr. David Aaron explained this reasoning at HUC-JIR, Bible 656, Fall 1999.
[2] Goldenberg 19.

> All that can be said for certain is that the incidents in I Maccabees reflect increasingly aggressive suppression of other religious cults in the areas under Jewish military control. The elimination of structures dedicated to such cults may have begun as a military precaution and then developed a momentum of its own. Or perhaps the traditionalists, growing in confidence, came to feel that religious purification of the entire land was more feasible than they had originally imagined. The question remains unsettled.[3]

Throughout history, Jews have clearly manifested and perpetuated their sense of intolerance for the "other." In the biblical and intertestamental periods, the Jews have harbored disdain for any peoples with different beliefs and practices. At first, the fears of the threats from other religions may have been grounded in real issues of military strength and political dominance. But, the underlying factor remains that "religious purification" was on the mind of the proto-rabbinic writers, laying the groundwork for rabbinic literature.

Even though this study will not emphasize the biblical and intertestamental motifs, they are relevant in that the rabbis respond to these ideas, and adopt some of the literary tropes as their own. It is important to note that the philosophical and religious indications about Jewish dogmatism came from the top down. The rabbinic mind had a great influence on the development of Judaism, but the Jews may have been surviving with much different principles guiding their actions. The Jewish laity had many different options in choosing how they responded to the "other": "different Jews chose among these options as they saw fit, adopting some and ignoring others, to build their own responses to the religious activities of their neighbors, their friends, and their enemies."[4]

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[3] Ibid. 37.
[4] Ibid. 8.

Hence, although we may glean an understanding of the rabbinic teachings and doctrine by studying rabbinic literature, we may not gain accurate insight into the practices of the average Jew. As such is the case, we must acknowledge that the rabbinic fear of the "other" may be greater than that of the laymen. The rabbis were trying to create and perpetuate Judaism, the laymen were just being Jews.

II. Rabbis Adjure: Stay Far Away from the "Other"

Rabbinic writing emphasizes the need for Jews to stay far away from gentiles. One of the vehicles that the rabbis use to make their point is the practice of idolatry. The Jews are beseeched to keep their distance from idolaters and idolatrous practices in many ways. Again, the rabbis tend to use idolatry as a metaphor for the worst aspect of other cultures. Beginning with biblical injunctions, and continuing well into the rabbinic period, Jewish literature reveals many "fences" - strategically placed - to separate Jews from their gentile neighbors.

In particular, the Jews detested three things about the gentile practices: idolatry, immorality, and ceremonial defilement.[5] These three aspects of gentile life created a certain perception of threat within the Jewish elite – they just flinch at the thought of being influenced and contaminated by the practices that surround them. Idolatry elicited this fear in a very unique way:

> Jews abhorred and were suspicious of gentiles because of their idolatry and all associated with it. Israel's history shows both a revulsion at idolatry and a fascination with it. The exile, it seems, greatly diminished the latter....Indeed, any association with gentiles could bring the Jew into a state of defilement. Unregulated contact with gentiles might endanger the whole system of ceremonial and ritual observances that were based on

[5] Scott 347.

> Old Testament law, and that during the intertestamental period became emblems of national identity and instruments of protective exclusivism....[6]

In essence, idolatry became the scapegoat and symbol from which the Jews of the rabbinic period recoiled. In their revulsion for idolatry was manifest their fascination. Thus, the rabbis use of idolatry to communicate their loathing of the "other" became an obsession.

As Judaism evolved into a religion of law, the culture of avoiding gentiles had already been deeply ingrained into the Jewish consciousness. In fact, by the rabbinic period, most Jews knew very well that they were not to participate in gentile religion in any way – Robert Goldenberg calls this phenomenon "studied avoidance."[7] The rabbis indoctrinated the people to live by the tenet of "studied avoidance" by demonizing the gentiles through metaphors of idolatry.

All of talmudic Tractate *Avodah Zarah* thematically addresses the problem of how to coexist with gentiles in a society where the Jews were economically dependent on interacting with their gentile neighbors. Once more, the rabbis appear to be operating under the assumption that by this time in their religious development, Jews would not actually consider the option of bowing down to an idol. So, the Talmud does not go as far as to explain, in detail, the prohibition of actually worshipping an idol. But, the rabbis do consider it necessary to build a fence around the gentiles, thus the Jews can stay even farther away from the real forbidden practice.

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[6] Ibid. 337-338.

8 The rabbis paint a far worse picture of idolaters than they do of idolatry in the Tractate *Avodah Zarah*. In looking closely at the details contained with the Tractate, we see that the rabbis had a very clear agenda in communicating their thoughts about gentiles:

> ...one finds a harsh picture of idolaters, who are suspected of incest, adultery, and murder. These suspicions have various halakhic ramifications connected with the obligation of caution and keeping one's distance in dealings with these lawless people, who are capable of any crime. It is forbidden to be alone with them in a room or to walk with them alone on an unfrequented road, and there are various other laws that highlight their image as lawless people.[9]

Let us now look at some examples of how the rabbis portray the idolaters as "lawless people." In the Mishna Avodah Zarah (2:1), the rabbis build big, strong fences:

> Cattle may not be left in the inns of the gentiles since they are suspected of bestiality; nor may a woman remain alone with them since they are suspected of lewdness; nor may a man remain alone with them since they are suspected of shedding blood. The daughter of an Israelite may not assist a gentile woman in childbirth since she would be assisting to bring to birth a child for idolatry....The daughter of an Israelite may not suckle the child of a gentile woman...

The rabbis clearly fear the influence of gentile culture upon the pure Jews. Only a gentile could seduce a Jewish woman into acts of lewdness; only a gentile man is suspected of bloodshed! Goldenberg states that it is not "clear whether traditionalist opposition to gentile ways made any distinction between the worship of gentile gods and other features of gentile culture."[10] In this sense, the rabbis may be using idolatry as an excuse to display their rampant xenophobia. Or, their condemnation of the other may

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[7] Goldenberg 99.
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[9] Halbertal and Margalit 209.
[10] Goldenberg 36.

have stemmed from their vehement loathing of idolatry. We have a chicken and egg problem. But, in either case, the rabbis do not like idolaters. They do not make any effort to conceal their contempt.

III. Some Rabbinic Contradictions

The rabbis were scared of the effect of idolatry and idolaters on Judaism and Jews. But, like much of the Jewish laity, even the rabbis had to interact with the gentiles. So, some of their writings betray the inevitable inconsistency between their theory and their practice. For example, we learn in the *Bavli, Sanhedrin* 63b:

> 'Nor cause others [sc. heathens] to vow or swear by its name.' This supports the dictum of Samuel's father. For the father of Samuel said: One may not enter into a business partnership with a heathen, lest the latter be obliged to take an oath [in connection with a business dispute], and he swear by his idol, while the Torah has said, Neither let it be heard out through your mouth (a rabbinically finessed translation of Gen. 41:40).

From this talmudic passage, it is clear that the rabbis build a fence around idolatry by not allowing a Jew to enter into a business relationship with a gentile, lest it be necessary to make an oath sworn to an idol. The rabbis do not want any Jew to be responsible for an idolatrous practice by entering a situation where an idolater would need to invoke the name of his god.[11] At the same time, however, many prominent rabbis were themselves in friendly relationships with certain gentiles.[12] Plus, the rabbis devote significant time and energy to bolstering their theory for the potential righteousness of the gentiles. But, in the end, "much rabbinic social legislation extending friendship or philanthropy to gentiles is couched in grudging language and presented as a set of gestures designed

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[11] Note the thematic similarity between this text and the *M. Avodah Zarah* 2:1 selection.
[12] Goldenberg 84.

either to preserve social peace or to avoid gentile hostility."[13] The rabbis exist in a tension of genuine disdain and distrust for the gentiles, while cognizant of the "wrongfulness" of judging them as evil human beings.

The tension is heightened in the way the rabbis understand their own construct of *mipne darkei shalom*. This principle overlays much of the sages' writings; the rabbis must be kind in their interactions with everyone for the sake of peace. Gersion Appel notes:

> The Sages have decreed that we are to visit their [i.e., heathen] sick and to bury their dead as we do the Jewish dead, and to provide for their poor together with the poor of Israel in the interests of peace. Behold it is said, 'The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works' (Ps. 145:9), and it is also said, 'Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace" (Proverbs 3:17).[14]

Furthermore, the rabbis extend their own obligations to the Jewish poor to the underprivileged among the gentiles. In *Mishna Gittin* 5:8, we learn that R. Yose says: "They do not try to prevent the poor among the gentiles from gathering the Gleanings, the Forgotten Sheaf and *Peah* – in the interests of peace." The three regulations mentioned in this mishna apply to caring for the Jewish poor. But, the rabbis extend this mitzvah to the "contemptible" gentiles. Also, the laws of *ger toshav*, the "resident alien," must be just – *ki gerim hayitem b'eretz Mitzrayim.* The rabbis hold that because we were strangers in the land of Egypt, we must extend an empathic grace toward those who now live as strangers among us. This does change the rabbinic perspective with regard to keeping far

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[13] Ibid.
[14] Appel, Gersion. *A Philosophy of Mitzvot* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1975) 127-8.

way from the gentile idolater. But, overall, the rabbis are far more interested in keeping the Jews from interacting with idolatrous gentiles than they are with helping them.

IV. Once an Idolater, Always an Idolater: Do the Rabbis Like Converts?

The question of whether the rabbis accept or reject converts is a complicated one. The halachah sets forth a system for welcoming those who wish to adopt Judaism, but the wariness of the rabbis nonetheless is apparent.

> The Talmud is aware that gentiles are allowed to adopt the Jewish way of life and lays down procedures for them to do so, but it shows no overall enthusiasm for pursuing such a goal. The Babylonian Talmud...explicitly instructed Jews to discourage any gentiles who show interest in joining the people of Israel, and both Talmuds contain expressions of doubt as to whether such newcomers are ultimately of benefit to the covenant people.[15]

In fact, Goldenberg further points out that the rabbis inherited a tradition of accepting gentiles through a process of conversion.[16] It remains unclear whether rabbinic culture would have supported an initiative to allow "others" to join the ranks of the Jews. In essence, some would argue that the rabbis got stuck with a tradition they would not have created. A clear example of the rabbis' ambivalence is found in the *Bavli, Yevamot* 47a-47b:

> Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a man desires to become a proselyte, he is to be addressed as follows: 'What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte; do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions'? If he replies, 'I know and yet am unworthy' [of the privilege of membership of Israel], he is accepted forthwith, and is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments. He is informed of the sin [of the neglect of the commandments of] Gleanings,

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[15] Goldenberg 90-91.

[16] In an endnote to this point (p. 91), Goldenberg writes "The Dead Sea Scrolls seem to contain the only surviving body of Jewish opinion that may have rejected this consensus [that converts were accepted]....a graded list of community members places *gerim* in the fourth rank" (See note #63, p. 163).

> the Forgotten Sheaf, the Corner and the Poor Man's Tithe. He is also told of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments. Furthermore, he is addressed thus: 'Be it known to you that before you came to this condition, if you had eaten suet (i.e., pig fat) you would not have been punishable with kareth, if you had profaned the Sabbath you would not have been punishable with stoning; but now were you to eat suet you would be punished with kareth; were you to profane the Sabbath you would be punished with stoning.' And as he is informed of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments, so is he informed of the reward granted for their fulfillment. He is told, 'Be it known to you that the world to come was made only for the righteous, and that Israel at the present time are unable to bear either too much prosperity, or too much suffering.' He is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much.

This text effectively works to deter a potential convert. Although the rabbis manage to couch their rhetoric in "warning," one could argue that they really hoped that the one who desires conversion would be discouraged by the strict rabbinic regulations. However, once a proselyte is officially converted, the rabbis must accept him. Those are the rules, and the rabbis cannot transgress the rules! But, in rabbinic literature, one must learn to read between the lines. The rabbis communicate a great deal through subtlety and implication. The rabbis would rather prevent a conversion than have to accept an idolater into the fold. The rabbis try to make it look otherwise, but they certainly appear to be scaring away anyone who would try to penetrate the fence dividing the Jews from the "others."

At the same time, there are rabbinic passages that are not as subtle. For instance, *TB, Sanhedrin* 59a: "A gentile who studies the Torah is deserving of death, as it is said, 'Moses commanded us Torah as an inheritance' (Deut. 33:4) – it is an inheritance for us, but not for them." The rabbis want to claim exclusive rights to the Torah, no others should meddle in our inheritance. In *TB Yevamot* 47b, we learn, "R. Helbo said:

Proselytes are as hard for Israel [to endure] as a sore." Thus, even though the rabbis knew they must endure the proselyte, he irritated the rabbis as much as a painful sore.

The rabbis characteristically avoid proselytizing. But, again, this concept is fraught with contradiction. While much of rabbinic writing appears to pray for the day when all will come to love and accept the Israelite God, the rabbis do not want to associate with those who do not follow God *yet*. The avoidance of proselytism may be explained by any number of possible factors. First, the avoidance may indicate a religious feeling that it is simply unnecessary, or not commanded, that Jews participate in active missionizing. Second, the rabbis may fear the risk of interacting with cultures that generally dislike the Jews – why would the gentiles want to become part of a group of people they hate? Or, third, perhaps the rabbis are making a statement about the inadequacy of gentiles: they "do not deserve or are not capable of enjoying the benefits of the covenant and are best kept out of it."[17] Much of the time, the literature betrays a preference for the third explanation, with certain contributions from the other two possibilities. The rabbis simply do not like the "other." Whether or not we find satisfactory justification for their ridicule, it pervades their thinking and their writing, giving us insight into their religious context.

The Rabbis Use Idolatry as Their Insult to the "Other" Cultures

I. Rabbis Express Resentment of Other Cultures' Persecution of Jews

Throughout the years, Jews have lived as a minority. In the rabbinic period, the Jews experienced persecution at worst, marginalization at best. The sages use their

[17] Ibid. 7.

literature as a stage upon which they act out their frustrations about their social situation. Jews have historically vented their anger in many different ways:

> Jewish hostility to other religions was sometimes merely passive, a scrupulous avoidance of all contact with "idols." At other times, however, Jewish hostility became more violent. This violence sometimes remained verbal, as vehement denunciation and mockery of the nations' gods, but sometimes Jews carried out actual violent destruction of pagan shrines or the forcible imposition of Judaism on formerly pagan groups.[18]

When Goldenberg explains the historical actions of Jews, he is referring to the laity as well as the intellectual elite. The rabbis are the intellectual elite. They did not desire "forcible imposition of Judaism on formerly pagan groups," nor did they wage physical war against the pagans. The rabbis wished to preserve the ritual purity and cultural separateness that characterized rabbinic thought. The rabbis wage a war of words:

> The hostility toward gentiles that suffused Jewish life may have originated as hostility toward pagan deities, but it had long ago broken free of that initial focus. This hostility fed on resentment of endless subjection to foreign conquerors and the frustrated national ambitions of the Jews themselves....Now the rabbis tried to deflect that psychic energy into less hazardous channels than war: emphasis on the moral depravity of gentiles, especially gentile women, was one available substitute, and eschatological fantasy , with its promise of vindication for those who held out, was another.[19]

Thus, the rabbinic polemic against idolatry reveals many layers of complexity. Their tirade is much more than a mere condemnation of the practice of idolatry.

Of course, the rabbis do believe that paganism is corrupt and stupid, obfuscating the existence of the One True God. But they are careful to add the dimension of insulting the *people* who practice idolatry. No one with common sense could ever possibly be

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[18] Ibid. 33.
[19] Ibid. 90.

interested in such a religion were it not for the release it offers from the constraints of a life of Torah. The rabbis, therefore, disallow the tainted products of pagans to enter the realm of Jewish practice. They use hyperbolic language, full of strict boundaries, to express their concern:

> R. Aha b. Adda said in R. Isaac's name: Their bread was forbidden on account of their oil, and their oil on account of their wine. 'Their bread on account of their oil'!-wherein is [the interdict of] oil stronger than that of bread? (This implies that there was greater reason from prohibiting their oil than their bread). Rather [say] they decreed against their bread and oil on account of their wine, and against their wine on account of their daughters, and against their daughters on account of 'the unmentionable,' (IDOLATRY) and [they decreed] something else on account of some other thing. What is this 'something else?'- Said R. Nahman b. Isaac: They decreed that a heathen child shall defile by gonorrhea (even if he is not suffering therewith), so that an Israelite child should not associate with him for sodomy.[20]

The rabbis do not hesitate to emphasize the repugnant disease of gonorrhea, along with the distasteful practice of sodomy, in conjunction with the idolater. But, by calling idolatry the "unmentionable" the rabbis may believe they are obscuring their language so that none of the other nations would recognize themselves in the rabbinic polemic! So many of their decrees effectively work as a backlash against the "other." The rabbinic tone is one of anger and hatred. Why do they hate the idolaters so much? Why do they need to keep so far away? How is this rabbinic anger manifest?

The rabbis go out of their way to assail pagan deities. Perhaps the rabbis perceive this attack as the best way of going right to the jugular of the pagan psyche. Given that the rabbis love their God so much, they may just assume that the ultimate insult to a person is to denounce his god. Hillel said, "Do not do unto others as you would not have

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[20] *Talmud Bavli. Shabbat* 17b. Soncino Trans.

others do unto you." The rabbis know the pain of an insult to God (see Chapter Two). If they want to be angry and venomous, they insult the other gods. There are various texts that exhibit this rabbinic pattern. In the *Bavli, Avodah Zarah* 46a, we learn:

> Whence is it that when one destroys an idol he must eradicate every trace of it? — There is a text to state, And you shall destroy their name. R. Akiba said to him: But has it not been already stated, You shall surely destroy? If so, why is there a text to state, And you shall destroy their name out of that place? — [Its purpose is to teach that] an idol must be renamed. It is possible to think [it may be renamed] for praise (i.e., to give it a better name). Can it enter your mind [that the renaming] is for praise? But it is possible to think [that the renaming may be] neither for praise nor contempt; therefore there is a text to state, Thou shalt utterly detest it, and Thou shalt utterly abhor it (Deut. 7:26). How is it, then? If [the heathens] called it Beth Galya [house of revelation], call it Beth Karya [house of concealment]; if they called it 'En Kol [the all-seeing eye], call it 'En Koz [the eye of a thorn].

This selection of text is a basic rabbinic lesson on how to turn the name of a pagan god into an obscenity![21] If idols are to be renamed, it is unthinkable that we would give the idol a good name. No. We must utterly detest the idol, abhor it. The rabbis do this by literally calling it names – schoolyard vengeance. It is the way the rabbis lash out at those who have threatened their God. The rabbis might say, "They started it...."

II. Rabbis Want to Win the Culture War

As long as the rabbis are expressing their anger, they want to win. The opening *dapim* of the *Bavli Avodah Zarah* emphasize the rabbis' vision of victory over all of the other nations. Despite the fact that the idolaters have persecuted the Jews, the Jews will have the last laugh. The God of the Jews will have very little mercy on the sniveling idolaters. This is a very satisfying *nechemta* for the sages. Robert Goldenberg

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[21] Goldenberg 83.

summarizes the midrashim of *Avodah Zarah* 2a-3b, demonstrating this particular brand of "rabbinic triumphalism":

> At the end of time God will hold an assize of all the nations: holding aloft a scroll of the Torah, God will proclaim, "Let him who has busied himself with this come and take his reward." Immediately all the nations will gather around...
> Rome steps forward first, and declares that all they have ever done was done for the sake of Israel: they built markets, constructed baths, and accumulated wealth, all so that Israel might be left free to busy itself with Torah. But God rejects this claim: everything they did was in their own self-interest.
> Next comes Persia, and a similar exchange unfolds: they built bridges, conquered cities, and conducted many wars, all so that Israel might be busy with Torah. God rejects this claim as well, and after that every other nation in turn suffers the same judgments. ...
> At this point the nations ask for another chance: "Give [the Torah] to us again and we will follow it." God rebukes them for their belatedness but instructs them to go carry out the commandment of dwelling in the sukkah. (The objection that it is too late for such repentance is brushed aside; God does not deal tyrannously with His creatures).
> But then God brings out a blazing summer heat, and everyone kicks over his sukkah and goes inside. As for the claim just made that God is no tyrant, sometimes it gets hot for the Jews as well. It is true that when it gets too hot even Jews are allowed to go inside, but they would not kick over their sukkah as they went in.
> And then the Holy One, blessed be He, will laugh.[22]

This summary of the rabbinic narrative highlights the rabbinic need to come out on top. Goldenberg affirms that this text "gives vent to the enormous Jewish anger at centuries of foreign oppression."[23] They are typical underdogs, living out their fantasies of what it would be like to see God destroy their enemies, the pagans. Even if the pagans were to acknowledge the supremacy of God and Judaism, their response would be too desperate, and too little too late. The rabbis win. They win the game for which they establish the rules.

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[22] Ibid. 92-93.

III. A Selection of Rabbinic Insults – Idolatry and the Gentile

The rabbis use the stage of their literature to act out their anger and disdain for the "other." Some of the texts are very direct, as in the case of *TB Shabbat* 88b-89a:

> R. Hisda and Rabbah the son of R. Huna both said, What is [the meaning of] Mount Sinai? The mountain whereon there descended hostility [*sin'ah*] toward idolaters....what was its [real] name? Its name was Horeb. Now they disagree with R. Abbahu, For R. Abbahu said: its name was Mount Sinai, and why was it called Mount Horeb? Because desolation [*hurbah*] to idolaters descended thereon.

Hence, the sight of Jewish revelation and the climax of Jewish identification as a people is synonymous with the hatred and desolation of the idolater. Their literature even demonstrates that the rabbis actually argued about which derogatory term should be used to describe the gentiles. Should it be derived from Horeb or from Sinai? Either way, we get the point.

The Talmud goes on to elaborate on the animal-like qualities typical of an idolater. In *TB Chullin* 5a, we read the following midrash:

> [It is written]. [When any] of you [presents an offering of cattle to the Lord], but not all of you (i.e., the issue is with "of," meaning not everyone can present an offering), thus excluding an apostate. Of you, that is, among you [Israelites] does this distinction apply but not among other nations. 'Of the cattle' includes persons who are [devoid of merit] like animals; hence [the Rabbis] have declared: One should accept sacrifices from the transgressors in Israel, so that they may be inclined to repent, but not from an Israelite apostate, or from one who offers a wine libation [to idols], or from one who profanes the Sabbath publicly.

In this midrash, idolaters are compared with cattle. The rabbis speak even more harshly to the issue of an apostate Jew who would ever dare to commit the ultimate offense of offering libation to an idol. In *TB Chullin* 13b, we learn that R. Eliezer maintains that

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[23] Ibid.

the thoughts of a gentile are usually toward idolatry. This, of course, is the ultimate rabbinic insult toward the gentile. Anyone whose thoughts are usually toward idolatry, and the implied licentious, immoral lifestyle that accompanies it, is the worst kind of human from the rabbinic viewpoint.

The Rabbis Define Judaism by Separating from the "Other"

I. A Break From Emerging Christianity

Rabbinic Jewish self-definition is often depicted in contradistinction to idolatry (see Chapter Two). Likewise, Jewish national self-definition is often contrasted with the rabbinic notion of the "other."[24] The sense of Jewish peoplehood that the rabbis guarded was particularly threatened by nascent Christianity. In fact, as Christianity began to create its own identity, it often used the authority of Jewish teachings to bolster its own credibility. In some cases, the line between Jew and Christian was blurred by the shared Scriptures. Even the rabbis were confused; there were Jewish Jews, and Christian Christians and Jewish Christians. In fact, "the tannaim still regarded the Jewish Christians they knew as Jews , even as late as the end of the first century C.E....Jewish Christianity still predominated until the Bar Kokhba Revolt."[25] Basically, Jews viewed Jewish Christians as Jews who had gone astray; only later did they alter their viewpoint to see Christians as another religious community entirely.[26] The great split came as a result of the Bar Kokhba Revolt – the respective communities realized that their differences were greater than their similarities.

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[24] Halbertal and Margalit 236.
[25] Schiffman, Lawrence H., Who Was a Jew? (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1985) 67.
[26] Ibid. 73.

The status of Jewish Christians was a subject of debate in rabbinic literature. Schiffman recounts that R. Tarfon regards Jewish Christians as worse than idolaters, "for while it is understandable that a pagan might embrace the new faith, it was a great source of frustration that Jews, raised in the traditions of Judaism, would do so as well."[27] In *BT Avodah Zarah* 17b, the rabbis discuss a "meeting house." The Soncino Commentary considers this a "Place of Assembly for matters and performances connected with idolatry. Under Hadrian Jews were forced to attend these. V. Shab. 115a, where this is referred to as a place where disputations were held between Jews and the early Christians."[28] The important piece of this information is contained in the rabbinic connection between Christianity and idolatry. Again, the rabbis are using idolatry as a supreme insult and a metaphor for depravity. Obviously, Christians did not bow down to pagan gods. Christian doctrine also condemned paganism. But, the rabbis are so fixated on condemning all other religions, they fail to differentiate between "real" idolatry and metaphorical idolatry.

Schiffman actually credits this kind of rabbinic stubbornness with saving the heritage of Judaism:

> In retrospect, the *halakhot* we have studied were what maintained the identity of the Jewish people. Had the rabbis relaxed these standards, accepting either the semi-proselytes or the earliest Gentile Christians into the Jewish people, Christians would quickly have become the majority within the expanded community of "Israel." Judaism as we know it would have ceased to exist even before reaching its codification in the Mishnah and the other great compilations of the tannaitic tradition. Christianity would have been the sole heir to the traditions of biblical antiquity, and observance of the commandments of the Torah would have disappeared within just a few centuries. In short, it was the *halakhah* and its definition

[27] Ibid. 63.
[28] *Avodah Zarah* 17b. Soncino Trans, n16.

> of Jewish identity which saved the Jewish people and its heritage from extinction as a result of the newly emerging Christian ideology.[29]

According to Schiffman's viewpoint here, the stringency of Jewish intolerance was the salvation of our religion. The fences built by the rabbis served to keep out the unwanted neighbors. But, perhaps even more importantly, the fences kept the Jewish ways reigned in tightly.

Many examples of rabbinic literature point to the rabbinic urgency in protecting Jewish practice. For instance, when the rabbis instituted *birkat ha'minim*, they hoped to accomplish several goals. First, the sages strove to combat Jewish Christianity. Second, they emphasized that Christian Scriptures were not to be considered holy books.[30] The "holy books" of the *minim* (read: Christians[31]) are not to be saved from a fire, for they are like blank spaces.[32] We are not to eat the meat slaughtered by a *min*, for it would be considered of the same status as meat slaughtered by an idolater.[33] The rabbinic warning: stay away from Christians. Stay away from everyone.

II. Can the Rabbis Forbid Idolatry to the Gentiles?

In certain selections of rabbinic literature, the rabbis appear to be legislating for a group of people over whom they have no control. In other words, the rabbis wish to prohibit idolatry even to those who do not subscribe to any rabbinic rulings. Thus, one must ask the question, how did the rabbis justify their authority over the religious practices of the gentiles? Did the rabbis view their discourse as merely theoretical? Did

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[29] Schiffman, Lawrence H. *Who Was a Jew?* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1985) 77.
[30] Ibid. 62.
[31] Ibid. 46, 65.
[32] *Talmud Bavli. Shabbat* 116a. Soncino Trans.
[33] *Tosefta Chullin* 2:20.

they wish to communicate to their Jewish constituents the illusion of control in a world in which the Jews had very little autonomy? How can we understand the boundaries of rabbinic legislation over gentiles?

Pragmatically, the rabbis would have no right to legislate over gentiles. But, it is important to recognize the powerful sense of mission with which the rabbis operated. Goldenberg calls this sense of mission "covenant loyalty":

> If the demand for Israelite monolatry was based on an appeal to covenantal loyalty, then presumably such an appeal had no relevance to the lives of other nations who did not share in Israel's covenant with YHWH. If, however, the prophets' claim was to be understood as implying the unreality of other divinities altogether – if the worship of other deities was understood as involving a truly cosmic error, if the worship of other gods was wrong because gods were false – then other nations too had to be weaned of such worship: intellectual integrity and simple human decency demanded no less.[34]

In the sense of Goldenberg's understanding, the rabbis did not feel that they had a choice about whether or not to combat the plague of idolatry. They had to fix the cosmic error! Their role on earth, as the "chosen" group who understands the cosmic truth, is to disseminate this truth to as many souls as possible. Thus, their task is clear.

For the most part, the rabbinic authority to mandate behavior to gentiles is based on their own construct of the *Sheva Mitzvot B'nei Noach* – the seven commandments which are incumbent upon all people (since all humans are descendants of Noah). The seven Noahide laws are defined by seven basic axioms:

1. Do not worship idols
2. Do not blaspheme the name of God
3. Establish courts of justice

4. Do not murder
5. Do not commit adultery (incest or homosexuality)
6. Do not rob
7. Do not eat flesh containing blood or meat not ritually slaughtered[35]

Note, there is nothing prohibited to the gentiles that is permitted to the Jews.[36] Interestingly, Scott points out that the Sibylline Oracles, a collection of Jewish writings from the intertestamental period, pronounce blessings upon gentiles who observe the following principles:

1. Recognize the true God
2. Abstain from idolatry and idolatrous practices
3. Abstain from murder
4. Do no violence
5. Abstain from theft
6. Wash from head to foot in running streams[37]

The blessings and prohibitions appear to indicate that the rabbis were legislating for the gentiles. But, David Novak argues that the Noahide laws were not intended to govern gentiles. Rather, they "represent a category of rabbinic religiolegal theory, not a historical body of rules. They have the effect of constituting a standard of gentile

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[34] Goldenberg 9.
[35] Scott 341. See also Novak 89. There are many versions of laws pertaining to gentile practice, but this list is most commonly accepted as the *Sheva Mitzvot B'nei Noach.*
[36] See *TB Sanhedrin* 59a and *Yevamot* 22a.
[37] Scott 340.

morality that is in theory independent of Judaism...."[38] Goldenberg agrees that the *Sheva Mitzvot B'nei Noach* were never intended for actual practice – "they remained an analytic construct of purely hypothetical interest.... Rabbinic authorities do not seem to have considered the Noahide laws enforceable at all."[39] But, perhaps the rabbis dreamed that someday gentiles would live under their jurisdiction.

In that sense, the Noahide laws were not meant to be enforced in their own day, but it could happen if the Jewish fate would change. And, if that should ever come to pass, the rabbis would be well prepared. For despite the fact that the Talmud teaches that a gentile who studies Torah deserves to be put to death,[40] the Talmud also states that "even a gentile who studies Torah is [equal in status to] a High Priest."[41] The rabbis explain the "Torah" as *their* Torah – the seven Noahide Laws.[42] In the end, we must conclude that the rabbis can only hope that their denunciation of idolatry would be respected. They certainly have no power to enforce their ideals upon those who do not subscribe to Judaism. But, their sense of mission to please God, in combination with their frustration with persecution and their desire for power, led them to create laws that restrict the practice of idolatry – for everyone on earth.

III. The Assimilation Fear

The rabbis are aware of the seductive power of the surrounding culture. Clearly, their biggest fear is that the Jews would slowly take on characteristics of the idolaters,

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[38] Goldenberg 89.
[39] Ibid. 88.
[40] *TB Sanhedrin* 59a
[41] *TB. Bava Kama* 38a.
[42] Goldenberg 87.

and then lose their Jewish uniqueness. In the *Bavli, Sanhedrin* 102b, the rabbis teach about the power of idolatry in luring Jews to its appealing ways:

> In the college of R. Ashi the lecture [one day] terminated at 'Three Kings.' 'Tomorrow, said he, 'we will commence with our colleagues (i.e., scholars).' [That night] Manasseh came and appeared to him in a dream. 'You have called us your colleagues and the colleagues of your father; now, from what part [of the bread] is [the piece for reciting] *ha-mozi* to be taken?' 'I do not know,' he answered. 'You have not learned this,' he jibed, 'yet you call us your colleagues!'(i.e., R. Ashi is not worthy of being included in the category of "colleague") 'Teach it to me,' he begged, 'and tomorrow I will teach it in your name at the session.' He answered, 'From the part that is baked into a crust (i.e., a piece of the outer surface must be taken for the purpose, not the inner dough).' He then questioned him, 'Since you are so wise, why did you worship idols?' He replied, 'If you had been there, you would have taken up the skirt of your garment and sped after me.'

In the rabbinic mind, a wise person should never be tempted by the inane and sinful practice of idolatry. But, if Menasseh, a wise king, could be tempted, most assuredly *amcha* is at risk! We know that Diaspora Jews in particular were quite involved in surrounding life, despite the rabbinic effort to separate from gentiles. In fact, according to Scott, "among all the ancient peoples none learned as much from the Greeks as the Jews."[43] Hence, we can be sure that the lure of other cultures was a very real, very threatening factor.

How did the rabbis respond to this threat? Jacob Neusner explains that they react with extremism:

> Their intention is to create nothing less than a full-scale Israelite government subject to the administration of the sages…[it] mediates between its own community and the outside ("pagan") world. Through its

[43] Scott 338.

> system of laws it expresses its judgment of the others and at the same time defines, protects, and defends its own society and social frontiers.[44]

Of course, as stated in the previous sub-section, this "full-scale Israelite government" may be happening more in the rabbinic imagination than in political reality. The rabbis of the Mishnah debate and discuss as if the Temple were still standing! Likewise, they create laws as if they had the power to eliminate idolatry from their midst and the midst of the Jews as a whole. But, since they surely know as well as the rest of us that they could not effect that wide-scale change, they hope to communicate their values and teachings through their rhetoric. It was effective. The entire system of Judaism is based on their writings.

Nevertheless, we cannot be sure how closely the Jews of the rabbinic period actually followed the teachings of the rabbis. Halbertal and Margalit assert that the Jewish communities of this period really did not adhere to the restrictions set forth in tractate *Avodah Zarah*. In fact, they regularly engaged in business dealings with Christians even on the days immediately before and after the Christian holidays. Plus, they regularly sold objects that were for use in Christian ritual practice.[45] The fact that the Jews were so brazenly disobeying rabbinic ordinance forced the sages to rethink their categorization of Christians. While at first the rabbinic decree was that Christians were idolaters, the rabbis had to change their stance. How could they allow a situation in which their own people disregard their teachings? They created a solution: instead of calling *all* other religions idolatry, the rabbis decided to consider monotheist traditions like

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[44] Neusner, Jacob. *The Formation of Judaism: In Retrospect and Prospect* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 92.

[45] Halbertal and Margalit 210-211.

Christianity and Islam to be "filial behavior" – "religiously meaningless ancestral custom rather than flagrant defiance of the one true Creator God."[46] Once the rabbis could relax about the potential threat to God (see Chapter Two), they could tolerate more Jewish interaction with the gentiles. At the same time, they managed to preserve their integrity – quite ingenious.

Christianity aside, the rabbis still had to solve the problem of infiltration of other culture. Even though they allowed for commercial interaction, they had strong disdain for the cultural influences. They were afraid of the constant temptation: "Gentile society, most particularly gentile women, was a constant temptation, and stringent restraints had to be placed on Jewish social activities, lest Jewish men with limited powers of resistance cross over to the other side and its alluring benefits."[47] It appears that the rabbis were fully aware of the psychosocial elements that contribute to the temptation. The "forbidden fruit" is always sweeter – and many Jews saw gentile culture as an orchard blooming with all of that sweet forbidden fruit. The rabbis just had to work that much harder to lure the Jews back to the straight path.

Summary:

The rabbis would rather live in their sequestered world. It is safe there, free from the fear of the infiltration of the gentiles. Throughout history, the Jews have learned to be very mistrustful of the "other." Clearly, the Jews have had good reason to be wary – and

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[46] Goldenberg 90.
[47] Ibid. 86.

the rabbinic period was fraught with tumultuous relations between the Jews and the gentiles:

> Some people...felt the very example of gentile religion was a disturbance, always tempting Israelites to adopt an alien, forbidden alternative to their own ordained way of life. Others, however, were confident that the Israelites could disregard such alternatives and focus their attention exclusively on their own obligations.[48]

The tension in this statement best encompasses the rabbinic tension. While they hoped that the Israelites would prevail over the "alternatives," they did not cease from their tirade to enforce the Jewish way. The Jewish way is fundamentally antithetical to the ways of the idolatrous pagans. Ephraim Urbach once said, "wherever separatism is lacking, syncretism speedily intrudes."[49] The rabbis were anti-syncretism – so they made sure that separatism was never lacking.

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[48] Ibid. 26.
[49] Ibid. 122, n86.

Chapter Five

The Use of Theological Aids to Prevent Idolatry

Definitions – Images and Idols

I. Are All Images Forbidden?

The rabbinic prohibitions of idolatry are rooted, in their most basic form, in the first and second commandments of the Torah Decalogue. As discussed at length in Chapter Two, the nature of idolatry is encompassed in its denial of God. But, the rabbis' problem with idolatry is much more complicated. Their objection to idolatry cannot be manifest in an unqualified proscription because of the fundamental human need to create representations of God. The rabbis concede to this human need. In truth, "the distinction between the idol worshippers and their opponents is not in the image of God in the minds of the worshipers but in the methods of representing him in ritual worship."[1] Unquestionably, the rabbis place strict parameters on the ways in which a person is allowed to represent God, without treading on idolatrous ground.

The restriction on images is based on the revelation on Mt. Sinai. The rabbis realize that at first glance, the first two commandments appear to be very similar, with the second commandment expounding upon the first. Adonai is God, and *thus*, one should

[1] Halbertal and Margalit 47-48.

not make any images or worship any other "gods." However, it is unclear whether the making of images is tantamount to idolatry. The rabbis grapple with the notion of how to define the "worship" of other gods.

Halbertal and Margalit explain that the second commandment is actually a second prohibition: "it is forbidden to worship other gods, and in addition it is forbidden to make images and likenesses of God himself."[2] The word "idolatry" is also used to describe the "ban on certain ways of representing the right God..., and the ban on idolatry is, among other things, a determination of the permitted and forbidden ways of representing God."[3] The scholars emphasize that the issue is not as focused on the worship of God versus the worship of idols. Rather, the main concern for the rabbis was whether or not it is even allowed to make any representation of God at all.[4]

During the revelation, God was not manifest in a corporeal form. The Bible recounts a description of the events, not a picture of God's appearance during the revelation. "Since the Israelites did not see any image on Mt. Sinai, they are forbidden to make images or pictures – a clear expression of the fear of the representation of God himself in images and pictures."[5] Even though the rabbis are adamant about their prohibition of physical portrayals of God, one must not assume that the rabbis consider God to be incorporeal.

On the contrary, the rabbis have a very anthropomorphic image of God (see Chapter Two) which is revealed in their descriptions of God's attributes. After all, "the

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[2] Ibid. 37.
[3] Ibid. 1.
[4] Ibid. 47.
[5] Ibid. 38.

claim that God has no image which was turned into one of the foundations of Judaism by Maimonides, does not reflect either the bible or the rabbinic tradition."[7] Hence, one must not consider rabbinic prohibition of idols as a repudiation of anthropomorphic theology. The rabbis certainly consider God to have a form – but, humans are forbidden to recreate it.

II. The Prohibition Against Creating Human Forms

It is precisely this anthropomorphic image of God that scares the rabbis:

> In both biblical and rabbinic literature, God is portrayed in human images. In the Bible God has a face, nose, mouth, ears, hands, finger, an arm, and feet. The Rabbis continue this use of human imagery to describe God. In rabbinic literature, for example, on the occasion of the wedding of Adam and Eve, God plaits Eve's hair and serves as best man for Adam; He wears phylacteries and wraps Himself in a prayershawl; He prays to Himself and studies the Torah during three hours of each day; He weeps over the failures of His creatures, visits the sick, comforts the mourner and buries the dead.[8]

These observations only affirm the anthropomorphic picture of God as seen in the minds of the sages. After all, the rabbis consider that "it is because God and man share an 'image' that the depiction of either is prohibited."[9] The rabbis become so frightened about creating a human form because they believe that human characteristics best approximate God's appearance. We are forbidden to make images of God, and so, naturally, we are forbidden to make images of man. The rules are set up thusly: "if God may not be depicted, then neither may man, by reason of their very correlation and partnership in the

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[6] Ibid. 38.
[7] Ibid. 46-47.
[8] Dorff 130.
[9] Kochan, Lionel. Beyond the Graven Image. (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 117-118.

governance of the natural polity."[10] God and man are too similar. Up goes the rabbinic fence – the rabbis want no part of the potential danger involved in creating human images.

The philosophical theory behind this fence is depicted in many talmudic *sugyot*. For instance, in the *Bavli, Sanhedrin* 65b, Rava makes a provocative statement about just how closely man is connected to God:

> Rava said: If the righteous desired it, they could [by living a life of absolute purity] be creators, for it is written, But your iniquities have distinguished between etc. (Isaiah 59:2). Rava created a man (by means of *Sefer Yetzirah*), and sent him to R. Zera. R. Zera spoke to him, but received no answer. Thereupon he said unto him: 'You are a creature of the magicians. Return to your dust.'

This teaching combines many aspects of rabbinic attitude toward creating human forms. First of all, Rava expresses that humans are very close to divine. In fact, we are so closely related to God that, were it not for our constant transgressions, we could create worlds just like our Creator. Then, Rava creates a "man" and R. Zera confuses the human form for a god. But, just in time, R. Zera realizes that the "man" created by a man is a mere "creature of the magicians," and he gets rid of the idol with a dramatic flourish.

Humans seem to need the opportunity for "creating" in this way, for the rabbis work hard to dissuade it. Society has taught that laws of prohibition are only necessary if people are doing something wrong. Humans want to create gods, just as God has created humans. Moshe Idel studied this phenomenon in his examination of the Golem. He wrote: "by creating an anthropoid, the Jewish master is not only able to display his

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[10] Ibid.

creative forces, but may attain the experience of the creative moment of God."[11] So, it is not only the profound insult to God that is evoked by the attempt to recreate a figure of God's likeness, it is also the hubris that is so offensive to the rabbis. The rabbis thwart the human propensity to strive for God-like powers.

In the end, it is the creating of human forms that defines the "graven image":

> ...it is not arbitrary or merely a matter of convention that the three-dimensional statue of a human being should constitute the acme of the idolatrous, for this mode of depiction purveys visual and tactile qualities accessible to no other mode. It has uniquely life-like attributes, which is undoubtedly the reason why the rabbinic aesthetic makes a very sharp distinction between the three-dimensional (even as the merely embossed) and any other mode of depiction. It serves as an object-lesson and bench-mark in the demonstration of the impermissibly idolatrous.[12]

The line is drawn by the rabbis. But, as with any good didactic technique, the rabbis offer an alternative. How can human beings understand the qualities and attributes of their one God? *Words* are the key to unlocking the mystery of God's qualities.

III. Literary Representation

The rabbis implicitly offer the alternative of using literary descriptions in place of physical portrayals. This becomes an important distinction. It is crucial that the rabbis emphasize that we heard only God's voice at Sinai (Deut. 4:12):

> This emphasis, which is repeated several times in the chapter is intended to eliminate the possibility that the very revelation which forbade the making
> of images and pictures would be conceived as a revelation in which the shape of God was seen and so would be a cause of the making of images and pictures. But the chapter does not tell us why a linguistic description of God's hand is permitted while a drawing of his hand is forbidden.[13]

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid. 122.
[13] Ibid.

The last line of this citation is the most significant in understanding the rabbinic view of representation of God. The rabbis like words. They use linguistics and semantics to express their teachings and values. They do not draw pictures or paint portraits. Thus, they connect with God through the written and spoken word, and they permit and encourage others to do the same.

One must ask the critical question that is prompted by these rabbinic stringencies: what is the difference between linguistic and visual representation in the rabbinic mind? The question is articulated in this way: the rabbis give tremendous freedom to verbal descriptions, and an inversely proportional freedom to physical depictions. "Is there a real difference between speaking about the hand of God and drawing it"?[14] To the rabbis, the differences between talking about the hand of God and drawing it are quite clear.

There are several reasons for the rabbinic appreciation for linguistic and literary representations of God. Halbertal and Margalit examine some of these reasons. First of all, "linguistic representation does not present the worshiper with an object that can be confronted in an attitude of worship, as an intermediary of God or a fetish...This blurring of the distinction between the symbol and the thing symbolized, which is so common in idolatry, does not occur in language because in the latter there is no concrete object that can be endowed with some of the powers of the symbolized thing."[15] In other words, the very human tendency to ascribe the pictorial depiction with the qualities of the deity is not a problem when words are used to describe the deity. If the picture is only in the mind of the worshipper, there is no threat of idolatry.

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[14] Halbertal and Margalit 50.
[15] Ibid. 52.

Additionally, the rabbis balk at the physical depictions because of the human inclination to concretize the depiction. That is to say, people might think that the depiction encompasses the entire scope of the deity. Consider, for instance, a picture of an apple. A person who had never before seen an actual apple might think that the picture delimits the apple. Yet, an apple has texture, and taste, and smell, and weight – and none of these qualities could be apprehended through a picture, or even an "accurate" sculpture. What an insult to the apple for someone to think he was experiencing an apple, but it was only a photograph or a drawing.

Somehow, it seems easier for humans to accept that linguistic descriptions *necessarily* fall short of defining a deity. Linguistic representation does not provide all the details; inevitably, some aspects of the Divine being are left to the imagination – "the Persian kings who spoke from behind a screen could be described linguistically but not represented pictorially...God may be heard but not seen."[16] Much like the kings of Persia, we need not see God in order to heed His words. Furthermore, we are enjoined only to use words to access God – the aural is preferred over the visual.

IV. The Idol: Fetish or Ritual Object?

Another facet to the problem of idolatry is the definition of the "idol." There is a problem in the rabbinic mind of the efficacy and power of the idol. Not only do the rabbis appear concerned about the actual potency of the idol, but they are very worried about the *perception* of the idol's strength. The rabbis are concerned about the potential for the Israelites to use the idol as a fetish. That is to say, they do not want the Israelites

[16] Ibid.

to believe that the idols have any inherent power of their own. The classic midrash that expresses this rabbinic sentiment recounts the story of a young Abraham who, while working in his father's idol shop, smashes the idols. Abraham then places his mallet in the hand of an idol. When Terach comes in and demands to know who smashed all of the idols, Abraham responds by pointing to the "chief god" who is holding the mallet. Even Terach manages to be enlightened when he realizes the ridiculousness of praying to ineffectual clay objects.[17] Another similar story is retold this way:

> As Abraham went through the streets, he met an old woman who had approached him with the purpose of buying an idol, good and big, to be worshipped and loved. "Old woman, old woman," said Abraham, "I know no profit therein, either in the big ones or the little ones, either unto themselves or unto others. And," he continued to speak to her, "what has become of the big image thou didst buy from my brother Haran, to worship it?" "Thieves," she replied, "came in the night and stole it, while I was still at the bath." "If it be thus," Abraham went on questioning her, "how canst thou pay homage to an idol that cannot save itself from thieves, let alone save others like thyself, thou silly old woman, out of misfortune? How is it possible for thee to say that the image thou worshippest is a god? If it be a god, why did it not save itself out of the hands of those thieves? Nay, in the idol there is no profit, either unto itself or unto him that adores it.[18]

In these types of midrashim, the rabbis communicate their disdain for a fetishist attitude toward the idols. They make a mockery of the powers that others attribute to mere statues. Kenneth Seeskin contends that this rabbinic derision has had a positive long range effect: "the single most important contribution of Judaism to world culture is that, when it is properly understood, no article or ritual has any magical power."[19]

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[17] See *Bereshit Rabbah* 38:13.
[18] Ginzberg, Louis. Legends of the Bible (Philadelphia: the Jewish Publication Society, 1909) 92-93.
[19] Seeskin 41.

A fetish is best understood by a twofold definition. First, "a fetish is an object to which people attribute powers that it does not have."[20] However, an object does not become a fetish by that attribution alone. Plus, assigning power to an object that does not have such a power is a subjective definition, which is not quite "scientific." In order for an object to be a fetish in the rabbinic mind, the object must be used for some form of veneration. An object may only be called a fetish "if the error gives the object some control over its worshippers. In such a case the fetish is an object to which people have an attitude of ritual worship."[21] In this sense, the rabbis' greatest fear is that a Jew would involve himself in an act of adoration directed toward a useless object.

The rabbinic fences against idolatry are built in protection of this ultimate fear. But, even before actually adopting an idol as a fetish, the rabbis fear the use of an idol as an intermediary. So, even if a person does not believe that an idol holds powers even approximating those of God, he is still committing the sin of idolatry. The rabbis do not want any idol used even to help a person connect with God. Seeskin explains this issue:

> The problem with intermediaries...is that they become objects of worship in their own right....establishing an intermediary between God and humans is tantamount to setting up another God, which is always the cause of sin. This is particularly true if the intermediary is a physical object...[22]

The rabbis appear to understand the human tendency to get confused. They do not want anyone falling down the very slippery slope of idolatrous ways (see Chapter Three). The practice of idolatry is also defined by all of the practices that encroach upon its boundary.

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[20] Halbertal and Margalit 42.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid. 63.

From the rabbinic viewpoint, the problem of visual aids is that they are both a blessing and a curse:

> One of the attractions of idolatry is that its objects are visible to the eye and easy to identify. The idolater is characterized in the Bible as someone who 'strays after the sights of his eyes,' and it is thus no wonder that he chooses objects like the sun and the moon, which are easy to identify..."[23]

The rabbis wish to prevent a common mistake: confusing the Creator with the creations. Again, this mistake is well ingrained in the human condition. Why do so many people enjoy the experience of praying outdoors, in nature? Why do people relate their most spiritual moments of communing with God as happening on a mountain top, or by the sea shore? By beholding God's creations, a human being feels as if he knows God. It is a natural thing for a person to confuse the God's creations for God Himself.

Consequently, the rabbis fear idolatry can occur not only with man-made statues but also with the mistaken worship of God's handiwork. This is a stringent prohibition, considering God's handiwork is broadly defined as every object in the universe. Even Rabban Gamaliel was questioned, when he used astrological charts for pedagogic purposes. His charts sparked a lively debate in the *Bavli, Rosh Hashanah* 24a-24b:

> MISHNAH. R. GAMALIEL USED TO HAVE A DIAGRAM OF PHASES OF THE MOON ON A TABLET [HUNG] ON THE WALL OF HIS UPPER CHAMBER, AND HE USED TO SHOW THEM TO THE UNLEARNED AND SAY, DID IT LOOK LIKE THIS OR THIS?
> GEMARA. Is this allowed, seeing that it is written, You shall not make with me (Ex. 20:20), which we interpret, 'You shall not make the likeness of my attendants'? — Abaye replied: The Torah forbade only those attendants of which it is possible to make copies (lit., out of the same materials), as it has been taught: A man may not make a house in the form of the Temple...
> But is it allowed [to make likenesses] of attendants of which it is impossible to make copies, seeing that it has been taught: 'You shall not

[23] Ibid. 141.

> make with me': [this implies], you shall not make the likeness of My attendants who minister before Me on high?' — Abaye replied: The Torah forbade only the likeness of the four faces (Ezek. 1:10) all together. If that is so, the portrait of a human being by himself should be allowed; why then has it been taught: All portraits are allowed, save the portrait of man? — R. Huna the son of R. Idi replied: From a discourse of Abaye I learnt: 'You shall not make with me' [implies], you shall not make Me (since man was made in God's image - Gen. 1:27 - the reproduction of a human face was prohibited).
> Still, are the other attendants permitted, seeing that it has been taught: '"You shall not make with me": you shall not make the likeness of My attendants who serve before Me on high, such as Ofanim and Seraphim and holy Hayyoth and ministering angels'? — Abaye replied: The Torah forbade only the attendants in the upper sphere. But are those in the lower sphere (i.e., sun and moon) permitted? Has it not been taught: 'Which are in the heaven (Ex. 20:4): this brings under the rule the sun, the moon, the stars and constellations; "above" (Ex. 20:4): this brings under the rule the ministering angels?' — That statement refers to the prohibition of [making a likeness] for serving them.

This *sugya* reflects the two problems addressed above – creating images and worshipping them. The discussion of the rabbis indicates their concern about both problems, together and separately. They need to be very clear about which of God's creations can be reproduced and/or represented. Moreover, the sages wish to clarify the intention of creating such representations – the intention never should be "for serving them."

Rabban Gamaliel is an example of someone who can "use" the allegedly prohibited attendants of the lower sphere - the sun and moon. He can use them because he is responsible enough not to consider them a fetish or an idol:

> Rabban Gamaliel was held to be justified in his use of pictures of phases of the moon for calendrical purposes, despite the doubt attaching to his representations of the heavenly bodies. He used only sections of the moon, it was argued, and thereby avoided any complete representation, and/or his purpose was pedagogic.[24]

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[24] Kochan, Jews, Idols, and Messiahs 133.

Clearly, all of God's creations could not be off limits for all use. Certain uses were deemed acceptable. The sun and moon - and human forms - were of particular concern to the sages, because those structures were used for worship by idolaters. The sages were strict about guidelines prohibiting possible misuse. Therefore, they did not trust everyone. But, they believed that Rabban Gamaliel could be trusted to stay on the safe side of the fence.

The Struggle to Know God – A Difficult Challenge to Humanity

I. Problem: God is Very Distant

Some argue that the most basic allure of idolatry is that it offers humanity an access to an immanent deity. God is high and distant, and there is no reliable way for people to know Him. So, humanity is tempted to create something which is understandable and near – thus, the idol. The temptation for idolatry is ridden with a tautological problem. Rabbinic Judaism, in its ultimate quest to combat idolatry, actually makes idolatry a more enticing option. Kenneth Seeskin explains the dilemma: "The usual criticism of Judaism is that it makes God too distant, too abstract...it is difficult for people to have anything concrete on which to focus...without a visual image of the divine or a series of intermediaries, God can seem distant, and with distance comes the risk of estrangement."[25] The rabbis reject the use of intermediaries, and they condemn those who use idols. Seeskin goes on to emphasize that although there is a strong rabbinic contribution to the tradition of angels, they are not considered intermediaries, and Jews are not instructed to direct their prayers to those angels.[26]

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[25] Seeskin 107.
[26] Ibid. 90.

As Seeskin points out, the risk of estrangement from God is a real concern within the theological framework of the sages. There is the potential for Jews to be frustrated in their unmet need for an immanent God. George Foot Moore also articulates this difficulty: "In the endeavor to exalt God uniquely above the world, Judaism, it is said, had in fact exiled him from the world in lonely majesty, thus sacrificing the immediacy of the religious relation, the intimate communion of the soul with God."[27] One must recognize that the human condition calls out for something to worship. If God eludes humanity, humanity might just give up. If God is too far away, people might choose something more accessible to worship.

Even the sacrosanct name of God contributed to the alienation of the Jews from their God. In the rabbinic period, the sages institutionalized the mystification of God's name. The Tetragrammaton, which had previously been known and used, entered the realm of the unknown. In essence, then, God's real name became inaccessible, which created new problems:

> There were probably two concerns behind this development. First, the fences around the third commandment restricted the use of the name – a protection against the misuse of it was to avoid all use of it. Second, increased contact with Hellenism and other forms of paganism probably made the use of the personal name of God seem too materialistic, too much like dragging Him to the level of the supposed deities of other religions.[28]

The cessation of the use of God's proper name was charged with religious and political issues. Politically, the rabbis were able to keep their edge as different from the "other" (see Chapter Four). Religiously, this phenomenon added to the mystery and grandeur of

[27] Moore 423.
[28] Scott 268-69.

God. The sages took pride in the fact that by elevating God's name to such an unattainable status, they had in fact elevated God's holiness. We learn in the Mishna, *Tamid* 7:2, "In the Temple, they pronounced the Name as it was written, but in the provinces by a substituted word."[29] What does this tell us? First of all, most "regular" Jews could never hear the name of their God pronounced, even when the Temple was standing. Second, after the destruction of the Temple, when rabbinic Judaism was coming into existence, no Jew ever heard the name of his God spoken.

Furthermore, we learn in the *Bavli, Kiddushin* 71a, that the name of God was guarded by the ritually elite:

> Our Rabbis taught: At first [God's] twelve-lettered Name used to be entrusted to all people. When unruly men increased [and it was not fit to be pronounced among such an unruly crowd], it was confided to the pious of the priesthood [to utter the Priestly Benediction], and these 'swallowed it' (i.e., pronounced it indistinctly) during the chanting of their brother priests (i.e., while they were chanting the Tetragrammaton at the Benediction]. It was taught: R. Tarfon said: 'I once ascended the dais (i.e., where the priests stood to bless the people) after my mother's brother, and inclined my ear to the High Priest, and heard him swallowing the Name during the chanting of his brother priests.
> Rab Judah said in Rab's name: The forty-two lettered Name is entrusted only to him who is pious, meek, middle-aged, free from bad temper, sober, and not insistent on his rights. And he who knows it, is heedful thereof (i.e., he does not take the honor lightly), and observes it in purity, is beloved above and popular below, feared by man, and inherits two worlds, this world and the future world.

It is clear from the writings of the sages that the name of God was well guarded. The preservation of the sanctity of God's name and its secrecy is symbolic of the theological obstacle described above. If people cannot even know the sound of the real name of God, how can they come near to God Himself?

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[29] This same passage is repeated in *M. Sotah* 7:6.

The strength and the intimacy are combined together in the name of God. The name had to be protected because of its force. The Soncino translation of the above passage offers an insight into the significance of the name: "in general the name of God was regarded more than a mere designation, but represented His nature or character and His relation to His people. It thus came to partake of His essence, His glory and power."[30] So, if the people were not allowed to participate in reciting God's name, likewise they were prevented from beholding God's essence, glory, and power. Moore confirms that "it was a universal belief in the age that the names of gods in incantations and adjurations put the power of these gods at the command of the magician, and no name could be more potent than that of the God of the whole world."[31] The Jews were not able to access God's power. This undoubtedly created a condition of alienation and estrangement, and Judaism became a "religion [that] suffered the consequences of an absentee God"[32] – a fearsome predicament.

II. Solution #1: Rabbis Portray God as Immanent

As a result of the fear that the people would perceive God as distant, the rabbis introduced a myriad of comforting midrashim which affirm the closeness of God. An example of this type of midrash is found in the *Yerushalmi, Berachot* 13b:

> Let a man go into the synagogue and take his place behind the pulpit and pray in an undertone, and God will give ear to his prayer, as it is said: 'Hannah was speaking within herself, only her lips moved, but her voice was not audible,' (I Sam 1:13) and God gave ear to her prayer; and so he does to all his creatures, as it is said, 'A prayer of the afflicted when he covers his face and pours out his thought before the Lord.' (Ps. 102:1)it is as when a man utters his thought in the ear of his fellow, and he hears him.

[30] *Talmud Bavli. Kiddushin* 71a, n38. Soncino Trans.
[31] Moore 426.
[32] Ibid. 429.

> Can you have a God nearer than this who is as near to his creatures as mouth to ear?[33]

God is as close to humans as humans are to one another. The rabbis do not want the Jews to panic about God's distance, and turn to idols. They try to prevent this type of mutiny with reassuring parables.

The rabbis were able to use these types of parables not only to reassure the Jews of the indwelling presence of God, but also to impose their values and teachings upon the general Jewish population. In the *Bavli, Sanhedrin* 39a, the rabbis record the following interaction:

> The Emperor said to Rabban Gamaliel: 'You maintain that upon every gathering of ten [Jews] the Shechinah rests (*Avot* 3:6): how many Shechinahs are there then?' (i.e., there are so many *minyanim*, how could God be with them all?) Rabban Gamaliel called [Caesar's] servant, and tapped him on the neck, saying, 'Why does the sun enter into Caesar's house?' (i.e., Why do you permit it to enter?) 'But,' he exclaimed, 'the sun shines upon the whole world!' 'Then if the sun, which is but one of the countless myriads of the servants of the Holy One, blessed be He, shines on the whole world, how much more the Shechinah of the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself!'

There is no place in the world, according to the sages, without the near presence of the Holy One. God is like the sun – there is enough light to shine upon everyone. Despite the fact that good Jews are praying in *minyanim* constantly, all over the world, God can bestow His presence on each one. So, the rabbis say, there is nothing to worry about. God is with you (even if you dare not speak His name!).

There are several midrashim that are expressive of God's empathy; they are based upon God's appearance in the burning bush. Why would God choose to reveal Himself in such a way?:

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[33] Trans. Moore 369.

> Apply the text (Song of Songs 5:2) "Open to me, my dove, my twin." Just as with twins, if one has a headache, the other also feels it, so it is with the Holy One blessed be He: "I will be with him in trouble." (Ps. 91:15). Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Moses: Don't you feel that I suffer anguish whenever Israel does? Know, therefore, from the character of the place from which I am speaking to you, out of the thornbush, that I, as it were, share their suffering.[34]

God is so close to humanity that He even shares in their suffering. God can feel our pain...God and people are twins. Just because people cannot pronounce God's name does not indicate distance in the relationship, the rabbis reiterate. There is much more to the relationship than just names. The rabbis emphasize that God is with us at every moment, in every location.

III. Solution #2: God's Inscrutability is Good - Rabbis Delight in God's Mystery

Although the rabbis wish to understand God in His most anthropomorphic, most immanent form, they do not discount the power and majesty of a transcendent God. So, a second - and diametrically opposed - rabbinic solution to the problem of God's distance is to portray God's mystery and transcendence as the holiest of attributes. Both immanence and transcendence are useful didactic images in the rabbinic repertoire. If God is nearby,

people can feel closeness with Him. If God is distant, people can feel proud and honored to have a powerful God on High. The restriction of idolatry, in effect, heightens the elusive nature of God:

> In general, there are two opposite approaches to the task of creating a feeling of remoteness and authority: one is to distribute the pictures of the king everywhere, and the other is to prevent anyone from ever seeing the

[34] *Shemot Rabbah* 2:7 - quoted in Leibowitz, Nehama. *New Studies in Shemot.* Trans. Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: Hemed Press, 1993) 57.

> king. The prohibition against making images and pictures is a facet of the second approach, which is based on mystery and distance.[35]

Thus, by strictly prohibiting idolatry, the rabbis are not helping Jews know God's essence – they are intensifying the human perception of God's transcendence.

Significantly, the understanding of God's actual essence seems less important to the rabbis than the understanding of God's commands. Alfred Ivry explains that, despite the fact that God is ultimately unknowable, God's will is perfectly clear:

> If the God who gave the Law has remained inscrutable and unknowable on the whole, His law has been an open, explicit, and inexhaustible source of information about His will. This information is not about Him directly, then, but about what he wants His people to do, how to live, be it in the study of the law or performance of it....One could even construct an inverse relationship between the certainty with which Jews claimed to understand God's presence in history, and the acknowledged lack of certainty with which they understood Him in terms of His own essence.[36]

Human beings may never know God in the way that they know one another. But, the sages make sure that the Jews can perform God's clear commandments. The rabbis, then, tend to take the mitzvot to an extreme. They figure that they can best approximate knowledge of an unknowable God by carrying out God's will. If God prohibits idolatry, then God Himself must hate idolatry. If God commands that people rest on Shabbat, then God Himself must rest on Shabbat. The rabbis can only attempt to know God through God's words in Torah.

But, even the rabbis are often frustrated by God's vexing nature. In the *Bavli, Kiddushin* 71a, we read a midrash on God's name:

> Rabbah b. Bar Hanah said in R. Johanan's name: The [pronunciation of the Divine] Name of four letters the Sages confide to their disciples once a

[35] Halbertal and Margalit 47.
[36] Ivry 203-4.

> septennate — others state, twice a septennate. Said R. Nahman b. Isaac: Reason supports the view that it was once a septennate, for it is written, this is my name for ever [*le'olam*] (Ex. 3:15), which is written *le'allem*. Rabbah thought to lecture upon it at the public sessions. Said a certain old man to him, It is written, *le'allem* [to be kept secret].

God is actually meant to be kept a secret. God's holiness and sanctity are preserved by the mystery of His existence.

The sages revel in God's incomprehensible nature – they feel that faith and piety are increased when one commits to a totally transcendent God. Kenneth Seeskin asserts that the biblical story of the binding of Isaac teaches "that faith has to be tested in order to be valid....Worship ought to require effort and dedication. If it becomes too easy, if piety was something you could achieve in your spare time, it would be difficult to take seriously."[37] The sages appreciate the notion that they have achieved a level of greatness by trusting in an unknowable God. Nothing worthwhile is easy, according to the rabbis. They take pride in knowing that they choose to worship a God whom no one can truly apprehend. At the same time, however, the rabbis make concessions which allow Jews to strive to connect with God.

IV. Using Theological Aids – The Boundary for Ritual Adornment and Worship

The sages are undeniably strict about using objects in Jewish ritual life. But, throughout history, Jews have created ritual objects and synagogue art that reflects an embellishment of worship. Even in creating the Tabernacle, and then the Temple, no expense was spared to create objects that adorned and sanctified the worship experience. Thus, one is prompted to ask the question: where is the boundary between aesthetically adorning a ritual object, and creating an item to worship? Lionel Kochan explains that

"despite the inseparable association of imagery and *avodah zarah*, the boundaries of both must be appreciated. Aniconism did not of itself exclude access to beauty, still less the production of artifacts."[38] The roots of Jewish ritual adornment are found in the Talmud. The rabbis use the prooftext: 'This is my God and I will adorn him.' (Ex. 15:2) to explain that every commandment should be observed with splendor.

By coining the phrase *hidur mitzvah*, the 'embellishment of a commandment,' the rabbis complicated the Jews' understanding of that which is allowed in ritual observance. In general, the rule is understood to convey that objects used to worship God should be the most beautiful and ornate – for, it is an honor to God to make those objects aesthetically pleasing. In the *Bavli, Shabbat* 133b, we are told: "make a beautiful sukkah in His honor, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, beautiful fringes, and a beautiful Scroll of the Law, and write it with fine ink, a fine reed [-pen], and a skilled penman, and wrap it about with beautiful silks." The rabbis wished to emphasize that the artwork is always secondary to the commandment – "a balance is required so that the embellishment does not obscure or distort the commandment."[39] Lionel Kochan points out that this balance exists in a state of delicate equilibrium.

By nature, the balance can be easily tipped, sending the rabbis into a panic. Then, the rabbis' greatest fear is realized:

> At this point a state of disturbance is created, the effect of which is to take the worshipper, student, teacher away from his involvement with God and towards involvement with some sort of image....Some part of the attention that belongs to God is transferred to an artifact which thus itself becomes -

[37] Seeskin 93.
[38] Kochan, Jews, Idols, and Messiahs 133.
[39] Ibid. 134.

> to some extent - the object of devotion, and thus...an idol, irrespective of its original purpose....God is diminished, and an object enhanced.[40]

Hence, even *hidur mitzvah* can wax idolatrous when the boundary is blurred. For example, when standing before the ark, one could mistake bowing before the Torah for bowing before God. This mistake can happen easily, as we see that the Torah is "a physical object that we dress in luxury, hold up in the air, kiss, touch, and bow to. Unless we remind ourselves that the Torah is supposed to teach us something, there is a danger that it too might become an idol."[41] It is quite helpful to have beautiful ritual objects in order to amplify the sanctity of a worship experience. Inevitably, the rabbinic ruling regarding *hidur mitzvah* works on two levels. The rabbis use the opportunity to emphasize God's honor, while simultaneously helping the average worshipper to have a "spiritual" prayer experience – as long as no one crosses the line into idolatry.

V. The Human Need for Images to Connect with God

People need theological aids in order to connect with God. The rabbis would hope that people could know God with verbal representation alone, but they understand the human desire for more than just words. Humans connect with physical images:

> Images arrest our attention. Their concrete character enables us to identify with them immediately and to feel their impact...
> Images provide insight and illumination...
> Images convey values through pictures much more effectively than general statements can...
> Images also help one deal with the psychological and social aspects of life. In conveying emotions, truths, values, and psychological perspective, images become invaluable means for a community to identify itself, cohere, communicate, and gain a sense of worth as a group. Members of the community need only invoke one of its images to convey meaning and

[40] Ibid. 135.
[41] Seeskin 63.

> relate a situation to the larger reality of the community and its world view...[42]

Kenneth Seeskin admits that "it is impossible for anyone to exist on a diet of abstraction alone. From time to time we all need tangible symbols...."[43] Furthermore, George Foot Moore emphasizes that the rabbis would prefer that we perceive God by faith, not by sight. But, humans "find it difficult to realize his specific presence in the particular place where they gather for religious service without some aid to faith or imagination."[44] People need visual aids to help them connect with God. Thus, the rabbis realize, that if they loosen the regulations on permissible visual objects, they might prevent idolatry in the long run.

The concessions made to the human need for theological help began in the Bible. When the Israelites left slavery, they were taken from an Egyptian pagan culture in which gods were worshipped using elaborate temples and shrines. Most, if not all, ancient religious cults involved the use of objects to depict the deities. Thus, when the Israelites were learning of their new monotheistic tradition, certain allowances were made to help guide them away from those pagan practices. For instance, Seeskin describes the Tabernacle as "a transitional structure that made numerous concessions to human fallibility....therefore built on the hope that the natural inclination toward material things can be overcome if the transition to the spiritual is smooth enough. "[45] The rabbis were still struggling with this rough transition.

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[42] Dorff 136-138.
[43] Seeskin 52.
[44] Moore 435.
[45] Seeskin 66.

With the destruction of the Temple, the rabbis were able to emphasize the border between idolatry and adornment. The rabbis could underscore the differences between art as a theological tool and the practice of idol worship. Art is acceptable; note, there are "no limits to purely decorative designs...they can be as ornate or luxurious as one likes."[46] The rabbis allow for decorative things to sanctify and separate houses of worship from the mundane structures of everyday living. Ultimately, the rabbis' purpose is "to take people with a strong predilection for material things and persuade them to devote their lives to the spiritual."[47]

Ideally, the Jews would realize that the art is not the end goal, but a vehicle through which a person can know God's greatness. The rabbis struggle with this problem: "the tradition does not always face the enemy [idolatry] and move forward. Sometimes it makes compromises, sometimes it moves laterally, sometimes it appears to take a step backwards."[48] The sages operate within a framework of balancing *halacha* with human tendencies. Sometimes *halacha* trumps human habits – sometimes vice versa.

Beyond the concrete, physical images, the rabbis use verbal imagery as a theological tool as well. God-imagery, such as a Rock, Shield, Pillar of Fire, helps us to recognize the greatness and glory of God.[49] The rabbis would favor the use of literary imagery to portray God more vividly and minimize theological abstractions. The words that the sages choose to express their relationship with God have far reaching effects.

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[46] Ibid. 68.
[47] Ibid. 69.
[48] Ibid. 27.
[49] Dorff 139.

Dorff explains that "the rabbis who used images certainly intended them to convey the truth about their world – or at least their perception of it."[50] Literary descriptions of God are the tools that the rabbis use to make known their theology. Their worldview is likewise revealed in their theology, since it is intricately linked with their conception of God.

Summary:

The true threat of idolatry in the rabbinic mind is the fear that the "gods try to sneak in not only where there is not God, but also where there is."[51] There is a human need to connect with God, but God is elusive and difficult to apprehend. Thus, the sages fear that even with an acceptance of God as sovereign and supreme, the human condition propels us to seek images - both physical and verbal - in order to connect with God in a personal way. We need theological tools – words, ritual objects, and aesthetic embellishments. Kenneth Seeskin writes, "we can imagine a religion completely devoid of art, but it would be so barren that only an extraordinary person could be drawn to it."[52] The rabbis hope that the Jews will prove to be "extraordinary" in their piety, despite the high and hidden God. But, at the same time, they concede the human propensity to seek theological help.

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[50] Ibid. 141.
[51] Schwarzschild 217.
[52] Seeskin 61.

Chapter Six

Conclusions

The fight against idolatry began in the biblical literature. The second commandment is a pivotal element of the definition of Israelite religion. It represents the first step in the Israelite movement from pagan, to monolatrous, to monotheist. The rabbis inherit the battle from the biblical period, and imbue it with renewed vigor. While this study has only begun to scratch the very surface of the complex rabbinic view of the problem of idolatry, we may nonetheless draw many valuable conclusions.

Perhaps foremost in the rabbinic mind is the notion of idolatry as a fundamental affront to God and Judaism. The rabbis define God in contradistinction to idolatry – God *is* "not idolatry" and idolatry *is* "not God." God's anthropomorphism creates difficulty for the rabbis. Since we know from Genesis 1:27 that humans were created in the image of God, the rabbis figure that we must *look* like God. Our "images" are the same. Thus, if a person ever crafts a human image, he is unavoidably violating the second commandment. Moreover, there is only One True God. To create an image of that God, or to "duplicate" God is strictly verboten.

Any replica or representation of God necessarily lessens and limits God. With the rabbis' staunch commitment to the magnification and glorification of God, idolatry is completely counterproductive to their purpose. Rabbinic writings in the realm of midrash

and aggadah illustrate the sages' resolution to elevate God and profane idols. In their use of parable, the rabbis ally themselves with the power and grace of the One True God, while desecrating the conception of the idolater. Midrash, in particular, interprets this point. For example, "when Jethro saw that the Holy One, blessed be He, had destroyed Amalek in this world and the next, he regretted [his idol worship] and repented, saying "I shall only follow the God of Israel."[1] All idolaters who turn to God are accepting truth, goodness, and the Israelite way of life. In expressing this hope, the rabbis are able to create their own sense of Jewish self-definition, in the midst of an atmosphere of persecution and turmoil. The sages convey their faith in the absolute power of God. Their implicit - and sometimes explicit - prayer is that if they express their vehement disapproval of idols, then God will reward them with His Divine favor.

Furthermore, the rabbinic authority to proclaim idolatry one of the most important commandments comes directly from God. The Talmud explicitly states that one is to live by the commandments, and not die for them. However, an exception is made for the three cardinal sins of Judaism: idolatry, murder, and incest. One is to sacrifice his own life before succumbing to those sins:

> R. Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon b. Jehozadak: By a majority vote, it was resolved in the upper chambers of the house of Nitza in Lydda that in every [other] law of the Torah, if a man is commanded: 'Transgress and suffer not death' he may transgress and not suffer death, excepting idolatry, incest, [which includes adultery] and murder. Now may not idolatry be practiced [in these circumstances]? Has it not been taught: R. Ishmael said: whence do we know that if a man was bidden, 'Engage in idolatry and save your life,' that he should do so, and not be slain? From the verse, [You shall therefore keep my statutes and my judgments,' which if a man do] he shall live by them: (Lev. 18:5) but not die by them. I might think that it may even be openly practiced. But Scripture teaches, Neither

[1] Exodus *Rabbah* 27:6.

> shall you profane My holy name; but I will be hallowed?' (Lev. 22:32) — They (the sages that met at the house of Nitza) ruled as R. Eliezer. For it has been taught, R. Eliezer said: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5).[2]

The Leviticus verse clearly states that one should live through the performance of mitzvot, not die for them. Thus, the rabbis ask: would that not permit one to commit idolatry and still live? The answer, they determine, is no. One must die rather than commit idolatry, since the underlined value is that of sanctifying God's holy name. If you love God with all of your heart, soul, and might, then there is no room for idolatry. Living for God necessarily contradicts the practice of idolatry. Perhaps, the rabbis are trying to communicate a fundamental message. In the words of Rabbi Edward Goldman, "if there are no things worth dying for, then maybe there are no things worth living for."[3] The rabbis strive to create a tradition full of integrity and dignity. If the standards are not clear, if the demands for conduct and moral excellence are not high, then their creation lacks quality. In the rabbinic mind, there are certain behaviors that are not acceptable under any circumstances. Those behaviors are idolatry, incest, and murder.

In the rabbinic mind, idolatry is the most extreme offense. In fact, idolatry is so grave that the rabbis assign a double punishment for the transgression – both a fine and the death penalty. Moreover, the sages sentence an idolater to punishment in this world *and* in the world to come. Idolatry is a dangerous sin, a slippery slope. One can easily be lured into the temptation to idolatry – there is almost a sexual seduction to the idolatrous

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[2] *Talmud Bavli. Sanhedrin* 74a. Soncino Trans.
[3] Quoted from discussion during thesis conference - January 24, 2000.

lifestyle. Even if the initial attraction to idolatry was superficial, the rabbis fear that an Israelite would fall down the slippery slope.

The rabbis, therefore, require that we all stay far away; they build tall fences around the prohibition of idolatry. For example, Jews are forbidden to craft any human image or likeness. Even if it is only for the purpose of decoration, it is forbidden. Furthermore, the rabbis discuss the permissibility of creating images of the angels or the celestial bodies. Considering that it was common for the surrounding cultures to worship the sun, moon, and stars, the rabbis did not want Jews producing any object depicting these entities. Through this research, it has become quite evident that the rabbis did not hold the average Jew in very high intellectual esteem. The sages reveal a constant apprehension that *amcha* will get confused. Thus, a great deal of time and energy is devoted to the rabbis' debating, creating, and enforcing strict boundaries. This is true for many issues of rabbinic concern; however, no issue is more representative of this phenomenon than that of idolatry.

In expressing their ultimate loathing for idolatry, the rabbis use a great deal of metaphor. Idolatry is an expression of *yetzer ha'ra* - the evil inclination. The evil inclination is entirely responsible for the propensity for idolatry. This rabbinic proclamation clearly shows the rabbis' distaste for idolatry – it is pure evil. Additionally, the rabbis consider idolatry to be tantamount to adultery. If God and Israel are married, then the ultimate act of betrayal is committed by turning to other "gods." At the very least, we owe our loyalty to God – we have made a covenantal promise to be faithful. Interestingly, the rabbis use the husband/wife metaphor for Israel's betrayal of God. But, when Israel is ready to repent and return to God, the rabbis use the metaphor

of Israel as the errant child and God as the ever-forgiving parent. God always accepts the repentance of His children. Yet another rabbinic metaphor for idolatry is that of political treason. In this model, God is the omnipotent Sovereign *par excellence.* In the adultery metaphor, idolatry intrudes on the exclusive relationship between God and Israel. In the political metaphor, idolatry intrudes on the authority that God holds over the Jews. The political treason metaphor is expressed in many midrashim. The *Mekhilta* contains a particularly illustrative passage which states that whatever a person allows to rule over him, that becomes his god.[4] In this sense, God is our Sovereign as long as we remain faithful servants. If we turn our loyalties to some other entity - be it a deity or a mere object - we have become idolaters.

There are really two general connotations of idolatry in the rabbinic understanding: one is a literal meaning (the worship of graven images) and the other is a more figurative meaning (the offense to God and Judaism, allowing another entity to be the "ruler"). In the end, the rabbis call many things by the name of "idolatry." Living in the Diaspora, outside of the Land of Israel, is idolatry.[5] Anyone who turns a blind eye to the needs of others, anyone who neglects his obligation for charity, is an idolater.[6] When the rabbis use the term "idolatry," they are referring to the most loathsome offense, the most distasteful act. Idolatry is the word for strange, deviant, or debased behavior. It is the word the rabbis use to mean serious sin. Any person who dares to rebel against God and His commandments is *de facto* an idolater. Once the rabbis have firmly established

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[4] Horowitz, Chaim and Yisrael Rabin, eds. *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael. Yitro*, 6.
[5] *Tosefta Avodah Zarah* 5:4-5.
[6] *Talmud Bavli, Ketubot* 68a. Soncino Trans.

the severity of the sin of idolatry, the meaning of idolatry becomes part of their social and cultural vocabulary.

Another important facet of the rabbinic conception of idolatry is the sages' expression of their xenophobia. The rabbis have a great fear of the "other." Rabbinic Judaism is characterized by the separation of the Jews from the other nations of the world – they made different rules, eat different foods, observe a different calendar, worship a different God. The rabbis fear that the aspects of gentile life that could potentially infiltrate Jewish culture would have a decidedly negative effect on Jewish life. The rabbis wish to create an insular society in which the Jews can resist being assimilated into the cultural, social and religious life of the surrounding peoples. In essence, idolatry becomes the scapegoat and symbol from which the rabbis recoiled. However, in their revulsion for idolatry was manifest their fascination. The rabbis use idolatry to communicate their fear and disdain for the "other" – it is an obsession.

The rabbis appear to fantasize about a time in which Jews can live free from the influences of other cultures. At the same time, however, the rabbinic literature contains glimmers of realism that reveal rabbinic concessions to pragmatic economic concerns. The talmudic tractate *Avodah Zarah* addresses very real concerns about commerce with gentiles, building fences around the potential for Jews' enabling idolatry. The rabbis certainly want to avoid the scenario where Jews actually sell objects to gentiles for the purpose of practicing idolatry. At the same time, however, the rabbis are cognizant of the demands of peaceful coexistence with gentile neighbors. Their own principle of *mipne darkei shalom* forces them to keep their xenophobic tendencies in check. They believe that the Jewish imperative involves occasionally bowing to gentile needs in order to keep

the peace. At times, the sages extend their own obligations to the Jewish poor to the underprivileged among the gentiles. This is especially true in situations where the Jews were more wealthy or powerful than their non-Jewish neighbors. After all, the rabbis teach that because we were strangers in the land of Egypt, we must extend an empathic grace toward those who now live as strangers among us.

Nevertheless, the rabbis are very reluctant to include outsiders in the ranks of Israelite religion. For instance, they are ambivalent at best about converts. They try to intimidate a potential proselyte into backing down, explaining that Jews are persecuted, oppressed, despised, harassed, and overcome by afflictions![7] Additionally, in the very next talmudic passage, we learn, "R. Helbo said: Proselytes are as hard for Israel [to endure] as a sore."[8] Although some explain this passage as a resentment of some proselytes' zeal for Judaism - which, in turn makes the Jews look impious - on the most literal level, the rabbis reveal an aversion to the "other." Rabbinic literature demonstrates that the rabbis feel a sense of resentment toward those oppress and intimidate them. While they may wish to actually retaliate, they are unable. Instead, they wage a war of words. In the end, their parables and teachings show that they hope someday they will emerge victorious. The rabbis hope that Jewish culture would not be subsumed by gentile ways, and so they do not cease from their tirade to enforce the Jewish way. They even hope to convince the gentiles that Judaism is supreme.

The rabbis make concessions to human flaws as well. In their writings is an implicit understanding that their objection to idolatry cannot be manifest in an

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[7] *Talmud Bavli. Yevamot* 47a. Soncino Trans.
[8] *Talmud Bavli. Yevamot* 47b. Soncino Trans.

unqualified proscription because of the fundamental human need to create representations of God. The rabbis, therefore, place strict limits on the ways in which a person is allowed to represent God, without treading on idolatrous ground. The rabbis have a very anthropomorphic theology. One must not consider the rabbinic prohibition of idols to be a repudiation of anthropomorphism. The rabbis certainly do picture God as having a form – but, humans are forbidden to recreate it. Thus, again, the rabbis make a clear demarcation: no human statues.

The rabbis do, however, allow for literary representation of God. They believe that verbal descriptions and depictions are encouraged, based on the fact that we heard only God's *voice* at Sinai - God did not reveal His physical self. The rabbis like words. They use linguistics and semantics to express their teachings and values. They do not draw pictures or paint portraits. They connect with God through the written and spoken word - and they require others to do the same. In the rabbinic mind, linguistic representations clearly fall short of encompassing God. Linguistic representation does not provide all the details; inevitably, some aspects of the Divine being are left to the imagination. With physical representation, one might confuse the representation for the actual entity. One could be fooled into believing that a statue or portrait of God looks *exactly* like God. Again, the rabbis have very little confidence in *amcha*. They presume the average Jew gets confused easily, so they would rather stay on the safe side.

By forbidding the creation of any human form, the rabbis believe they are blocking the problem at the source. But, in truth, they realize that any object has the potential to become an idol. So, the rabbinic discourse turns to the question of how to define certain objects. They discuss the potential for ritual objects to be used as fetishes,

assigned power that an inanimate object does not possess. The rabbis wish to prevent a common mistake: confusing the Creator with His creations. They admit that God is difficult to apprehend, distant, and unknowable. When the rabbis emphasize God's majesty, greatness, and transcendence, they run the risk of estranging the people from their deity. There is the potential for Jews to be frustrated in their unmet need for an immanent, personal God. Even the fact that the rabbis facilitated the cessation of the use of God's proper name added to the mystery and uncertainty of God. If people were prevented even from hearing God's name, likewise they were removed from the ability to behold God's essence, glory, and power.

The sages attempt to mitigate this problem with two main solutions. First, they portray God as more immanent, through the expert use of *midrash* and *mashal*. The rabbis do not want the Jews to panic about God's distance and turn to idols. Thus, they try to prevent this type of mutiny with reassuring stories and parables. Second, the rabbis portray God's inscrutability as a good thing, delighting in the mystery of God. In the rabbinic view, God is actually meant to be kept a secret. God's holiness and sanctity are preserved by the mystery of His essence. In fact, the sages revel in God's incomprehensible nature – they feel that faith and piety are increased when one commits to a totally transcendent God.

In addition, the sages recommend using theological aids to help commune with God and avoid idolatry. They believe in their own construct of *hidur mitzvah*, "embellishment of a commandment." The sages not only condone, but also encourage, the use of beautiful ritual objects to fulfill God's mitzvot. The rabbis are careful to emphasize that artwork and adornment are only vehicles to fulfill the commandments, but

they are secondary to the commandments themselves. The human need to connect with God is fundamental; the rabbis allow for some help from the corporeal world. God is always elusive and difficult to understand.

This study has only begun to dig beneath the opaque surface of the rabbinic problem with idolatry. For the sages, idolatry is a much deeper problem than meets the average reader's eye. The rabbis are not merely carrying out the biblical prohibition of bowing down to other "gods" or making graven or molten images. The rabbis disguise their greater fears by couching them in the category of idolatry. They fear offending God and Judaism with the sin of idolatry. They fear of the slippery slope of sin, which begins with idolatry. They fear the infiltration of other cultures, and they fear assimilation – which would be manifest if idolatry crept into Jewish practice. They fear that human weakness will lead to idolatrous practice.

In a concerted effort to combat their fears, the rabbis weave webs of rhetoric and complex argument. They hide behind their fears by creating their own system. They use their system to explain the phenomenon of idolatry and all of its trappings. The rabbis knew that the problem of idolatry would not be an easy one to resolve. Behold, it is still not resolved today. Each day we continue to pray:

> May the time not be distant, O God, when Your name shall be worshipped in all the earth, when unbelief shall disappear and error be no more. Fervently we pray that the day may come when all shall turn to You in love, when corruption and evil shall give way to goodness, when superstition shall no longer enslave the mind, nor idolatry blind the eye, when all who dwell on earth shall know that You alone are God.[9]

May that time not be distant.

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[9] Stern, Chaim, ed. *Gates of Prayer* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975) 617.

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