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"Rethinking Idolatry"

By Oren J. Hayon

The taboo on *avodah zarah* and an accompanying sense of alarm surrounding the religious phenomenon of idolatry have pervaded Jewish literature from the biblical period until even our own day. The persistence of this theme and the enormous volume of literature dedicated to it appear to indicate decisively that, as a religious category, idolatry's relevance is central to Judaism. Idolatry taboos are not restricted to Judaism, however; reactions to paganism and other "unacceptable" religions appear throughout other traditions and demonstrate literary and sociological characteristics strikingly similar to those we find in Judaism.

What are the reasons for the ubiquity of these polemical responses, and how is it that the fervency of Jewish rejoinders to idolatry has not abated during the centuries in which Jews have lived in a world devoid of idol-worship? This paper will endeavor to explore and explain the ways in which religious prohibitions on idolatry may have arisen and endured because of their usefulness to Jewish self-definition. Moreover, by bringing evidence from other sectors of social science, we will see that anti-idolatry responses may in fact have emerged, on a much more primal level, from the evolutionary process of natural selection.

The study begins with a brief examination of the portrayals of idolatry found in the *Tanakh*. This presentation brings attention to the religious role played by textual treatments of idolatry in early Judaism and will provide a necessary introduction to the rabbinic texts which will be introduced later in the paper. In order to understand the underpinnings of the long-lasting idolatry taboo, we attempt to determine, as precisely as the text allows, what religious phenomena the Bible was responding to, what consequences they feared most, and for which audience their polemic was intended.

The paper's focus then shifts to the religious response to idolatry formulated in tractate *Avodah Zarah* of the Babylonian Talmud. A number of key aggadic passages from *Avodah Zarah* are isolated and sorted under three major rubrics, which are central to

the Talmud's interpretive treatment of idolatry: theology, economics and social interaction. By systematically studying aggadah as it falls under the categories listed above, we are enabled to draw specific conclusions about how and, perhaps, why particular characterizations of idolatry (and of idolaters) evolved the way they did in early Judaism.

Next, we isolate and analyze later (medieval and modern) commentaries and explanations of *avodah zarah*, each of which struggles mightily to preserve the category's relevance for contemporary religious life. Our study of this material shows, in the end, that the effort is in many ways in vain; those writers determined to preserve *avodah zarah*'s eternal relevance for Judaism frequently resort to the use of half-truths and sloppy methodology in order to concoct workable conceptualizations of idolatry for their readers.

The final section of the paper undertakes to assemble a rational understanding of the idolatry taboo not predicated on mythology or on chauvinistic polemic. This section builds upon the analyses put forth earlier in the study and includes within it valuable insights from two social scientists, Peter L. Berger and Pascal Boyer. By extracting the vital essence from Berger's theories on social construction and from Boyer's anthropology of natural selection, we may finally approach an accurate assessment of *avodah zarah*'s phenomenology and its salience for modern religion. Building upon this new conceptualization in its final pages, the essay advances some specific, practical recommendations about how the liberal Jewish community might effectively engage the idea of *avodah zarah* and preserve its relevance. This approach takes into account the difficult challenge of remaining faithful to the religious history of idolatry, while still preserving the philosophical integrity of today's Reform movement.

Rethinking Idolatry

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Contents

Idolatry in the Bible and Talmud

The Hebrew Bible has no word for idolatry. This fact may come as a startling

revelation to students and lovers of the Bible, who are intimately familiar with the text's

revulsion for the worship of graven images and its unequivocal condemnation of those

who participate in such worship. Strictly speaking, however, the fact of the term's

conspicuous absence remains. The closest thing to a Hebrew term for idol-worship we

can find is a construct form found in Ezekiel 23:49: *"chata'ei giluleichen,"* – "your idol-

sins,"[1] though even this term is itself a euphemism[2] and not literally parallel to our

modern translations.

To be sure, the *Tanakh* does contain a wide variety of names for religious idols

themselves: *pesel, temunah, teraph, elil, asherah,* and so on. Moreover, we can find

plenty of colorful descriptions of idol-worshipers: those who prostrate themselves to

Ba'al, who make molten images, who immolate their children in the names of false

deities.

This imbalance in biblical terminology – many words for idols and for idol-

worshipers, but none at all for the practice of idol-worship – may well indicate that, at

least for the biblical authors, idolatry was not seen as a distinct devotional practice with

identifiable structural characteristics. Since there was no shortage of Israelites as well as

non-Israelites who had the practice of including idols in their religious lives, idolatry

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[1] This and all subsequent translations are my own, unless otherwise specified.
[2] Definitions of the Hebrew *"gilul"* vary widely. Suggested translations have included "log," "stone-mound," and the evocative "dung-heap". The term remains ambiguous.

could itself hardly be considered a discrete "religion" of the ancient world. This fact, however, would be easily overlooked as Israelite religion slowly developed into rabbinic Judaism.

When, several centuries after the redaction of the Bible, the rabbinic institution grew and gathered momentum in Babylonia, the rabbis of the Talmud turned back to the Bible. In constructing their new Judaism, the rabbis looked back at the biblical world as a mythical ideal yet at the same time saw it as intensely relevant to their own day. This synthetic link to the legendary world of the Bible may have encouraged the rabbis to believe that the biblical Israelites had been engaged in the same sort of religious "world-building" that the rabbis themselves undertook with the creation of rabbinic Judaism.[3]

One factor that led effectively to subsequent belief that idolatry was a distinct religious creed was the rabbis' invention of a new catch-all term: "*avodah zarah,*" or "foreign worship".[4] This generic phrase, first appearing canonically in the Mishna, is used throughout the corpus of rabbinic literature to mean idolatry. By using a single term to refer to all pagan practices, the rabbis made it seem as though idolatry was in fact a distinct, unique faith with its own structural integrity. The phrase "*avodah zarah*" is even used in the religious writings of today, as a reference to practically all abhorrent religious practices – a subtle linguistic campaign which might well lead one to see the pernicious plague of idolatry has having tenacious longevity, even over thousands of years and thousands of miles.

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[3] Peter L. Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), which will figure into this study later, begins with the sentence "Every human society is an enterprise of world-building" (3).

[4] Likely related to "*esh zarah,*" or "foreign fire," which appears in the biblical account of Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu, who are executed (Leviticus 10:1-2) for offering incense on unauthorized fire in the Tabernacle.

But why did the rabbis have to build what was essentially a new, fictionalized religion out of *avodah zarah*? There are several possibilities. Perhaps the rabbis didn't really know what biblical idolatry was, or how to recognize it in everyday life, since the biblical text rarely goes into detail about what was involved in the worship of idols. Uncertainty of this type must have been unsettling for the rabbis, who were forced to reckon with the Bible's harsh descriptions of idolatry as they formulated legal documents for their constituents, few of whom were committed to truly aniconic religious practice.[5]

Another possibility may have been that the rabbis recognized that the semiotics of polemic against idolatry simply break down eventually. Since rabbinic Judaism itself employed metaphors of its own (often including elaborate descriptions of God's physical characteristics, personality traits, likes and dislikes, and so on) that might have been seen as problematic by strict aniconists, the rabbis may have consciously opted to use their critique in order to synthesize a new discrete religion, *avodah zarah*.

Finally, it may have been the case that social factors led to the innovation. Robert Goldenberg (1998) asserts that Roman oppression of Judaism manifested itself in chauvinistic self-assertion:

> [A]s Roman power snuffed out the last embers of Jewish nationalism, religion eventually became the only sphere in which Jewish national pride might express itself; much rabbinic polemic against idolatry can be understood as camouflaged polemic against Rome. (7)

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[5] "It is not easy to draw the exact line between attributing value and conferring absolute value, between not being indifferent and leading a life of total devotion, but when that line is crossed an idol is erected and an idolatrous life is being led" (Halbertal and Margalit, 246).

And so, as a result, rabbinic Judaism, moved by its sociopolitical milieu, effectively decided to build a sort of idol of its own – the socially-constructed idolater, to whom it turned its attention in the Talmud text.

For the purposes of this study, we will examine a substantial collection of material (mostly aggadic in content) from the Babylonian Talmud that falls under three major rubrics in tractate *Avodah Zarah*. In order, they are: theology, economics and social intercourse.

Theology

When the Talmud addresses itself to analyses and critiques of pagan theology (whatever it may have been), it does so in tendentious and often clumsy ways. Although it is difficult to determine whether the rabbinic authors had an understanding of the ideological roots of pagan religion, they seem to have felt compelled to try to expose and analyze them nonetheless. Predictably, their responses to idolatry derive in large part from fundamentally theological critiques. Ultimately, however, these varieties of critique fail in the Talmud because of the rabbis' insurmountable confusion about what, specifically, the idolaters' theology consisted of.

Superficially, the Talmud occasionally comments about the sheer ignorance or silliness behind idolatrous practice, as when it mentions (b. *Avodah Zarah* 8a) the benighted pagan descendents of the first human, who weren't clever enough to see the light of monotheism. The account of Rabbi Chanina's death-sentence, as well, shows us a crudely drawn caricature of a well-meaning but simple-minded pagan executioner who,

in the end, is redeemed because of his willingness to shirk his professional duties in

exchange for Chanina's promise of eternal life in the world-to-come:

> The executioner said to [Rabbi Chanina]: "Rabbi, if I increase the flames and
> remove the wool-tufts from your chest [which are prolonging your suffering],
> will you bring me into the eternal life to come?" He said to him: "Yes." [The
> executioner pressed him:] "Promise me," and he promised him. Immediately,
> [the executioner] increased the flames and removed the wool-tufts from his chest;
> [Rabbi Chanina's] soul instantly departed. [Suddenly, the executioner] leaped
> and fell into the fire. A divine voice proclaimed: "Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion
> and the executioner have been welcomed into the eternal life to come." (18a)

But caricatures cannot serve as incisive social or religious commentary, and so the

Talmud does eventually address itself to serious analysis of the religious principles

behind idol-worship. To do so, as is its norm, the text examines in great detail those

liminal cases which separate the prohibited from the permitted and the pure from the

impure. For instance, the Gemara engages in substantial debate over precisely how one

may determine the status of a given statue, sculpture, or idol, presumably a fitting

discussion given the aesthetic and cultural circumstances which surrounded the rabbis in

the time at which they wrote. After considerable back-and-forth, however, the rabbis find

themselves stymied when they consider the instability inherent in a principle such as

"*avodat kochavim shel oved kochavim einah asurah, elah ad shete'aved; v'shel Yisrael,*

miyyad" – "the idol of an idolater is not prohibited until it is worshiped, but [the idol] of

an Israelite [is prohibited] straightaway" (52a). The notion that a sculpture – or any

object, for that matter – changes its fundamental nature depending on its use is

understandably difficult for the rabbis to accept, but the difficulty in this *sugya* is set

aside, at least temporarily.

Elsewhere in the text, however, the problem of images and their meanings

develops into an irresolvable conundrum. The first mishna in Chapter 3 asserts that

> [a]ll images are prohibited because they are worshiped annually. These are the
> words of Rabbi Meir, but the sages say, "[The idol] is not prohibited unless it has
> a staff, or a bird, or a globe in its hand." Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: "Any
> idol that has anything in its hand [is prohibited]." (40b)

Because the authoritative words of the Mishna cannot be disregarded or revoked, this

ruling yields tremendous difficulty when it is expounded further in the Gemara. To be

sure, one problem lies in the prohibition of an entire genre of artistic expression, which

was so widespread in the rabbis' milieu. How could the rabbinic institution make such a

bold and facile prohibition on art that they themselves recognized was established and

maintained by the Empire "*la'noi*"[6] – for purely aesthetic purposes?

The larger question, though, centers on the notion of prohibiting human creativity

because of religious sentiment that may, at some point in time, have been associated with

that creativity. And, to their credit, the rabbis do not shy away from probing these issues

deeply. How should Jews relate to astronomical charts, given that some pagans worship

heavenly bodies (42b)? What about idols which have been broken into useless fragments

and then used as paving-stones (41a-41b)? What if a body part has been broken off a

certain statue (41b-42b)? The Gemara deconstructs these issues to the point that they

become essentially meaningless. Commenting on Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel's ruling

from the Mishna above, the text tells us that

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[6] The words of Rabbah, a Babylonian rabbi from the third generation of *amoraim* (41a).

> [Another tannaitic source] taught: [A statue is forbidden] even [if it held in its
> hand] a pebble or a wood-chip. Rav Ashi objected: "What if [it] held feces in its
> hand? [Ought we forbid it, and] say that [the idol] degrades all people as if they
> were feces? [Or, alternatively, ought we permit it, and] say that [the idol itself] is
> degraded by all people, as if it were feces?" *Teiku.* (41a)

This conclusion, this "*teiku*," is an idiom in rabbinic debate meaning that the discussion

cannot be resolved; these questions cannot be answered. By ending a *sugya* in this way,

the Talmud's authors acknowledge that they cannot satisfactorily answer these questions

about the metaphysical status of idols. Nor, in the end, can they reliably assess

theological questions about ultimate meaning behind the phenomenon of idol-worship,

given its unavoidable ambiguity.

Eventually, convinced that a systematic, reasoned theological argument against

idolatry is fundamentally unsustainable, the rabbis content themselves by concluding that

Judaism is simply a religious lifestyle that is preferable to paganism. Moreover, when

reasoned metaphysical critiques prove impossible, the Talmud frequently marshals

miracle-stories from rabbinic aggadah to settle the matter. Often the miracles are

grotesque, but they provide adequate refutation to the validity of idolatry (at least to a

reader unburdened by the strictures of rationalism):

> [Rava] went to visit [Bar Sheshak, a pagan acquaintance of his, and saw him]
> sitting up to his neck in [a bath of] rosewater, with naked prostitutes before him.
> [Bar Sheshak] said to him: "Do you [Jews] have [anything] comparable to this in
> the world-to-come?" He replied, "We have [that which is] better than this!"
> [Bar Sheshak] asked: "Is there anything better than this?" He replied, "You fear
> divine sovereignty, and we will not fear divine sovereignty". [Bar Sheshak
> responded:] "Why should I ever fear divine sovereignty?" As they sat, a royal
> messenger arrived and said [to Bar Shishak], "Rise! The king summons you!"
> Preparing to leave, [Bar Shishak] said to [Rava]: "[May] the eye that hopes to see
> evil [befall] you explode." [Rava] responded, "Amen," and [Bar Shishak's] eye
> exploded. (65a)

Note, too, that this story does not even bother to deny the existence of Bar Shishak's

gods; it merely asserts that the God of Israel is a more powerful ally – one who is not

above physical abuse to prove his sovereignty.

The rabbis' failure to construct a cogent theological argument against paganism is

further justified by an aggadic text in folio pages 54b-55a. This story asserts that, in fact,

God himself has successfully rationalized his policy of leaving the pagans alone to their

own devices. This well-known passage originates in the Mishna, where the senior

Roman elders are asked, "If God does not desire idol-worship, why does he not simply

abolish it?" The Gemara's deft rationalization comes quickly: "The idolaters worship

nature itself – and why should God destroy the natural world because of fools?" In this

way, paganism's popularity in the ancient world is quickly recontextualized not as

evidence of God's impotency, but as a sign that he can't be bothered to mar his splendid

creation on account of those who, because of their stupidity, insist on worshiping idols.

In the end, once the rabbis' tactic of attacking *avodah zarah* on theological

grounds has been proven fruitless, they turn to more fertile ground. By analyzing

everyday commercial interaction between Jews and pagans, the rabbis of the Talmud

succeed in sketching the image of a freakish, even demonic, idolatrous Other.

Economics

An approach based on economic models was very likely an easy place for the rabbis to

begin their synthesis of the stereotypical idolater once the attempt to discuss pagan

theology broke down. Even a cursory overview of tractate *Avodah Zarah* reveals that the

overwhelming majority of the halachic issues being discussed in it have to do with commerce, at least superficially.[7] Moreover, nearly all of the remainder of the tractate deals with consumable commodities (wine, produce, livestock, etc.) and thus are about economics as well, even when the topic of discussion is what things may be eaten, drunk, or worshiped by Jews.[8]

Under the rubric of economics, the wealth of textual material in b. *Avodah Zarah* – both aggadic and halachic in nature – contributes to the construction of the fictional idolater's character. The construction is easily observable, in large part because the Talmud's understanding of commerce is so different from a purely capitalist model. For the rabbis, there is no such thing as "mere" commerce; exchanges of finances or commodities between two or more parties also must take into account the social and religious realities in which the parties live and work. In some ways, this view of economics is anachronistically progressive; in yet other ways, however, modern readers cannot escape the fact that, for the rabbis, financial savvy is often paired with broad polemic in the formulation of rules for economic conduct. In the end, this combination is a particularly powerful component of the social construction of the ancient idolater.

To be certain, enabling Jews to accrue financial profit is a high priority for the rabbis, especially if religious legislation may increase the chances that the Jewish community will attain prosperity by impoverishing pagan gentiles. One brief exposition (20a) on the biblical phrase *"lo techannem"*[9] reveals the rabbinic ruling that no Jew may

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[7] This tendency is easily witnessed by reading the Mishna, as well, whose entire first chapter is about prohibited sale and rental between Jews and gentiles on pagan festival days.
[8] Note the Greek root of "economics": *oikonomia*, meaning, "that which pertains to the house (*oikos*)."
[9] Literally, "do not be merciful to them" (Deuteronomy 7:2).

give away anything for free to a suspected idol-worshiper; even decaying carrion – the epitome of repulsive, worthless material – must be sold for a profit.

The rabbis became particularly concerned when confronted with the idea that a Jew might sell or lease something to a pagan that might facilitate the pagan's idolatrous religious life. The biblical exhortation against "placing a stumbling-block" is invoked frequently (though decidedly out of context), and is held to a higher priority than amassing profit from the pockets of gentiles.[10] For this reason, the rabbis are extremely wary about allowing Jews to sell or lease homes or bathhouses to gentiles (21a-22a) – especially in the holy land of Israel – because of their anxiety that gentile idolaters will commit idolatry in the buildings, and thus render the Jewish landlord ultimately liable for the iniquity taking place on his property.

Any suggestion that Jewish commerce might benefit a social group perceived as Israel's enemy (even a fictionalized group) is promptly dismissed by the rabbis. When the tannaitic authority Nachum HaMadi ("Nachum the Mede") asserts that a Jew "[may] sell [to idolaters] an old male horse in wartime," the other rabbis' response is swift and definitive: "Silence! This matter should not be spoken of" (7b). Even financial arrangements between physicians and patients – which we would presume to be of higher importance than mere religious quarrels – are called into question by the Talmud. In fact, no sooner do the rabbis reach a grudging consensus that pagan doctors may be paid for treating Jewish patients in life-or-death situations than a contrary piece of aggadah is introduced:

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[10] See Leviticus 19:14. The notion here is that the Jew may be making it easier for the idolater to sin *unwittingly*, like a person who places something in the path of a blind person who cannot tell that the obstacle is there and trips over it.

> There is a story about Ben Dama, the son of Rabbi Ishmael's sister, who was bitten by a snake. Jacob, a man from Kfar Sekanya,[11] came to heal him, but Rabbi Ishmael would not let him.[12] So Rabbi Ishmael said to him, "My brother, Rabbi Ishmael, let him, and I will be healed by him. I will even bring a phrase from the Torah showing that he is permitted!" But he could not finish what he was saying; his soul went out of him and he died. Then Rabbi Ishmael said, "Happy are you, Ben Dama, whose body was pure and whose soul departed in purity – for you did not transgress the words of your colleagues!" (27b)

Clearly, for Rabbi Ishmael at least, a willingness to die rather than engage in economic exchange with gentiles is an admirable quality. One suspects that Ben Dama might have disagreed, however!

Notwithstanding the stridency of the rabbis' arguments against financial interaction with pagan gentiles, we suspect that the average Jewish buyer or seller would have equivocated considerably on the same subject. The sheer volume of rabbinic screeds against dealing with idolaters in business ought to raise our suspicions that everyday life in the Talmud's day did indeed involve financial transactions between neighbors of differing religious convictions. Mustn't the rabbis have been preaching against something in particular with which they were intimately familiar?

It must have been extremely difficult for Jews to consider cutting off trade with others around them for reasons of financial stability, let alone considering the social pressures associated with such a bold religious move. Rabbinic ambivalence about Jewish economic separatism is itself encoded in certain passages in b. *Avodah Zarah*. At the conclusion of a passage (6a-6b) clarifying the times when economic exchange is forbidden between Jews and gentiles, the Talmud introduces a story about a financial gift sent to Rabbi Judah Nesi'ah from an unnamed apostate on a pagan festival day. In the

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[11] A place with heretical associations.
[12] See also 40b, where Rabbi Ishmael makes a comment testifying to the unnatural skill that idolaters seem to have in the medicinal arts.

story, Resh Laqish proposes to Rabbi Judah that, because the tannaitic halachic notion of depriving gentiles of profit on their festival days cannot be overturned, Rabbi Judah ought to throw away the gift. In order to keep from offending the man, who presumably was a friend of Rabbi Judah's, however, he should undertake to dispose of it "*kil'achar yad*" (6b) – literally, "under-handedly," so as to fulfill the halacha without upsetting one's gracious pagan neighbor.

Evidence like this points to the idea that there is more at play in the rabbis' economic halacha than merely a desire to adjust Jews' financial portfolios. Although it is clear that the Talmud is at pains to preserve the legal rulings of the Mishna, which unequivocally prohibited certain types of economic exchange between Jews and gentiles, it seems that the social reality in which it was born and developed had a greater effect on the Gemara than its textual ancestors could possibly hope to have had.

Nevertheless, we cannot discount completely the role of the Talmud's economic reform. Pascal Boyer (2001), from whom we will hear a great deal more later in this study, asserts that much of religion's development came about in order to make it too "costly" (socially, militarily, and, yes, financially) to belong to rival religious groups with whom one's own *ethnos* is in "competition" (286-296). For Boyer, then, the rabbis must make it difficult for Jews to do business with the gentiles in order to preserve the coalitional unity of Rabbinic Judaism – what the sociologist Matt Ridley (1996) called the religion's "groupishness" (cited in Boyer, 288). Ideally, from this point of view, the Talmud's legislation would not only make it too onerous for Jews to transact with gentiles – indeed, it would make it too "costly" to *be* a gentile.

Looking through this social lens, it should by now have become clear why the use of economic halacha proved so effective in the rabbis' construction of *avodah zarah*. We will return to this analysis, and to Boyer's perspective, in the final section of this paper.

Social Intercourse

Facing the incomplete pieces of their attempts to characterize the idolater in terms of theology or economic policy, the rabbis chose to construct him *de novo*. It may have been that, recognizing that their own "rabbinic theology was neither systematic nor monolithic" (Rubenstein 238), the sages, in their quest for unification, sought to invent an Other that could be easily caricatured and demonized by Jews from Palestine to Babylonia and beyond.

To this end, the rabbis turned their attention and their creative energy to the public sphere in which they – like all citizens – lived their everyday lives. Surrounded by confusing, often threatening circumstances, the rabbis used the Talmud (arguably the only area left in which Jews of that era could remain publicly triumphalist and emphatically proud of their ethnic and national identity) to reevaluate social phenomena in ways that were specifically meaningful to them religiously.

> [Jewish] hostility fed on resentment of endless subjection to foreign conquerors
> and the frustrated national ambitions of the Jews themselves. It had several times
> exploded into ward so violent they were remembered centuries later. Now 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. (Goldenberg, 90)

Thus, critical reevaluations of social intercourse between Jews and gentiles turned out to be an incredibly effective method of galvanizing group identity against fictionalized idolaters while encountering relatively low risk in exchange.[13]

There is an overwhelming amount of material in the Talmud (again, both halachic and aggadic in nature) about social interaction between Jews and non-Jews. In order to analyze this material most efficiently, it must be organized carefully and deliberately. To this end, it is my belief that the rabbinic texts concerning social interaction may be divided into two groups, based on two discrete observable agendas that motivate them. This paper will evaluate the two corpora one at a time. First, we will look at *transformational* texts, which evidence activist traditions to absorb and transform gentile practices into acceptable new forms. Second, we will concentrate on the *polemical* texts, which, having accepted that certain types of social reality cannot be adequately sanitized, choose instead to attack the social lives of gentiles, characterizing them as unacceptable at best and repulsive at worst.

Our analysis of the rabbis' activism vis-à-vis Jewish social interaction with gentiles must begin with the acknowledgement that for individuals of their day, the trappings of paganism must have been practically unavoidable throughout the public sphere. The sheer physical unavoidability of potentially offensive images, statues, and cultic apparatus would have been strongly influential when the rabbis were creating their legislation relating to *avodah zarah*. Indeed, the Talmud contains numerous references to the omnipresence of statues (and pieces thereof), utensils, tools, and jewelry bearing pagan imagery (see, for instance, 41a-43b), as well as to a striking number of public

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[13] Centuries later, this approach would of course backfire, as communities of Jews all over Europe in the Middle Ages would be forced to confront censorship and burning of the Talmud and endure public "disputations" of its teachings.

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facilities where idols had been established: roads, squares and plazas, fountains, springs, and so on (12a-12b). It must have been vitally important for the rabbis to come to terms with this reality if Jews were to lead productive lives in the ancient *polis*. There is even a remarkable passage (44b) in which the great Rabban Gamliel defends his practice of visiting a bathhouse in Akko dedicated to Aphrodite! Clearly the rabbis were aware of the inevitability of pagan imagery in Jews' lives, so they had to be creative with their legislation, lest their condemnation of *avodah zarah* create unrealistic expectations of everyday Jews. "Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel and Rabbi Eliezer ben Tzaddok said: 'We make no decree for the community unless a majority of the public is able to withstand it'" (36a).

For this reason, the rabbis' first instinct would have been to find a way to convert offensive gentile practices into acceptable new forms, so that Jews could participate in the cultural world in which they lived. This instinct led to rulings in the Talmud that appear at times remarkably progressive, and at times simply laughable.

> Our rabbis taught: He who goes to coliseums or to circuses and watches
> magicians or sorcerers, or *bukion, mukion, lulion, mulion, blurin* or
> *salgurin*[14]...[you should] learn that these things lead one to the neglect of Torah.
> [However,] it is permitted to go to coliseums, for [one may] shout and thus save
> [a victim of gladiatorial combat]. And [going] to circuses is permitted [for the
> sake of] civic order....Rabbi Natan permits [going to coliseums] for two reasons:
> one [is that one may] shout and thus save [a victim of gladiatorial combat], and
> one [is that a Jewish spectator may] give evidence to the wife [of a victim,
> attesting to his death], and [thus allow her] to remarry [under Jewish law]. (18b)

Another passage (11a) concludes after lengthy debate that idolatrous funerary practices reserved for those of high office are also permitted to Jews, thus affirming once again that

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[14] According to Epstein, these names refer to various types of comic performers.

long-held anxieties about cultural assimilation need not prohibit Jews from the

established social niceties of the gentile world.

There are, of course, certain lines that the rabbinic establishment is unwilling to

cross, even despite Jews' attraction to the finer aspects of gentile society, most notably

those that might threaten the longstanding Jewish taboo on intermarriage:[15]

> Another interpretation of [the biblical commandment] *"lo techannem"*[16] is: "do
> not find them attractive"....A story [is told about] Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel,
> who was standing on a step of the Temple Mount and saw an idolatress who was
> extraordinarily beautiful. And he said: "How great are Your works, O God!"
> (Psalm 104:24) (20a)

Another variety of transformational texts includes those that, not merely satisfied

with recontextualizing reality, opt instead to create a fantastic imaginary world in which

Jews – and Judaism – reign supreme over the pagans and their idolatrous religious

practices. The beginning of tractate *Avodah Zarah* is a perfect example of this type of

text. The tractate opens with a very long aggadic passage (2a-3b), which relates an

eschatological vision of the *"atid la'vo"* – the "coming future" at the end of time. In this

story, the end-of-days culminates with God holding a Torah scroll in his lap and

evaluating the nations of the world one by one to determine how well they had occupied

themselves with its study. One at a time, Rome, then Persia, then the rest of the world's

powers enter into God's presence to plead their merits, and one by one they are

summarily dismissed by God. Each time, God thunders at the gentile nations: *"Shutim*

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[15] Of course, this anxiety presents itself in numerous places throughout tractate *Avodah Zarah.* See, for
instance, 36b, which tells us that "an Israelite who has intercourse with an idolatress is considered [as
having had intercourse with, all at once,] a menstruant, a female slave, a gentile and a married woman."
[16] See note on page 9, above.

she 'ba 'olam" – "You fools!" and reaffirms his praise for Israel who alone embraced the

truth of Torah.

Rubenstein analyzes this narrative at length in his *Talmudic Stories* (1999, pp.

212-242). He notes:

> The story at the outset of the tractate explains and justifies not only the Mishna's
> view of gentiles and idolatry, but also the fundamental rabbinic value – the
> Torah. For it is Torah that separates gentile from Jew in both this world (the
> Mishna) and in the world to come (the story). (238)

In the rabbis' fantastical worldview, the thing that separates Jews from gentiles – Torah –

is also the only thing of ultimate value in the universe. Thus, the rabbis have in effect

created a universe in which gentiles' lives can never attain metaphysical value, unless

they recognize the error of their ways, convert to Judaism and embrace Torah.

This theme is one that recurs in numerous stories in the tractate. Judaism is not

merely said to possess supreme worth, however; the gentiles in the stories recognize

Judaism's inherent superiority and desperately seek to be accepted within the Jewish

community. A series of transformational narratives of this type, in which reality itself is

turned on its head, depicts imaginary encounters between a Roman emperor named

Antoninus[17] and a Rabbi Judah[18] (10a-11a). Each of the brief vignettes shows the

emperor desperately consulting the rabbi for advice, which the rabbi provides gladly. In

each episode, the rabbi's sage counsel ensures that the entire Empire continues to run

smoothly. The final episode culminates with Antoninus humbling himself before Rabbi

Judah, begging for favor and for a place in the world-to-come:

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[17] Possibly Antoninus Pius, who reigned from approximately 138 to 161 C.E.
[18] It is unclear whether the character in this story is Rabbi Judah HaNasi or his grandson Judah II.

> When Rabbi wished to get in bed, Antonius lay in front of it and said to him:
> "Get into bed by stepping on me." Rabbi objected: "It is not fitting to degrade a
> king thus!" And Antoninus replied: "If only I could be made into your mattress
> in the world-to-come!" (10b)

The ideological motivation behind the pairings of the two men in these stories is clear,

and the ironic triumph of the rabbi over the emperor is a powerful illustration of the

values underpinning the rabbis' imaginative prose. One page later (11a), the Gemara

goes to far as to remark that the two struggling "nations" in Rebecca's womb[19] had

actually been Antoninus and Rabbi Judah. Just as in the story of Jacob and Esau, the

rabbis predict hopefully, one nation, less powerful but favored by God, would best

another, despite its impressive size and overwhelming strength.

We move now to examine the second variety of texts found in tractate *Avodah

Zarah*. Viciously polemical material is spread liberally throughout the tractate and,

though its grotesqueness lacks the literary subtlety we observed in the earlier texts, it is

quite effective in communicating the irreconcilable differences between Jews and non-

Jews in the ancient world. Indeed, the pagans in this material are "unable or unwilling to

control even their basest urges, and by implication the religions underlying gentile life are

the ground cause of this appalling deficiency" (Goldenberg, 83).

The accusations leveled at the rabbis' gentile neighbors are monstrous: they are

violent, deviant, perverse, dishonest, filthy and crude. They prefer sexual congress with

animals even to their own spouses, and occasionally even use the same animals for food

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[19] Genesis 25:22-23: "But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She
went to inquire of the LORD, and the LORD answered her, "Two nations are in your womb, Two separate
peoples shall issue from your body; One people shall be mightier than the other, And the older shall serve
the younger." (Translation from the Jewish Publication Society edition: Philadelphia, 1985.)

that they have used for sexual gratification (22b-23a). Pagan midwives and wet nurses seek to kill Jewish babies; pagan circumcisers secretly hope to emasculate or castrate Jewish boys (26a-27a). The rabbis' panicked fear of the gentile Other is palpable in the Talmud text:

> One may not place cattle in idolaters' pens – even male [animals] with male [idolaters] or female [animals] with female [idolaters]. Needless to say, [one cannot place] female [animals] with male [idolaters] or male [animals] with female [idolaters]. One may not entrust livestock to their shepherds, and one may not be alone with them, and one may not entrust a child to them for education or apprenticeship....Furthermore, it has been taught: one may not sell them weapons or weapon-accessories; nor may one sharpen their weapons or sell them manacles or neck-chains or ropes or chains of iron....Rav Adda bar Ahava said: "One may not sell them ingots of iron." What is the reason? Because they may fashion weapons from it....[But] Rav Ashi said: "[We may sell ingots of iron] to the Persians, who protect us [from the idolaters]." (15b-16a)

What can the meaning be behind such offensive texts? Certainly it does not reflect a faithful picture of pagan life in the rabbis' communities. Had a credible account been the rabbis' true intent, they surely would have muted their hyperbole considerably in an effort to make their literature more believable. On the other hand, however, we ought not conclude either that the style of the polemic is so broad, so intentionally cartoonish, that its intent is merely to entertain the reader. This hyperbole is intentional, but not merely for literature's sake.

We also should not conclude from this literature that the rabbis were simply interested in setting Jews and pagans apart completely, cloistering their community away from the corrupting influence of gentile society. The "transformational" texts we examined earlier countervail against this fallacious conclusion, for one thing. Moreover,

we must bear in mind that the rabbis were not at all opposed to the notion of conversion. Gentiles, in the rabbis' minds, could certainly be welcomed into the community of God's chosen – witness the Talmud's treatment of the Emperor Antoninus, for instance. Even the gentile executioner who put Rabbi Chanina to death was accepted into the heavenly world-to-come because he welcomed Judaism's truth (18a).

We will see, in the concluding sections of this paper, that there were very specific socioreligious reasons behind the rabbis' construction of a sinister gentile Other. After exploring some ways in which contemporary writers have undertaken their own campaigns to (re)construct idolatry, we will explore the rationale behind all of these efforts and, hopefully, illuminate some ways of transforming them to bring about positive religious change in our own day.

Idolatry in Contemporary Thought

We have already seen how the rabbis of the Talmud actively endeavored to replace the Bible's vague and antiquated understanding of idolatry with a highly imaginative, synthetic version of their own. We should bear in mind that, although the rabbis constructed fanciful visions of idolatry built largely on social (and not ritual) criteria, they were also careful to link their own fictionalized *avodah zarah* to the Bible's warnings about idolatry in its own day, citing on numerous occasions the very biblical texts that they had set out to supersede. In this way, *avodah zarah* as the rabbis understood it simultaneously extended and replaced the Bible's characterization of idolatry.

In virtually the same way, modern religious writers have replicated the rabbis' campaign. Perhaps these writers have been motivated by a need for past religious writings to remain forever relevant, or perhaps by an anxiety that material in the religious canon would, under the light of reason, be proven false. Whatever their reasoning may be, these contemporary figures undertake substantial effort to prove that the threat of idolatry is still with us and that ancient strategies to root it out are still highly relevant and useful for modern religious people.

How, then, in a modern world devoid of true idol-worship, do these individuals assert that the menace of *avodah zarah* is still so real? Two methodological approaches are dominant in contemporary treatments of idolatry, each of which will be explored in

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detail. The first possibility is for the writer to assert that in modern life we ought to

categorize more phenomena as *avodah zarah* than our predecessors would have done.

The other rhetorical option is for the writer to claim that the terms "idolatry," or "*avodah*

zarah" really are meant to refer to a certain repugnant pattern of religious thought.

According to this perspective, certain religious practices (of which devotional fetishism

would be only one example) ought to be eschewed not for reasons of structure or

function, but because they exist as instantiations of wrongheaded ideas about religion.

Expanding the Definition of Idolatry

Let us turn first to the strategy of expanding *avodah zarah*'s traditional definition. One

assertion common to the individuals who espouse this particular viewpoint[20] is the notion

that idolatry's danger remains near at hand, despite the reality that modern life has

dictated certain changes in the form of *avodah zarah*. Much of the writing in this

category is driven by a feeling of peril, not only deriving from the ancients' repugnance

for idolatry, but also from a sense that we moderns are constantly at risk of stumbling

into the practice of idolatry without even knowing it.

The idea that "anything can become an idol" (Seeskin 1995, 21) is quite common

in these works, and their authors are eager to demonstrate their point with numerous

examples from contemporary life. Halbertal and Margalit (1992), for instance, quote

Karl Marx to the effect that to a capitalist, money may easily become an idol (243), and

Kenneth Seeskin, a professor of philosophy, declares that even his own academic

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[20] In this study, Seeskin and Kushner (examples to follow) represent the traditional perspective. Halbertal and Margalit, as representatives of the second school of thought, will be discussed below.

discipline might become "a form of idolatry" (47). Along similar lines, he also suggests

that human vanity presents a clear temptation for us to practice idolatry:

> When the second commandment prohibited image-making, it asked people to
> abandon the values of a warrior class and look at the world from a new and
> revolutionary perspective: one that regards moral qualities such as justice and
> mercy as more important than physical form. ... To people who spend thousands
> of dollars on cosmetics or who rely on steroids or breast implants to provide what
> nature did not, the lesson is still valid. Let us therefore consider the first level at
> which idolatry manifests itself: self-love. (33)

The questionable historicity of a pre-Sinaitic "warrior class" of Israelites aside, his point

is clear: excessive devotion to one's physical appearance may be tantamount to religious

attachment to statues of divine beings. Even those of us with healthy self-images may

not be immune to committing idolatry:

> If God is the only thing in the universe worthy of worship or adoration, then
> anyone who becomes obsessed with the desire for wealth, beauty, fame, or power
> is said to *idolize* them. From a modern perspective then, idolatry is a universal
> phenomenon. Almost every country in the world has military parades that
> glorify power, advertisements that glorify beauty or sexual fulfillment, books that
> extol wealth or influence, and cults that deify movie stars and sports figures.
> Thus a person who devotes several hours a day to grooming, dressing, or body-
> building is said to "bow" to the god of fame or beauty even though he or she may
> live in a secular culture. (17-18)

Note that, in constructing his reasoning here, Seeskin uses a well-known metaphoric turn

of phrase from everyday language (to "idolize" someone or something), which refers

most commonly to secular enthusiasm for a person or object. From this idiom, Seeskin

extracts the conclusion that enthusiasm of nearly any kind may be idolatry ("From a

modern perspective then, idolatry is a universal phenomenon"). Even if we accept his

assertion that modern speakers of English are likely to talk about "idolizing" fame or

fortune,[21] we ought to recognize that his conclusion is spurious. The figure of speech is effective precisely because of its hyperbole. It is clear that, in everyday speech, a person is more likely to say that he "idolizes" a movie star than a deity; the expression works precisely because of its incongruity.

Moreover, when Seeskin claims brashly that "idolatry is a universal phenomenon," he has paradoxically weakened his own campaign to preserve the relevance of *avodah zarah*. Even the anxious authors of the Bible and Talmud were not willing to declare idolatry ever-present; perhaps they realized (as Seeskin does not) that if everything is idolatry, then nothing is idolatry. This problem is not unique to Seeskin, however. Often, when contemporary writers are intent upon broadening their audience's understanding of idolatry in order to include a wide range of modern beliefs and practices, they stretch the concept wholly out of proportion. By using this approach, these people devise reinterpretations of *avodah zarah* so drastic that the notion no longer resembles anything familiar, and certainly nothing that we would recognize when we look backward to the religious institutions of the past.

Idolatrous Thought: Halbertal and Margalit's Diachronic Approach

The second strategy undertaken by those attempting to construct a contemporary model of *avodah zarah* is to generalize it as an issue of problematic religious *thought*, not of religious *practice*. These individuals, like those examined above, render idolatry abstract

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[21] Personally, I think that Seeskin has misunderstood the way the idiom works. My impression is that people use the phrase only when talking about people they admire. The sentence "I idolize Tiger Woods" makes much more sense than the sentence "I idolize Tiger Woods's net worth," though Seeskin holds that "to idolize" in modern speech applies primarily to concepts ("the desire for wealth, beauty, fame, or power") and not to people.

in order to synthesize a measure of continuity with biblical, rabbinic and medieval texts. By using this strategy, these writers also assert the existence of *avodah zarah* as a discrete religious phenomenon, and one with a particularly troubling longevity.

An example of this approach can be found in *Idolatry* (1992) by Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, which we will examine in detail. The work aims to assemble a sort of "unified field theory" of idolatry. In order to do so, Halbertal and Margalit first examine various ways in which religious individuals and institutions have understood idolatry (as infidelity, breach-of-contract, cognitive error, and so on), and then explore how the metaphors have evolved over the centuries. By emphasizing the metaphors' continuity, Halbertal and Margalit imply that what has been called "idolatry" throughout history is a single enduring phenomenon, though the ways people describe it have shifted considerably.

Essentially, Halbertal and Margalit universalize idolatry by freeing it from the bonds of time, place, and culture; for them, idolatry is an eternal phenomenon rooted primarily in the human mind. To prove this point, they highlight religious texts claiming that idolatry is simply a problem associated with one's thought about God, and not necessarily with one's ritual practice. Much of Halbertal and Margalit's construction of abstracted idolatry hinges upon the writings of Maimonides, whom they credit with having pointed out the social and mental "internalization" of idolatry following the Second Temple's destruction in the first century CE (109ff). Following Maimonides, Halbertal and Margalit assert that the best way to determine whether someone is an idolater is to examine the way he or she thinks about God (55).[22]

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[22] See also the first section of the *Guide* (Pines 1963, 56ff).

The idea that idolatry is essentially a cognitive error has found purchase in less scholarly contemporary works as well. The *Book of Words* (1995) is a listing of thirty words and phrases in Hebrew which author Lawrence Kushner translates and analyzes in order to produce a "contemporary spiritual guide for the reader's personal religious life."[23] When Kushner comes to explain the phrase "*avodah zarah*," he does not consider the actual phenomenology of idol-worship in antiquity at all, but rather asks rhetorically (and ungrammatically): "so what if you're stupid enough to talk to a statue, surely no harm could come from that" (55). Despite the flippancy of Kushner's "spiritual guide," his qualification of *avodah zarah* as simple stupidity provides another example of idolatry characterized as intellectual error by modern religious writers.

Certainly, those who wish to use the concept of idolatry for antagonistic purposes also eagerly make use of the hypothesis that *avodah zarah* is a kind of mental affliction. Their polemic is strengthened because *avodah zarah* understood purely as a mental dysfunction (i.e. a definition of idolatry is not dependent upon reasoned examinations of pagan religious praxis over the years) means that the polemicists can easily (although perhaps deceitfully) claim that idolatry has plagued the religious world for as long as religion has involved human thought. This line of reasoning is made use of not only in Kushner's *Book of Words*, but also in the responsa of modern rabbinical authorities who claim that Reform Judaism is itself a form of *avodah zarah*.

For example, Judith Bleich (1992) reports that in the nineteenth century, Tzvi Chajes, a Galician orthodox rabbi, published a tractate called "*Minchat Kinaot*" (1849) which analyzed a wide range of Reform innovations. In it, Chajes drew connections between the nascent Reform movement and the most glaringly deviant sects of the Jewish

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[23] According to this edition's back cover.

past, including the Israelites who worshiped the golden calf (Exodus 32) and supported

the rebellion of Korach (Numbers 16), those who offered sacrifices at Beth-El and Dan

(instead of in Jerusalem), the Sadducees, Essenes, early Christians and Karaites. Chajes

concluded, "There is no doubt whatsoever that all the rulings that our Sages of blessed

memory decreed for the Sadducees and Karaites apply to [the early Reformers]"

(*Minchat Kinaot*, 1012; as translated and quoted in Bleich, 59). Even Jack Wertheimer, a

prominent figure in today's liberal Jewish world (he is currently the provost and a faculty

member at the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary) draws a direct

comparison in his *A People Divided* (1993) between Reform Judaism and the idolatrous

worship of the golden calf (177).

We should see by now that these approaches have adopted the same agenda that

was so central to the Talmud's reinvention of *avodah zarah*: to reject outright any

intimation that religious responses to idolatry had somehow become unnecessary or

irrelevant over the course of history. Works like Halbertal and Margalit's undertake this

agenda by linking idolatry to something that will always be relevant to the religious

endeavor: human thought about the divine. Similarly, in the absence of an accurate

understanding of what *avodah zarah* really is, modern writers have also continued the

biblical and rabbinic campaign to construct the idolater as a frightening and hazardous

Other. In our modern, rationalist world, however, instead of ridiculing the idolater as a

sexual deviant or a cheater as the Talmud did, contemporary authors simply mock him as

an idiot.

Clearly, the demonization of the idolatrous Other is much more important than

hermeneutic precision for these modern writers, and they have also embraced inaccurate,

stereotypical patterns of thought, similar to those that we saw earlier in our analysis of the

Talmud texts. Halbertal and Margalit, for example, derive their conclusions about

Israelite beliefs about idolatry by analyzing biblical texts (mostly prophetic texts) using

exegesis that is essentially *midrashic* in style (9-36). To do so, they first isolate the

metaphors that dominated when the prophets discussed idolatry (chiefly, these are

metaphors about violations of sexual, marital, or contractual partnerships), and then

extract from these metaphors information about how Israelite society as a whole thought

about and legislated against idolatry.

This approach, while certainly the result of a great creative effort, is not one with

much scientific integrity. For one thing, the prophets were not creating prescriptive

literature in the same way the Talmud set out to do; nor did their literature emerge from a

uniform perspective about the religious world. Consequently, Halbertal and Margalit are

on shaky ground when they attempt to posit a uniform biblical worldview of idolatry as

they do. For another thing, knowing what we do about the wide gulf between the

literature of the Bible and the mainstream religious practices of ancient Israelite society,

we must conclude that Halbertal and Margalit's approach is not an effective method of

learning anything significant about normative belief in the biblical period.

Even discounting the major methodological problems associated with

constructing a universal theory of idolatry, Halbertal and Margalit take liberties with

contemporary scholarship about ancient worship practices. For instance, they correctly

reject the biblical assertion that idolaters literally worshiped pieces of stone or wood,[24]

rather than a divine entity for which the idols stood (39). However, they go too far when

they boldly declare that "icons have independent power; they heal and perform miracles

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[24] An assertion which is made, for instance, in Isaiah 44:9-20, Jeremiah 10:1-5, and Habakkuk 2:18-19.

and therefore are addressed and worshiped" (40). Although there is evidence that at least

part of this claim is true (MacMullen 1981, 49-73), we must not delude ourselves into

believing that the situation was as simplistic as Halbertal and Margalit make it out to be.

But Halbertal and Margalit are not only guilty of having oversimplified ancient

systems of pagan religion with their offhand dismissal; the factuality of their statement

about the nature and role of idols is dubious as well. Zaidman and Pantel (1992) begin

their description of ancient Greek idol-worship by cautioning us that

> Even though the cult-statue was in most cases the ultimate focus of rituals, it was
> usually kept shut up within the temple, and only taken out and handled during the
> great festivals....The function of these was not to play an active rôle in ritual but
> to recall to the worshipper's mind the divinity's attributes and history and the
> deities associated with him or her....Everywhere the eye travelled it encountered
> images of the gods, deceptively familiar in their forms yet simultaneously
> reminding mortals how vast was the gulf in status between the human condition
> and the divine world. (60-61)

Moreover, in at least one form of ancient idol-worship – the Roman imperial cult

– religious devotion most certainly could not have functioned under Halbertal and

Margalit's assumption that the idol has "independent power". On the contrary, the

emperor, and not the statue of him, administers affairs of state and so ought to be adored.

Believing that the imperial statues are themselves independent deities is a mistaken

understanding of how the cult functioned, and falling into this trap will only lead to

serious confusion (also see Ferguson 1970, 88-98; Aaron 125-155). Recognizing the

phenomenology of the Roman imperial cult is especially important to our purposes, given

that cult's central role in the Talmud's polemic.[25]

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[25] Goldenberg (1998) holds that the imperial cult necessarily occupied a central position in the Talmud's
polemic for several reasons: the cult's unique threat to Judaism's theological and nationalist integrity, the

In general, ancient religion was much more sophisticated than many

contemporary writers recognize, and it was more widely varied than their stereotypical

statements might lead readers to believe.[26] Despite the well-documented complexity of

religion in antiquity, however, plenty of writers feel comfortable dismissing all of

fetishistic worship as silly or trivial (Seeskin is just one example, as is Kushner, who

pokes fun at the "stupidity" of those who "talk to a statue").

Ultimately, Halbertal and Margalit's critique of idolatry as an institution is rooted

in their assessment of how ancient pagans related to idols as symbols. They assert (44-

45) that the biblical and talmudic authors were vehemently opposed to idolatry because

of an "attitudinal" error in the idolaters' understanding of depictions of the divine and

their function. In other words, the Bible was only opposed to *certain* cases of symbolic

substitution, depending on the religious attitude that prevailed in a particular cult's

adherents. This approach, however, is fatally flawed. How can we seriously hope to

construct a critique of idolatry not based up on written records or archaeological artifacts

but upon what might have been in the *minds* of idolaters thousands of years ago? Even

when we are able to uncover detail about the kinds of ritual practiced by ancient pagans,

there is no real way of knowing what the biblical idolaters were thinking while they were

engaged in it; it is considerably easier for us to talk authoritatively about pagan *practice*

than about pagan *belief.* Imaginative writing about the "nonpagans' great fear of

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unavoidable pervasiveness of the emperor's image, and the daunting sociopolitical repercussions that
would certainly follow from any citizen's rejection of the civic-imperial cult (94ff).

[26] Indeed, ancient idol-worship may in fact have been remarkably similar to our own system of book-
religion and linguistic metaphor:

> [I]n Babylon and Assyria the relationship of the signified to the signifier is characterized by a
> constant shifting between the two realms – realms that are integral to the real....we can see that the
> process of visual representation or duplication is structurally similar to the system of writing....we
> need not think of two areas of words and images with functional similarities or parallels. The two
> areas are structurally the same because they belong to the same system of signification. (Bahrani
> 2003, 128.)

similarity-based representation" (Halbertal and Margalit 41; see also 40-42) may be

stirring prose, but it cannot be taken seriously as a reliable account of religious conviction

in the Ancient Near East.

After all, Robert Goldenberg (1998) has shown effectively that the prophetic

literature about idolatry, in fact, may be read quite differently. In discussing Jeremiah

44:16-18, he points out that

> Jeremiah's accusation contains none of the familiar themes of prophetic
> denunciation; there is no talk here of Israel's treachery or of foolishly worshiping
> sticks and stones. The prophet simply asserts the greater power of his god, and
> warns his hearers that the other gods will not be able to shield them from his
> god's power. Everyone in this debate appears to accept that the other gods are
> real enough; the current debate is about their power, not their being. (13-14)

He also raises the possibility that the material from Isaiah 44 might be read as satire, a

possibility that considerably weakens Halbertal and Margalit's bold assertions about the

prophets' revulsion for and "great fear" about idol-worship.

Ironically, Halbertal and Margalit's search for contemporary relevance in the

Bible's views on adultery is also weakened by their attempt to buttress their conclusions

with the writing of late commentators. As mentioned above, they seek to actively import

meaning to the text, and to lend that meaning a certain authority, by frequently citing

Maimonides' interpretations of *avodah zarah* (42-45, 54-62, 109-111, and 152-159,

among other places). The inappropriateness of this approach should be obvious. Not

only did Maimonides know considerably less than we do about the realities of idolatrous

cults in the ANE, but his perspective is necessarily rooted in the rabbinic tradition, and is

thus unsuitable for modern, unbiased analyses of Israelite religion in antiquity.

Though we must reject this particular tactic in Halbertal and Margalit's work, we understand clearly the reason they have engaged it. They, like so many other modern writers, are determined to transform ancient idolatry into a discrete "religion" whose core is belief, and not praxis. To this end, philosophical approaches (like those for which Maimonides is best remembered) to religious phenomena are useful in transforming the *avodah zarah* of the ANE into betrayal and error, transgressions that (as all of the writers we have examined thus far agree) continue to manifest themselves in religious life today.

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We have seen so far a number of serious problems that may arise when modern figures write about *avodah zarah* and strive to prove its timeless relevance. In their eagerness to preserve the ancients' emphatic rejection of idolatry, these contemporary figures not only demonstrate a willingness to distort biblical and rabbinic texts (or at least interpret them too creatively), but they also demonstrate a disturbing disregard for scholarly thinking and general methodology. When Seeskin, Kushner, Halbertal and Margalit treat idolatry as a distinct, identifiable phenomenon, or when they discuss rabbinically-constructed idolaters as if those idolaters were real people, the authors' analyses are understandably gratifying to modern readers who want to find religious meaning in the past. Nevertheless, we should not confuse edifying homilies with honest scholarship, and a genuine understanding of *avodah zarah* can only emerge from sober, critical thought.

But imposing contemporary life-lessons onto a constructed *avodah zarah* is not simply intellectually dishonest; it in fact exacerbates the same problems of interpretation

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that have plagued us since the biblical era. Trying to define something abstract in terms of something invented is at best unclear and at worst quite misleading. Yet, for reasons that will be explored later, religious tradition has never shied away from employing these clunky metaphors. In turn, the writers' affinity for these platitudes in the end provides additional evidence of the malleability – and thus, the ultimate meaninglessness – of idolatry idioms.

Consider how easily idolatry-as-metaphor may be manipulated to serve wildly different pedagogic needs. Just within the body of rabbinic literature, one can easily collect a long list of trite axioms employing the *avodah zarah* idiom: "One who tears clothing or breaks utensils when angry is considered as an idol-worshiper" (t. *Bava Qamma* 9). "Rav Sheshet said in the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah: 'Anyone who disregards the festivals is considered an idolater'" (b. *Pesachim* 118a). "Rabbi Elazar said: 'Learn from this that anyone who prays while intoxicated is considered an idol-worshiper'" (b. *Brachot* 31b). These few examples are just a small sampling of the literally hundreds of similar platitudes found throughout the rabbinic canon.

Interpretively speaking, the problem posed by such mutability in these figures-of-speech is obvious. Because of the ease with which commentators attach idolatry-as-metaphor to countless semiotic receptors, the entire notion of idol-worship as a religious phenomenon quickly disintegrates into a fabrication wrapped in an abstraction. In the end, then, rather than crediting the rabbis and contemporary thinkers for making us aware of potential religious pitfalls, we ought to acknowledge their role in *creating* these hazards through their stalwart insistence that the definition of *avodah zarah* ought to be expanded so widely as to include potentially every element of modern life.

Perhaps the most insightful view about how Jews relate to *avodah zarah* in the

modern world comes, ironically, from the medieval *Beit HaBechirah*, the Me'iri's[27]

commentary of the on the Mishna. Here (m. *Avodah Zarah*, pereq 2, mishna 3) he

discusses the ways in which Jews might avoid transactional relationships with idolaters in

their neighborhoods:

> And on Shabbat, even a well-known woman is forbidden from acting as midwife
> for an idolater; [the midwife] could be released from obligation and say that she
> is not permitted to desecrate Shabbat for a woman who does not observe Shabbat,
> even though this is not prohibited by the Torah.

In other words, at least according to the Me'iri, in our campaign to stamp out idolatry, it

is halachically permissible for us to misrepresent truths about Jewish law. It is acceptable

for us to tell lies in order to maintain the integrity of the idolatry myth and so fortify the

boundaries that that myth erects between us and our non-Jewish neighbors. The

prescience of the Me'iri's ruling is striking: we moderns *are* intent on keeping a

constructed *avodah zarah* relevant to our lives – so much so that we and our leaders and

teachers are even driven to make up lies about it. Idolatry's social construction must

remain built upon a scaffolding of "plausibility structures," in Berger's (1967) words –

even if, in the final regard, those structures turn out to be somewhat implausible.

In the next section of this paper, we will be examining the options that may be

available to us in constructing a new, more honest and effective model of *avodah zarah*.

If we would like for our religious lives today to be informed by a truthful understanding

of *avodah zarah*, we will have to build that understanding ourselves. Unlike past models,

any new construction we build cannot be dependent on inaccurate assessments of

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[27]27 Rabbi Menachem ben Shlomo; 13th century Provence.

religious practice in the ANE or give rise to blustery screeds that equate *avodah zarah* with a wide range of social or religious problems. Instead, if we hope for it to remain relevant to us today (which is the question to which we will address ourselves in the final section of this paper), we must assemble a wholly new understanding of idolatry.

Toward a New Model of Idolatry

Up to this point in our study, we, like the religious thinkers who preceded us, have assumed that because previous conceptualizations of *avodah zarah* have become irrelevant, it is incumbent upon us to create a successful new scheme to improve upon them. Before embarking upon a campaign to accurately determine the salience of *avodah zarah*, however, we ought to consider that this response may actually not be the only option available to us. It may be, in fact, that at the end of our study we may well come to the conclusion that *avodah zarah* as a religious category has already outlived its utility and should therefore be abandoned altogether. For the time being, however, we labor under the assumption that *avodah zarah*'s relevance is worthwhile for guidance in our modern religious lives; we will set out to build a new perspective on idolatry to that end.

Even in this case, however, we should be cautious about reconstructing idolatry. We must realize that the endeavor is fraught with peril; there has never been a universally sustainable understanding of *avodah zarah* in Jewish history, and the flowering of new religious expressions and our growing appreciation for pluralism in a modern world may render this undertaking a virtual impossibility. Indeed, it may be that we simply cannot construct a modern, accurate definition of *avodah zarah* that will remain relevant to today's Judaism. Perhaps our first task simply should be to identify precisely why it has been so difficult for past thinkers and writers to construct a strong model of idolatry.

By way of illustration: Halbertal and Margalit open their book by asserting that *avodah zarah* is nothing more than the opposite of monotheism. Similar techniques of defining idolatry strictly by use of negative attributes (Halbertal and Margalit certainly do not hold a monopoly on this sort of thought, as students of Maimonides can attest) abound, but do not comprise a strong methodological approach toward constructing a definition of any religious phenomenon, let alone one as vague as *avodah zarah*. If we expect that definition to possess any meaning whatsoever, it is ineffective to describe anything solely by what it is not.

Admittedly, part of the problem may be merely semantic. We must bear in mind that rabbinic tradition has for centuries used a single catch-all term ("*avodah zarah*") to encompass the widest imaginable array of gentile beliefs and practices. The term does not necessarily distinguish between pagan and non-pagan idol-worship, between idolatrous and aniconic paganism, or, ultimately, between polytheistic and monotheistic gentile religions. The lack of specificity would eventually open up all kinds of interpretational possibilities when rabbinic Judaism came to confront the political world around that enshrined Christianity as its *religio licita*. For instance, the plasticity encoded in the rabbis' understanding of *avodah zarah* was precisely what allowed 19th century orthodox *poskim*[28] to equate *avodah zarah* with Reform Judaism (a movement which is obviously neither pagan nor idolatrous). Without a substantive and enduring definition, the phrase "*avodah zarah*" remains a vague – and somewhat misleading – denotation of the religious Other.

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[28] Perhaps most significant in this category of rabbis was Azriel Hildesheimer, whose virulent attacks on the emerging Reform movement in 19th-century Germany were rooted primarily in halachic understandings of *avodah zarah*. His passionate and, it must be said, eloquent responses to Reform Judaism galvanized support for his vision of institutional change within orthodoxy to combat the growing momentum behind religious liberalism. See Schacter, 106-114.

Another problem seems to have been that few earlier approaches to *avodah zarah* were truly interested in what the phenomenon of idol-worship actually entailed; understanding idolatry fully was functionally far less important to religious commentators than the campaign to keep it eternally relevant. But why has rabbinic Judaism expended so much energy in creating and sustaining categories like the *oved kochavim u'mazalot?* The answer to this question is critical to our investigation. Before we construct our own model, we need to understand not so much why others have failed, but why, throughout history, the need for a religious Other has been so irresistible that it has moved so many writers to produce lackluster and often ridiculous explanations of *avodah zarah* as a religious category.

Two significant social scientists hold that there is something intrinsic in the human social experience that motivates our creation and sustenance of categorical Others at the margins of our social lives. Their explanations for this phenomenon, though quite different from one another, may be combined to gain a broad and useful understanding of *avodah zarah*'s roots in Jewish society. We will investigate and assess the claims of these two thinkers one at a time.

Peter Berger:

Idolatry as Social Construct

The first perspective helpful to our investigation comes from sociologist Peter Berger, whose classic books *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) and *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966, with Thomas Luckmann) have proven invaluable to social science's understanding

of human beings' social structure, and specifically of objective "reality" as it is created

and maintained by society. Berger's stated undertaking is to sketch the "sociology of

knowledge," but his aims are not merely epistemological in nature. In *The Social*

Construction of Reality, he demonstrates how human beings, as social animals, succeed

in synthesizing a vast arrangement of institutions, roles, myths, and truths that keep the

machinery of society perpetually in motion. In this way, the products of social

organization include the entirety of the human world. "While it is possible to say that

man has a nature," Berger tells us, "it is more significant to say that man constructs his

own nature, or more simply, that man produces himself" (49).

The origins of Berger's theory lie in Marxist thought, which asserted that man's

consciousness is the product of his social station. Nietzsche, too, advocated this

approach, and furthered Marx's belief that human identity is largely forged out of a

matrix of social and economic powers. Probably the most influential force on Berger's

work, however, comes from Emile Durkheim, who exhorted his readers in *The Rules of*

Sociological Method (1950) to remember that "the first and most fundamental rule is:

Consider social facts as things" (as quoted in Berger, 18; emphasis added).

The boldness of Berger's theory ought not to be overlooked. The critical point of

his argumentation is not merely that humans *perceive* reality in a particular way, but that

what we call "reality" is actually "a world that originates in [human beings'] thoughts and

actions, and is maintained as real by these" (19-20). This is not to say that reality is an

illusion, or that what seem to be facts are merely hallucinations, but that the phenomena

of everyday life constitute an "ordered reality" in and of themselves, which truly possess

integrity and facticity for the human beings who experience them first-hand. These

phenomena

> are prearranged in patterns that seem to be independent of my
> apprehension of them and that impose themselves upon the latter. The
> reality of everyday life appears already objectified, that is, constituted by
> an order of objects that have been designated *as* objects before my
> appearance on the scene. (21-22)

In this socially-constructed reality, one's survival as a social human animal is

predicated upon one's ability to absorb, utilize, and transmit knowledge of the

synthesized real.[29] In this way, one's participation in one's social milieu is not only

critical to one's own survival, but to the survival of that reality in which one's friends,

family, and colleagues collaborate. "Knowledge about society is thus a *realization* in the

double sense of the word, in the sense of apprehending the objectivated social reality, and

in the sense of ongoingly producing this reality" (66). While it is true that not all

constructed truths are necessarily compatible with each other, we humans undertake to

build elaborate "plausibility structures" in order to keep our socially-constructed world

intact. The many disparate packets of knowledge available to us are thus protected and

sustained by our endeavors:

> By presenting itself to me as an integrated whole the social stock
> of knowledge also provides me with the means to integrate
> discrete elements of my own knowledge. In other words, "what
> everybody knows" has its own logic, and the same logic can be
> applied to order various things that I know. For example, I know
> that my friend Henry is an Englishman, and I know that he is
> always very punctual in keeping appointments. Since
> "everybody knows" that punctuality is an English trait, I can

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[29] We do not even have a choice of other criteria upon which to base our survival: "*Homo sapiens* is always, and in the same measure, *homo socius*." (51)

> now integrate these two elements of my knowledge of Henry
> into a typification that is meaningful in terms of the social stock
> of knowledge. (43-44)

It is somewhat inaccurate to speak of the "power" of social construction, since there is no quadrant of the human experience that exists outside its influence. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning for the purposes of illustration that the potency of the social exercise is such that it is chiefly instrumental in the creation of all human myths, histories, roles and institutions.

In particular, the creation of these entities is central to our study; we must understand the way that roles and institutions are built and maintained in the world of religion in order for us to gain an understanding of *avodah zarah* throughout Jewish history. Specifically, we have to keep in mind the social roots beneath the realities of religious belief and behavior. Although religion lays exclusive claim to divinity in explaining its own identity,

> it is important to keep in mind that the objectivity of the
> institutional world, however massive it may appear to the
> individual, is a humanly produced, constructed objectivity. The
> process by which the externalized products of human activity
> attain the character of objectivity is objectivation. The
> institutional world is objectivated human activity, and so is every
> single institution. In other words, despite the objectivity that
> marks the social world in human experience, it does not thereby
> acquire an ontological status apart from the human activity that
> produced it. (60-61)

Berger tells us that once the "objectivated reality" is constructed by our social behavior, it must then be solidified for future generations by a process he calls "legitimation." Legitimation requires that a given set of principles, ideologies or actions be affixed to "a cosmological and anthropological frame of reference" (97). Legitimation

thus enables the social group to accuse more easily certain behaviors or, as we will soon

see, certain individuals of having crossed an invisible boundary into territory that the

social order cannot accommodate. Specifically, the social order soon undertakes to create

corpora of knowledge and guilds of specialists whose role is to act as border guards, that

is, to formulate and enforce the rules and standards of given social groups and subgroups.

At a certain point during his discussion about legitimation, Berger sketches an illustration

about how a primitive society might go about concretizing the laws of kinship structure

and the privileges and taboos associated with relationships between cousins.

> Because of [the] complexity and differentiation [of this particular variety of
> legitimations], they are frequently entrusted to specialized personnel who
> transmit them through formalized initiation procedures. Thus there may be an
> elaborate economic theory of "cousinhood," its rights, obligations and standard
> operating procedures. This lore is administered by the old men of the clan,
> perhaps assigned to them after their own economic usefulness is at an end. The
> old men initiate the adolescents into this higher economics in the course of the
> puberty rites and appear as experts whenever there are problems of application.
> If we assume that the old men have no other tasks assigned to them, it is likely
> that they will spin out the theories in question among themselves even if there are
> no problems of application, or, more accurately, they will invent such problems
> in the course of their theorizing. (94-95)

One need merely substitute the word "idolatry" for "cousinhood" and "rabbis" for "old

men," and one will immediately recognize the relevance of Berger's theory for our study.

Whether or not we agree that the enormous volume of halachic literature on *avodah*

zarah emerged because of the economic uselessness of the rabbinic elite, the parallel

should be clear. The realism or practical applicability of the Talmud's material on

idolatry, within Berger's scheme at least, is relatively immaterial. It proliferates not

because of the rabbis' need to establish legal precedent, but because the social order

called "Rabbinic Judaism" must legitimate an idolatry taboo and ensure that the social

order is impervious to erosion from the outside.

Berger goes on to account for other ways in which social groups behave toward outside threats. As one might predict, rabbinic Judaism is not the only entity that has gained advantage from strict policies against those social Others that exist at its margins. Indeed, Berger asserts that such policies are imperative for nearly every institutional order, so that they may build for their inhabitants a "shield against terror" (102). Without clearly defined boundaries, the institution's constituents may lose sight of their own identities, and so risk (in the constituents' own eyes at least) the disintegration of their group and the anxiety of encroaching social anomie.

Frequently, the social group deliberately and unapologetically creates castes or classes of outsiders in order to strengthen the boundaries of identity:

> The symbolic universe assigns ranks to various phenomena in a hierarchy of being, defining the range of the social within this hierarchy. Needless to say, such ranks are also assigned to different types of men, and it frequently happens that broad categories of such types (sometimes *everyone* outside the collectivity in question) are defined as other than or less than human. This is commonly expressed linguistically (in the extreme case, with the name of the collectivity being equivalent to the term "human"). This is not too rare, even in civilized societies. For example, the symbolic universe of traditional India assigned a status to the outcastes that was closer to that of animals than to the human status of the upper castes (an operation ultimately legitimated in the theory of *karma-samsara*, which embraced *all* beings, human or otherwise), and as recently as the Spanish conquests in America it was possible for the Spaniards to conceive of the Indians as belonging to a different species (*this* operation being legitimated in a less comprehensive manner by a theory that "proved" that the Indians could not be descended from Adam and Eve). (102; emphasis in original text.)

While the creation of a mythical Other is strategically expedient for a group, it is important to bear in mind that (according to Berger, at least) the Othering process is itself not necessarily a conscious or manipulative maneuver; social construction takes place at the subconscious, even instinctive, level of cognitive process. Nevertheless, there are components of the Othering process that quite obviously remain on the level of

conscious, intentional behavior. Outsiders are mocked or derided, for instance; the elite members of religious, economic or governmental guilds formulate "taboos, exorcisms and curses against foreigners, heretics or madmen [that] similarly serve the purpose of individual 'mental hygiene'" (156). Certainly this schematization holds abundantly true for the case of Judaism's relationship with idol-worship. Polemic formulated throughout history has succeeded in demonizing gentiles of practically every stripe (not to mention certain categories of Jews as well) by decrying them as *ovdei kochavim*. Such techniques, though crude, certainly seem to achieve their intended goal of minimizing Jewish disloyalty to and defection from "the true Israel."[30]

Berger states that the process of social construction culminates when it reaches the phase he calls "reification." In this stage, synthesized reality has become inseparable from empirical reality; in fact, neither category exists outside the other. Reification implies a state of equilibrium in which the socially-constructed origins of reality become, at last, irrelevant. In explaining the concept, Berger introduces the following example of reification, which is strikingly appropriate for the subject of this paper:

> [I]dentity itself (the total self, if one prefers) may be reified, both one's own and that of others. There is then a total identification of the individual with his socially assigned typifications. He is apprehended as *nothing but* that type. This apprehension may be positively or negatively accepted in terms of values or emotions. The identification of "Jew" may be equally reifying for the anti-Semite and the Jew himself, except that the latter will accent the identification positively and the former negatively. Both reifications bestow an ontological and total status on a typification that is humanly produced, and that, even as it is internalized, objectifies but a segment of the self. Once more, such reifications may range from the pretheoretical level of "what everybody knows about Jews" to the most complex theories of Jewishness as a manifestation of biology

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[30] A mythic entity which, to be fair, must be recognized as being a social construct itself. Nevertheless, as Graham Harvey shows in *The True Israel* (Brill, 2001), even writers who lived long before the modern era were intent upon demonstrating the authentic pedigree of their own ethnic community.

("Jewish blood"), psychology ("the Jewish soul") or metaphysics ("the mystery
of Israel"). (91; emphasis in original text.)

Once the ontological status of an Other has been reified by the members of a

particular social group, arguments about the appropriateness of polemic directed at that

Other become meaningless. Once the Talmud's characterization of idolaters became

dominant for normative Judaism, then, it became pointless for Jews to quibble about

whether or not gentiles were, in fact, ignorant, predatory, or bestial. Whether or not these

descriptions actually apply is immaterial; the only discussion that is germane after the

reification stage is one about how to respond to the threat of idolatry.

This sort of discussion has its parallel in Berger as well. The campaign of

propaganda directed at the Other following the reification of the Other's status Berger

terms "nihilation." The process is intended, in Berger's words, to "liquidate" the Other,

to deny the very fact of its existence within the socially-constructed universe. Once the

Other is "liquidated," by marking it with "an inferior ontological status, and thereby a

not-to-be-taken-seriously cognitive status," it poses no threat whatsoever. Indeed, the

Other has, in effect, ceased to exist.

To be fair, it should be pointed out that the work of nihilation has rarely been the

aim of religious thinkers confronted with the threat of idolatry, at least within the

majority of canonical Jewish literature. On the contrary, the pattern classically has been

for these individuals to exaggerate (or invent completely) the threat posed by a marginal

or nonexistent community of idol-worshipers. Perhaps, in the particular case of *avodah*

zarah, it is the existence rather than the disappearance of idol-worshipers that is most

politically and socially expedient to monotheism's practitioners, and for this reason the

myth of *avodah zarah* has been perpetuated for so long. On the one hand, this aberration

may constitute a weakness in the applicability of Berger's thought to the construction of a new theoretical perspective on idolatry, but it may, in fact, present to us new theoretical options yet untested in the synthesis of a new model. We will explore this possibility further in this paper's conclusion.

There is, however, yet another shortcoming of Berger's approach that continues to nag at us. If we are to adopt a purely sociological or epistemological approach to the phenomenon of idolatry, we are stymied by a profound lack of useful evidence. The undeniable fact remains that we know very little about the social realities of Judaism in antiquity. The rabbis' own internal writings are all that remain for us to use in our reconstruction of rabbinic Jewish society and the ways in which it approached iconic worship. We have little or no experience in common with ancient Judaism, and so it is difficult to extract conclusions that will necessarily come to bear on our own religious lives today from a study of this kind.[31]

This difficulty would be mitigated somewhat, however, if it were discovered that the idolatry taboo had its roots in a level of human consciousness even deeper than the religious or the social mind. What if responses of this sort are actually an intrinsically *human* phenomenon, whose roots lie in our development as biological creatures, products of evolution? Berger's proclamation that "society sets limits to the organism, as the

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[31] Berger himself seems to imply that such an undertaking borders on inappropriate egotism or, at the very least, may simply be too hasty a betrayal of human nature:

> [T]he available ethnological and psychological evidence seems to indicate...that the original apprehension of the social world is highly reified both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. This implies that an apprehension of reification *as* a modality of consciousness is dependent upon an at least relative *de*reification of consciousness, which is a comparatively late development in history and in any individual biography. (90)

organism sets limits to society," (182) and so it seems wholly appropriate for us to

explore the ramifications of that phrase's second clause just as we have its first.

We should be aware, however, that Berger would have emphatically opposed

such an approach. He tells us unequivocally that

> Social order is not biologically given or derived from any biological *data* in its
> empirical manifestations....Social order is not part of the "nature of things," and it
> cannot be derived from the "laws of nature." Social order exists *only* as a
> product of human activity. No other ontological status may be ascribed to it
> without hopelessly obfuscating its empirical manifestations. (52; emphasis in
> original text.)

This paper, however, will take an approach different from Berger's, and will

explore the possible naturalist origins of social order. This next section will examine the

innovative writing of another social scientist, whose work – and whose understanding of

the evolutionary "nature of things" – can contribute a great deal to our new model of the

anti-idolatry phenomenon.

Pascal Boyer:

Idolatry as Evolutionary "Meme"

The other perspective comes from Pascal Boyer, a cognitive scientist who teaches in the

areas of anthropology and psychology. Boyer's recent book *Religion Explained: The*

Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought (2001) systematically exposes and challenges

popular misconceptions about the origins and hardiness of human religious thought, and

at the same time introduces some intriguing new ideas that will figure prominently into the new understanding of idolatry formulated in this study.[32]

As we will see, Boyer's understanding of religious phenomenology is similar in some ways to Berger's, in that both assert that there is something peculiar to our special existence as *homo socius* that stimulates us to construct religious institutions and tactics to counter the Other. Unlike Berger, however, Boyer believes that the roots of human religious thought stem from biology; specifically, from the way evolution has predisposed our minds to function. Nevertheless, Boyer's hypotheses can certainly be used to support and enrich Berger's:

> Having concepts of gods and spirits does not really make moral rules more *compelling* but it sometimes makes them more *intelligible*. So we do not have gods because that makes society function. We have gods in part because we have the mental equipment that makes society possible but we cannot always understand how society functions. (28; emphasis in original text.)

In other words, the biological mandate assigned to us by natural selection cannot be severed from what we have learned previously about the social construction of reality. This will prove helpful if we hope to combine Boyer's ideas with Berger's later.

In his book, Boyer notes the writings of Walter Burkert as having influenced his study. Burkert also wrote about the evolutionary significance of religion in his book *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (1996). Burkert's work, however, is primarily limited to constructing etiologies of specific religious *practices* and does not assemble a comprehensive theoretical model. He informs his reader

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[32] Another work by Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (1994), is also excellent and relevant to our purposes, though *Religion Explained* will provide the primary basis of this section of the paper.

straightaway that he is mainly interested in understanding the "impressive similarities"

between the ancient Mesopotamians', Jews', Greeks' and Romans' "understanding and

practice of religion, their myths and their rituals, temples and offerings" (2).

Boyer does take the extra step toward constructing thorough theoretical

understanding, however, in his book. As we will see, it is easy for us to build upon

Boyer's theory in order to uncover the seeds of the *avodah zarah* phenomenon buried

inside certain characteristics that we share in common with all other human beings. As

will become clear, there are specific ways in which theology and religious practice –

including anti-idolatry traditions – have become cemented in our consciousness because

of their proven value for humans' survival over the ages.

In order to understand how this happened, it will be necessary for us to undertake

a bit of historical reconstruction. Boyer estimates that evolution resulted in what he calls

"the modern mind" between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand years ago.

Specifically, he asserts that the cultural and technological innovations taking place at that

point in history (cave-painting, certain burial practices, etc.) indicate to us a new sense of

group identity among (and between) humans. Surprisingly, Boyer says that early

humans' "modernization" was not a "*liberating* process by which the mind broke free of

evolutionary shackles and became more flexible, more capable of novelty." Rather,

because our ancestors' brains had begun undertaking new kinds of sophisticated thought,

"they became vulnerable to a very restricted set of supernatural concepts: the ones that

jointly activate inference systems for agency, predation, death, morality, social exchange,

etc." (322-325). Thus we can identify this particular epoch as the point in time which

served as the origin of human religion – which, not accidentally, also seeks to address

that same narrow set of metaphysical concerns.

In a related way, then, the concept of natural selection inheres to religion as well

as to biology: those religious notions that are still extant today are those "successful"

concepts which withstood the test of time and outlived other ideas (32). Moreover, Boyer

states, religious natural selection tends to function in the same way as biological natural

selection, rewarding (so to speak) those human variations which increase the odds of

passing on one's genetic material.

Before we address the link between religious thought and human survival,

however, it is important for us to understand the way Boyer views culture. Religious

doctrine, which is at the heart of this paper, after all, is one of the most successful types

of cultural transmission. Explaining what culture is, therefore, ought to precede any

discussion about how it develops and how it is transmitted from person to person.

The most important principle that Boyer insists upon is that culture is not any sort

of independent entity or external force that acts upon us. Rather, *"culture is the name of*

a similarity" (35, emphasis in original text). It is a mistake, he tells us, to imagine that

culture exists anywhere outside of human beings, and so it is inaccurate (or at least

misleading) for us to make statements like "African culture values family," or "Jewish

culture frowns upon intermarriage". "This is why it is confusing to say that people share

a culture," Boyer says, "as if culture were common property. We may have strictly

identical amounts of money in our respective wallets without sharing any of it!" (35-36)

If culture is not common property, however, we must come up with a working understanding of how it is that culture is passed from person to person so efficiently. The illustration that Boyer uses comes from the field of genetics.

> Biologist Richard Dawkins...[described] culture as a population of *memes*, which are just "copy-me" programs, like genes. Genes produce organisms that behave in such a way that the genes are replicated – otherwise the genes in question would not be around. Memes are units of culture: notions, values, stories, etc. that get people to speak or act in certain ways that make other people store a replicated version of these mental units. A joke and a popular tune are simple illustrations of such copy-me programs. You hear them once, they get stored in memory, they lead to behaviors (telling the joke, humming the tune) that will implant copies of the joke or tune in other people's memories, and so on. (35)

The meme's survival, then, depends upon human interaction. The most "successful" memes (that is, the ones with the best chances of survival) are those that are easiest to pass from one person to another.

Dawkins's conception of culture-as-meme is only a starting point, however, and Boyer's illustration is an oversimplification of how culture works. When it comes to religious behavior, the transmission of cultural information is much more complex than retelling a knock-knock joke. Boyer acknowledges this fact, though, and exhorts his reader to remember that received memes are not perfect digital copies downloaded from their parents. Memes, like genes, mutate and recombine; our minds "rework" them to make them more functional and easier to transmit.

Unlike genetic material, however, cultural memes are rarely reconfigured as the result of random mutations. Frequently we use what Boyer calls "templates" to help integrate new memes with other cultural information already stored in our brains. The memes are reshaped on these templates, which keeps the memes continually relevant.

For example, Boyer says, a template labeled "POLLUTING SUBSTANCES" would have been cemented firmly in our minds thanks to the process of natural selection. As the brain receives new cultural memes (say, concerning the dangers of ingesting road-kill, human waste, or tobacco smoke), those memes will be integrated with preexisting data about what human should and should not consume. This process simultaneously increases the chances of the organism's survival and strengthens the "POLLUTING SUBSTANCES" template, a self-perpetuating cycle.

Other factors determine the effectiveness of certain memes as well. One intriguing aspect Boyer points out is that it seems to make a meme's transmission more effective if the meme contains surprising or counterintuitive information (what Boyer calls a "tag") relative to its ontological category. For example, the talmudic caricature of the idolater may historically have been an effective meme because the ontological category "PERSON" does not, typically, correspond with the tag "Has Sexual Intercourse With Livestock" (64).

Broadening the possibilities even further is a lesson that we might have learned from Marx or Durkheim. Our lists of ontological categories, which affect the way we form and transmit cultural memes, are extremely flexible; they shift depending on who we are, where we live and work, and how our society functions. Boyer acknowledges the role of social construction as well, and illustrates it humorously in the following passage:

> *Mary* with her little *lamb* are [*sic*] resting under a *tree* next to a *lamppost*. Now imagine how this is processed in the minds of different organisms. For a human being, there are four very different categories here (human, animal, plant, artifact). Each of these objects will activate a particular set of inference systems. The human observer will automatically encode Mary's face as a distinct one but probably not the sheep's, and will consider the lamppost's function but not the tree's. If a giraffe were to see the same scene, it would probably encode these

> differently. For a giraffe there is probably no deep difference between the sheep
> and Mary (assuming that the giraffe does not identify Mary as a predator)
> because neither is conspecific, and a lamppost is just like a useless (leafless) tree.
> Now if a dog were around, it would have yet another take on the scene. Because
> dogs are domesticated animals, they make a clear distinction between humans
> and other non-dog animals, so Mary and the sheep would activate different
> systems in the dog's brain. But the dog would not attend to the difference
> between a lamppost and a tree. Indeed, both afford the same possibilities in
> terms of territorial marking. (114-115)

Although Boyer here discusses variations in the perspectives of observers from different

species, the same holds true for human observers who make their homes in varying social

(or, as pertains to this paper in particular, religious) milieus. The ways we receive,

modify, and pass on cultural memes are tied inextricably to our position in human

society. Indeed, our membership in social groups and subgroups is determined in large

part by the ways in which we interact with these particles of information.

Another metaphor that Boyer particularly favors comes from the field of biology.

He tells us that the study of epidemiology provides a useful methodology for observing

the ways in which groups of humans respond to outside stimuli (bacteria, viruses, and so

on).

> An epidemic occurs when a group of individuals display similar symptoms –
> when for instance people in a whole region of Africa get high fevers. This is
> explained as an epidemic of malaria, caused by the presence of mosquitoes
> carrying the *Plasmodium* pathogen. But note that what we call the epidemic is
> the occurrence of fevers and assorted symptoms, not the presence of mosquitoes
> or even *Plasmodium*. (46)

In other words, the critical process for our purposes is observing the common ways in

which human physiology reacts to the presence of an infectious pathogen. Similarly, as

pertains to cultural transmission, our assessment process ought to take into account

cultural *responses* to the memes. That is, what should matter to us in this study is why

Jewish tradition has developed the literature and doctrines with regard to idolatry that it has; the actual character and nature of idol-worshipers in antiquity is relatively unimportant to our purposes.

Returning to our discussion of idolatry, then, Boyer's work naturally also includes information that helps explain why Judaism's policy of exclusion toward idol-worshipers arose and flourished. The rabbinic response to idolatrous Others functioned precisely like other physiological responses to infectious pathogens. Just as a body develops instinctive aversions to things that can harm it (as mentioned above: carrion, feces, chemical toxins), the anti-idolatry epidemic has continued to flourish as an effective social survival response. To understand this phenomenon fully, though, we need to turn again to Boyer to grasp the anthropological processes of coalition-building and group maintenance.

Apparently, humans' proclivity for what we termed earlier "groupishness" is universal and widely accepted. Our urge to build social groups around ourselves is, in fact, so deep-seated and unavoidable that it is remarkably easy to replicate in laboratory experiments. Boyer informs us that

> [o]ne of the most solid and famous findings of social psychology is that it is trivially easy to create strong feelings of group membership and solidarity between arbitrarily chosen group members. All it takes is to divide a set of participants and assign them to, say, the Blue group and the Red group. Once membership is clearly established, get them to perform some trivial task (any task will do) with members of their team. In a very short time, people are better disposed toward members of their group than toward the others. They also begin to perceive a difference, naturally in their group's favor, in terms of attractiveness, honesty or intelligence. They are far more willing to cheat or indeed inflict violence on members of the other group. Even when all participants are fully aware that the division is arbitrary, even when that is demonstrated to them, it seems difficult for them not to develop such feelings, together with the notion that there is some essential feature underlying group membership. (288)

Our instinct toward groupishness is not merely acted upon mechanically; the urge is

reinforced by strong emotional responses to group formation in ways that also have been

repeatedly documented within the scientific community.[33]

> [T]he principal strategy that social scientists observe among human cooperators
> is a mixture of positive moral feelings toward cooperation together with a very
> strong angry reaction to cheating, as well as anger toward people who do not
> punish cheaters. However, when we engage in cooperative endeavors with
> people...we just feel that they are intrinsically "good," "reliable," "nice people,"
> or alternatively that they are "devious," "unreliable," "creepy," etc. (249)

The results of these psychological experiments are certainly consonant with what

we know about social life in antiquity, when people tended to gather in easily designated

groups, like tribes, clans, and so on. Our urge for alliance-building has remained in other,

contemporary settings as well:

> In most large [modern] settlements or institutions, where thousands or millions
> are thrown together, people tend to recreate small-scale solidarity networks.
> After a few months or years in a company or in a town, people identify a number
> of people whom they talk with, whom they can trust in case of need, as well as a
> number of neutral outsiders and some potential enemies who should not be
> trusted. Sociologists now find that these networks are of the same size and
> involve similar emotions, regardless of the country, language, size of the
> institution or town, and other differences. Again, however, people often do not
> think of such networks as coalitions at all. They just find that in their institution,
> company, neighborhood, some people are intrinsically likeable and others less so,
> some people seem trustworthy and others do not. (249)

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[33] One of the points that Boyer frequently returns to throughout his work is that human emotions are a
primary way in which the evolutionary process "rewards" or "punishes" us for making decisions that affect
our viability as a species. Note the feelings that arise when we are confronted with violence done to a
family member, for example, or the phenomena of romantic love and sexual attraction that surround an
encounter with a particularly desirable mate.

Though it is tempting to write off our tendency to form groups as simple human chauvinism, this response is overly reductionist. Boyer asserts that the decisions we make about who is "in" and who is "out" of our coalitions in fact involves a great deal of highly complex social algebra. In order to assemble a "membership list" of group members, so to speak, we have to quickly tally a long and potentially confusing list of benefits and liabilities that might result from a given individual's group membership.[34] Even given the sophistication required of such calculation, the process is often surprisingly effective.[35] That this subconscious process (the only segment conscious to us comprises the emotional responses that our brains produce as the result of positive or negative coalitional choices) of assessment takes place so rapidly ought to impress us with the high priority that our evolutionarily-programmed brains place upon effective group formation (288-289).

Combining these data with the material that we have already examined from religious writers attacking idolatry, we find Boyer's model to be quite functional for our purposes. Coalitional thinking, just as Boyer describes it, is clearly at the root of rabbinic Judaism's campaign against *avodah zarah*. These writers, particularly the rabbis of the Talmud, are working to shore up the walls of their own coalition, not necessarily to destroy idolatry among the pagans; the vicious literary attacks against "outsiders," identified as *ovdei kochavim*, are designed for the consumption of potentially wayward *Jews*, not gentiles.

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[34] Obviously, we also realize that we are subject to the benefits and liability associated with membership in our own groups. The ways in which we advertise or camouflage our coalitional status depends greatly on our social milieu and the benefits or liabilities that we stand to reap by being members of those groups.
[35] Boyer also points out that we undertake these calculations based on evidence submitted to us by other humans, which is extremely easy to "fake" by the use of deception or hypocrisy.

Incidentally, Boyer strongly emphasizes that, when deconstructing religious

phenomena, we recognize the importance of a particular anthropological development

central to religious advancement: the rise of literacy in human society. He spends

considerable space explaining how the select ability to read and write gives rise to literary

"guilds," limited groups of qualified specialists. These guilds (in our case, scribes, sages

and other members of the rabbinic establishment) can then produce and control the flow

of what purport to be "guaranteed truths" about religion:

> The use of texts as authority strengthens the notion that true descriptions of
> supernatural agents come in the form of a stable and general doctrine, rather than
> on-the-hoof, contextual solutions to specific problems.....even complex concepts
> can gradually become more and more familiar to the illiterate masses through
> consistent sermons and recitations. (278)

In this study in particular, the contributory role of literacy in religious evolution is

indispensable for a thorough understanding of how polemic about *avodah zarah*

developed in the way that it did. Clearly, the development of the rabbinic elite and the

growth of its coercive power is relevant in this case because, as a guild, the rabbis

produced doctrinal texts of precisely the genre described above. Moreover, following

Boyer, it is no accident that virulent anti-idolatry material was confined to the pages of

the Talmud, a document internal to the rabbinic Jewish community and written in a

highly opaque language that illiterate Jews outside the rabbinic guild (let alone gentile

Others) would likely have had neither the ability, nor, presumably, the interest to read at

all. By limiting access to rabbinic doctrines about idolatry, the base of the guild's power

is solidified and the gentile Other is pushed farther into the margins.

Exclusion and ridicule of social Others is not limited to the rabbinic establishment, however, as *Religion Explained* makes abundantly clear. All of us humans have a certain predilection to devalue the members of other groups, often in quite unpleasant ways. Boyer quotes the sociologists Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto to the effect that

> many dominant group behaviors not only represent a desire to
> stay with one's group, to favor one's clan, but also to favor one's
> group in an insidious way that maintains the other group's lower
> status. Racial stereotypes are among the representations that
> people create to interpret their own intuition that members of
> other groups represent a real danger and threaten their own
> coalitional advantages. (290)

Identifying the presence of outsiders will not satisfy the ruthless drive of natural selection. We must create a sort of social propaganda that denigrates the outsider and disseminate the propaganda to members of our group; otherwise our coalition's boundaries may become blurry or, worst of all, porous.

Near the end of his book, Boyer shows that this variety of propaganda is most often characteristic of religious groups that are confronted with the new realities of a modern world. We may see evidence of this trend among fundamentalist groups of Jews, Christians, or Muslims throughout their histories. Why should doctrines of hateful exclusion necessarily be associated with modernity? Because, says, Boyer,

> [t]he message from the modern world is not just that other ways of living are
> possible, that some people may not believe, or believe differently, or feel
> unconstrained by religious morality....The message is also that people can do that
> *without paying a heavy price*....Seen from the point of view of a religious
> coalition, the fact that many choices can be made in modern conditions without
> paying a heavy price means that *defection is not costly* and is therefore *very
> likely*....It is dangerous to join a coalition that others can defect from without

> paying much cost. The more you put at risk by joining the coalition, the higher
> you want to raise the price of defection. (294-295; emphasis in original text.)

Clearly, this final point is vital to our new understanding of *avodah zarah*. For one thing, it is powerfully effective in explaining the sorts of polemic that surfaced and spread during various periods of historical modernization. Consider the bursts of anti-idolatry creativity that exploded during, for example, the rise of Hellenism, the spread of Christianity, or the European Enlightenment and dawn of modernity. Those writers anxious about their fellow Jews' hopes to partake of the gifts offered by the contemporary world around them acted decisively to dispel the temptation. The production of polemical literature was aimed at making it undeniably clear that Jews drawn to the benefits of modernity (no matter when the literature was produced) risked forfeiting their membership in the coalition of Jews.[36] In this way, the writers were behaving according to the stringent principles implanted within them by natural selection. As the price for defection hikes ever higher, stronger groupishness, tighter unity, and fiercer loyalty result.[37]

Does this phenomenon still exist today? One need not look far to be convinced that we must answer this question in the affirmative. Consider the countless areas in which various Jewish authorities constantly warn us to remain on guard against the threat of the Other. The Anti-Defamation League cautions us about Nazis hiding in the shadows and warns us about even electronic threats to our children's safety: "Trying to

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[36] Obviously, the polemicists could not, in any sense, "revoke" their coreligionists' Jewishness; the campaign instead undertook to place the wayward Jews "beyond the pale" of communal and social participation with other Jews.

[37] Strictly speaking, it does not matter whatsoever whether or not Jews *actually* stand to lose their membership in the Jewish community; the emotional response (fear, anxiety, paranoia, and so on) that accompany the (fictional) risk are the stimuli which enforce "proper" behavior and responses toward the outside world.

capture the hearts and minds of youngsters…racist skinheads have taken to the Internet with a vengeance".[38] Prominent Jewish figures like Alan Dershowitz frantically urge us to remain on guard against the wild-eyed Palestinian terrorists who may soon bring about the end of Israel, and possibly even of the United States and the rest of the world as well:

> Terrorists are trying to kill our children and our grandchildren. They are trying to change our way of life and to diminish our liberties. It is possible they may succeed, at least in part….The only possible "final" resolution of this struggle would be cataclysmic defeat – the nuclear, chemical, or biological destruction of the planet or large segments of it. (Dershowitz, 11-12)

Throughout his study, Dershowitz also makes clear that dire threats to the survival of the Jewish people come not merely from violent terrorists (political Others) but specifically from Muslims (religious Others). Notice how, in discussing Muslim terrorism, he invokes the threat of Nazism, which is not only the ultimate threat to Jewish survival, but which is also a highly effective spur to Jewish groupishness:

> There are indeed haunting and frightening similarities between what Hitler said he would do to the Jews and what many Islamic leaders are now saying they intend to do to the Jews, the Americans, and the heathens. (224)

Similar prophecies of doom emerge from analyses of the Jewish Population Survey.[39] Although sociologist Steven M. Cohen of the Hebrew University, who works on the team analyzing the survey, remarked that the most recent findings indicate that "there is no evidence that the core group [of Jews] is in any way declining,"[40] Jewish institutions

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[38] ADL website: http://www.adl.org/focus_sheets/focus_internet.asp. Cited March 1, 2004.

[39] This study is conducted in North America once every ten years and was done most recently in 2000.

[40] Rachel Zoll, "Jewish Population in U.S. Declines, Ages: Reasons Include Fewer Women Have Kids; Faith Not Being Passed Down," n.p. *Detroit News* (October 9, 2002). Cited March 1, 2004. Online: http://www.detnews.com/2002/religion/0210/19/a12-607543.htm.

nonetheless announced that Judaism as we know it is hurtling headlong toward

demographic decimation:

> ...[T]he Jewish Agency for Israel is defending its decision earlier this month to
> mount an "international emergency conference" on world Jewish population
> decline...[t]he conference, organized in Jerusalem by the Jewish Agency's new
> strategic planning institute, was focused on what agency officials called a
> worldwide Jewish "demographic crisis." Speakers referred repeatedly to a
> decline of 300,000 in the world Jewish population during the last decade, a figure
> that agency chairman Sallai Meridor called "a point of no return" for world
> Jewry. The figure is based mostly on an American Jewish population survey that
> was partially released in October in New York by United Jewish Communities of
> North America....[41]

Confronted with all of these warnings about threats to Jews living in the modern world, it

is no wonder that increasing numbers of Jews today have either retreated to the tight

cocoon of ultra-Orthodox isolation or have given up completely on eking out a

meaningful Jewish existence.

Led as we are, however, by Berger's ideas about the creative and coercive power

of the human social order, we need not despair about the Jewish community's future.

Despite the forceful pull of our evolutionary instinct toward groupishness, we are yet able

to resist it when necessary through conscious action. Because of our cognizance of these

phenomena, we modern Jews possess an unprecedented ability to reshape the way our

social institutions function in the face of "outsiders." In *The Social Construction of*

Reality, Berger extends the following challenge to his readers: "The decisive question is

whether [man] still retains the awareness that, however objectivated, the social world was

made by men – and, therefore, can be remade by them" (89).

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[41] Nacha Cattan, "Israel Sees a 'Crisis' in Falling U.S. Population: Agency Cites Shelved Study: 150 Jews
Vanish Daily?" n.p. *Forward* (December 13, 2002). Cited March 1, 2004. Online:
http://www.forward.com/issues/2002/02.12.13/news1.html.

Hopefully, our comprehension of the relevant social and anthropological apparatuses associated with idolatry will empower us to respond positively to Berger's challenge. If so, the degree to which we capitalize upon our understanding of the *avodah zarah* phenomenon will be directly proportional to the amount of progressive, religiously beneficial "remaking" we are capable of. The way we approach this socioreligious reconstruction may thus determine the form Judaism takes in years to come.

Conclusions

By tracing the transformation of *avodah zarah* from its biblical origins to its mutated contemporary form, this study will ideally have aided us in acknowledging idolatry's central role in constructing Jewish identity and strengthening Jews' instinct for social groupishness. The valuable contributions of Berger and Boyer, additionally, should have helped place these findings into their appropriate contexts. By synthesizing all of our findings, we ideally will have recognized that the threat of idolatry is, objectively speaking, a phantasm constructed for Jews' social and evolutionary benefit.

Berger's mandate for us to remake our socioreligious world – "the social world was made by men – and, therefore, can be remade by them" – calls out to us as modern liberal Jews. However, we cannot respond positively until we have ascertained whether it is worthwhile or advisable for us to undertake the difficult task of becoming less religiously dependent upon idolatry polemic. Before undertaking substantive reform, we must first ask ourselves if we are comfortable discarding the notion of idolatry. Mightn't such an undertaking be functionally impossible in today's Jewish world?

If, in the end, we determine that *avodah zarah* must remain perpetually relevant to our religious lives, it will be possible to go on without it. Realistically, however, such a decision will be accompanied with a great deal of discomfort. The reason for the uneasiness is not the rightness or wrongness inherent in the decision to jettison idolatry

from our Jewish "plausibility structure"; it is a direct result of our innate need for an

idolatry taboo. Boyer notes, along similar lines, that

> The contagion inference system may in some circumstances seem overly
> cautious, as when subjects in Paul Rozin's experiments refused to drink from a
> glass that once sheltered a cockroach and that was then thoroughly disinfected.
> But the system was tuned to ancestral conditions, under which there was no such
> thing as thorough disinfecting. (119-120)

Since evolution tuned human beings' biological settings to prevent contagions present in

our environment tens of thousands of years ago, they are overly sensitive for our safe

lives in today's world. Presumably, however, Rozin's subjects could eventually be

convinced of the disinfectant's efficacy and thus come to the logical conclusion that they

could safely drink from the glass. The case is the same when it comes to idolatry; the

Jewish community merely needs to be persuaded that group integrity will be bolstered

most effectively by other, more efficient attitudes toward the religious Other.

Just as Rozin found in his experiment with the cockroach, human social reality

has changed over the past millennia, and although our instincts may disagree, we simply

no longer need an idol-worshiping Other to muster group loyalty. Goldenberg shows that

even the Talmud's treatment of *avodah zarah* was itself an innovation born out of

changing social and political circumstances:

> 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. It had several times
> exploded into wars so violent they were remembered centuries later. Now 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. (90)

If Goldenberg's assessment is correct, we modern Jews ought to be even more capable of

transforming – or eliminating – our reliance upon *avodah zarah* for buttressing social

identity. After all, tyrants and despots no longer oppress us; since 1948, our "national

ambitions" have been realized in ways never imaginable by the ancient rabbinic

establishment. Certainly, now is the ideal time for us to uncover new ways of fortifying

our religious community.

We should also bear in mind that moving beyond our historical dependence on

avodah zarah would not be a wholly innovative or revolutionary strategy. Goldenberg

assures us that, in spite of what canonical text tells us, Jews have been comfortable

ignoring idolatry for a very long time.

> ...[I]n any event only the rabbinic texts survived from antiquity to shape Jewish
> life in later ages: Jews eventually settled into acceptance of the rabbinic view that
> gentile religious affairs were none of their concern and might properly be
> disregarded while they struggled to maintain their own sacred way of
> life....Some Jews clearly sought to maintain an active struggle against "idolatry"
> while others worked at disengaging from that effort. Some Jews were prepared
> to judge outsiders as individuals who might be virtuous despite their religious
> loyalties while other took for granted that no one who honored false gods could
> maintain an admirable way of life. In general, however, Jews did not argue with
> one another about these things. Those who remained open to gentiles simply did
> this, while those who sought to thicken the barrier between themselves and the
> outside world simply did that: neither group has left behind any evidence
> suggesting that it tried to win the other over to its point of view. The absence of
> intra-Jewish polemic on this apparently central question suggests as well that for
> all their diversity, and in spite of the deep acculturation of some Jews into the
> Greco-Roman environment, in the long run the gentile world was marginal to the
> religious cosmos of virtually all Jews in antiquity: it simply did not matter
> enough to arouse impassioned debate....Individual Jews and groups of Jews were
> therefore free to adopt any posture toward gentile religions that they considered
> appropriate: their own religion did not impose on them any required stance or set
> of attitudes. *Aggressive Jews might attempt out of national pride to add to their
> God's followers at the expense of others; indifferent or cautious Jews would
> leave such other people alone.* (106; emphasis added.)

According to Goldenberg, then, Jewish responses to gentile (even idol-worshiping) Others have historically been functionally irrelevant to Judaism's survival. Despite the enduring legacy left by the Talmud (those outside the guild of literate rabbis, after all, left us few texts with which we might examine their position vis-à-vis idolatry), we too have the freedom and the capability to "disengage" from campaigning against idolatry as did some of our predecessors. In addition, since history has proven (at least according to Goldenberg) that turning aside from anti-idolatry polemic is not destructive to the integrity of the Jewish community, it may even be the case that abandoning the notion *avodah zarah* will, in the end, prove beneficial to our contemporary Jewish community. Goldenberg tells us that, in the ancient world, turning aside from their historical anxiety about idol-worshipers enabled Jews to begin using their efforts to build up religious creativity, social innovation and commercial success. This assertion, along with what we have learned in the rest of this study, should convince us that it is not merely possible but is indeed advisable for us to abandon *avodah zarah* as a religious category. As a relic of the ancient world, it is functionally irrelevant, and may in fact be preventing us from making necessary religious process in today's world.

What should be our response, however, if it proves impossible for us to discard the notion of *avodah zarah* altogether? If we turn back to Goldenberg, we can find a practical solution for that situation as well. Perhaps the most intriguing part of Goldenberg's argument comes at the very end of his observation (see italicized lines above): might efforts toward *religious outreach* play a significant role in a new understanding of idolatry? The notion sounds strange; after all, liberal Judaism's outreach initiatives are very much a phenomenon of the modern western world, and there

is still so much residue of the ancient world clinging to traditional Jewish notions about

avodah zarah. The two concepts seem very much incompatible with one another.

Moreover, reaching out to the non-Jewish Other may strike us as being very much at odds

with a rudimentary ethic of Jewish life. It appears to be fundamentally counterintuitive

for us to invite non-Jews to join our ranks, particularly because of the biblical injunction

against showing compassion to religious outsiders: *"lo techannem"* (Deuteronomy 7:2).[42]

Returning to the sociologists' findings we studied in the previous chapter,

however, we can easily find strong justification for reaching out to individuals outside

our own religious community. Since, as Boyer has shown, the ultimate purpose of

idolatry taboos can be localized in humans' social evolutionary drive to strengthen one's

own ethnoreligious group, the best way to render the taboos obsolete may be to come up

with a strategy that will heighten groupishness even more effectively. In other words, by

making it clear that Jewish loyalty and group identity will be reinforced by contact with

and outreach to gentile Others, we can satisfy our anti-idolatry instincts while at the same

time eschewing outmoded and inappropriate religious polemic.

Turning once more to Goldenberg, we can find precedent for the positive,

galvanizing effects of religious outreach in the ancient world. The evidence he brings

shows that that this approach is not strictly a modern phenomenon, but more

significantly, it shows that Judaism is able to endure, even benefit from, porous

boundaries between ourselves and our neighbors. Jews in the ancient world recognized –

and we would do well to do the same – that gentiles welcomed to our communities are

not likely to infiltrate our congregations with malicious or violent intentions. Quite the

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[42] See notes on this verse in Chapter 1, above.

opposite: contact with these Others in fact strengthens us and allows us to flourish in new

and unexpected ways. Goldenberg affirms that

> the Jews of Chrysostom's Antioch welcomed outsiders who visited their
> synagogues, and presumably hoped to wean them away from their current
> religious loyalties. But from rabbinic literature one would hardly guess that such
> visitors existed in any great numbers or that Jews worked very hard to attract
> them. It was easier for the rabbis of antiquity to abandon the fight against
> idolatry in this way because they no longer felt challenged or threatened by it. In
> those environments where rabbinic Judaism began to flourish, Jews were
> apparently no longer tempted by pagan rituals or conceptions; rabbis in turn felt
> free to allow Jewish artisans to protect their livelihoods by serving the religious
> needs of pagan customers. One senses in rabbinic literature a growing
> disengagement from the Jewish past. This dehistoricization of Judaism has been
> much discussed in other connections; among other results, it allowed the rabbis
> tacitly to disavow those aspects of Israel's ancestral mission in the world which
> they no longer felt able to sustain. (97)

We may perhaps acknowledge that the "dehistoricization" Goldenberg describes

may carry with it a sense of regret or disappointment; foundational Jewish myths (in

which opposition to *avodah zarah* figures prominently) are powerful and difficult to

abandon. In the final assessment, however, we must find that much of this mythology is

simply not sustainable. Modern rational Judaism will ultimately have to abandon as

irrelevant the classification of *avodah zarah* in contemporary religious life. Though we

will regret its loss, we ought not to be willing to lie to ourselves about the

meaninglessness of this religious category merely to prop up obsolete religious

paradigms and show obeisance to nostalgia or to a displaced sense of obligation.

Still, we cannot overlook the truths articulated by Berger and Boyer. Clearly, we

humans have a deep need for reliable plausibility structures that will assure us of the

survival of our social groupings, and so there may yet be a need for *avodah zarah* today

and a place for it in liberal religious thought. If this proves to be the case, it is

nevertheless incumbent upon us to transform it conceptually and strip it of the toxic patina that covers it. Recognizing the role of idolatry in our evolutionary development, we can preserve its utility as a tool for fortifying Jewish groupishness and, ideally, we should invite even the historically marginalized Other to join us. By combining our assets and our energies, we will find, as did certain sectors of the Jewish community in antiquity, that all of our communities will be enriched by our cooperation with each other.

In the end, all of us share the obligation to undertake a sober assessment of the utility of idolatry as a religious category in our modern lives; it is my hope that this brief study has clarified that process somewhat. If, upon deep and sincere reflection, we still find it necessary to retain the notion of idolatry, we can temporarily allow to it sit on the shelf, collecting dust, until we are finally comfortable smashing that ancient, moldering idol called *avodah zarah*.

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