

Idolatry and its Antidotes: Thoughts for Behar-Behukkotai, May 4, 2013

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“You shall make no idols for yourselves, nor shall you raise for yourselves a graven image or a pillar; nor shall you place any figured stone in your land to bow down unto it; for I am the Lord your God. You shall keep My Sabbaths and reverence My sanctuary: I am the Lord” (Vayikra 26:1-2).

The Torah juxtaposes the prohibition of idolatry with the positive commandments to observe Sabbath and revere the Sanctuary. What is the connection between these themes?

The essence of idolatry is to render a false representation of God. Idolatry, at root, is a lie. It purports to limit God to a physical image. It has people worship an image—but not the real God. It focuses on physical image, not on eternal spirit.

In 1956, a film came out, called “The Invasion of the Body Snatchers,” in which invaders replaced human beings with duplicates that appeared identical on the surface but were devoid of any emotion or individuality. To the outside, everything looked the same. The physical bodies were still intact; but the souls were gone. This is, at core, the way of idolatry: to maintain an outward, physical appearance, while destroying connection with the inner soul. It worships form, not essence; it highlights external appearances, not inner spirit.

The Torah recognizes idolatry as an unequivocal threat to true worship of God. Idolatry is a lie; God is Truth. Idolatry dotes on physical appearances; God demands focus on essence.

The nature of idolatry is not only manifested in worshiping statues. It also shows itself whenever people substitute external appearances for inner realities, when people go for “glitz” rather than essence, when they judge themselves and others by external appearances rather than by inner values. When people sell out truth for the sake of gaining popularity or power, they are actually engaging in idolatrous behavior.

What is the antidote to the disease of idolatry? If the hallmark of idolatry is falsehood and attachment to physical appearances, the antidote must be truth and the attachment to spiritual realities. The antidote is the proper understanding of our relationship with God, the source of absolute Truth.

The Sabbath reminds us that God created the universe, that God's providence maintains the universe. We live in relationship with God, with His absolute Truth and Truthfulness. The Sanctuary reminds us that God is present in our lives, that we have nowhere to hide from God, that God's Truth and Truthfulness must imbue our lives if we are to be authentic human beings.

The Sabbath is symbolic of time; the Sanctuary symbolizes space. All time and space are filled with God's Truth and His demand that we be truthful. Time and space are physical phenomena; yet they are manifestations of God's spirit. By sanctifying the Sabbath and revering the Sanctuary, we are reminded to focus on essence, not physical appearances.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in an address to the Rabbinical Assembly in 1953, discussed a problem: even when people attend the synagogue on the Sabbath—and hence should be very much tuned in to a spiritual experience—they still might not internalize the religious message. Here is an excerpt from that talk:

"Of course, people still attend "services" – but what does this attendance mean to them? Outpouring of the soul? Worship? Prayer? Synagogue attendance has become a benefaction to the synagogue, a service to the community rather than service of God, worship of the congregation rather than the worship of God. A variety of suggestions have been made to increase synagogue attendance: invite distinguished guest speakers, radio commentators and columnists; honor individual members of the congregation; install stained-glass windows, place pledge cards on the seats and raise funds, remind people of their birthdays or anniversary dates. Well intentioned as these suggestions may be, they do not deal with the core of the issue. Spiritual issues cannot be solved by administrative techniques. The issue is not how to fill buildings but how to inspire hearts. The issue is not synagogue attendance but one of spiritual attendance. The issue is not how to attract bodies to enter the space of a temple but how to inspire souls to enter an hour of spiritual concentration in the presence of God."

In its ongoing battle against idolatry, Judaism seeks to focus our minds and souls on authenticity and truth. Our religious lives and our religious institutions must not lose authenticity and truth by succumbing to the external blandishments of material "success."

It's possible for everything to look fine on the outside, but to be empty on the inside. It's possible to maintain the appearance of "success" while, in fact, having lost one's soul. The price of idolatry is very high, too high.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)