

Drash for Vayeilech

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Shabbat Shalom

It is almost one year since my wife Shirah and I traveled from the SF Bay Area to Seattle to settle in this community and begin a new phase in our lives. We give thanks to God and to you for the hospitality, seriousness, and laughter that has welcomed us.

I am going to talk for a few minutes about idolatry, a topic that appears explicitly three times in the chapter. By way of alerting you to my orientation in this question, for my entire adult life I have been a student of the way that we invent our selves, our concerns, our ways of being, and the way we work together in language. Not language like a collection of words, but language as the space and distinctions that God gives us, in which we engage with life. Language as in what we are *doing* when we say, “Listen up you God-wrestlers, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai, ehad.”

In the fifth paragraph of today’s parashah – the first time idolatry appears in the text – Alter translates the Hebrew in vivid, vulgar language:

*“And the Lord said to Moses, “Look, you are about to lie with your fathers, and this people will rise and go whoring after the alien gods of the land into the midst of which they are coming, and they will forsake Me and break My covenant that I have sealed with them.”” (31:16)*

Why have I chosen to talk about idolatry? Three reasons: (1) it is central in our tradition, (2) I think we moderns can very easily miss much of what is right under our noses, and (3) I think that it is, perhaps surprisingly, topical in the midst of the various messes in which the US now finds itself.

I’ll start with how it figures in our tradition.

Idolatry appears many, many times in the Torah. When I told Rabbi Zari Weiss that I had been looking for an opportunity to speak about idolatry, she teased me, saying “I assume you didn’t have to look far.”

Idolatry is the subject of the first and second of the ten utterances – what we commonly call the Ten Commandments:

*I am Adonai, your God. ... You will not have any other gods in My presence.*

*Do not make for yourself a statue of any representation that is in the skies above or that is on the earth below, or that is in the water beneath the earth. Do not bow to them, and do not serve them....*

Devarim 5:6-9. The Metsudah Chumash/Rashi

How many hundreds of times in the Torah do we find ourselves admonished about the dangers of projecting God into anything in the world, that we must not have any other gods than Adonai, and that we must not engage in idolatry? The texts are clear that idolatry is a fundamental prohibition.

Moreover, many Rabbis tell us that idolatry is a top commandment; it is the central principle of Judaism – the foundation on which our entire tradition rests. The Talmud tells us that the prohibition against idolatry, by itself, is equal in weight to the entire Torah:

*“Whoever acknowledges idolatry disavows the whole Torah, and whoever disavows idolatry acknowledges the whole Torah.” (Sifre Deut 28)*

On the other hand, somehow the first and second utterances don’t arrive as emphatically in our modern times as do others of the top commandments.

This is my second reason for talking about idolatry today: how we moderns can overlook, or badly misinterpret what is right under our noses.

‘Do not take the Lord’s name in vain,’ ‘keep the Sabbath,’ ‘honor father and mother,’ ‘no murder,’ ‘no adultery,’ ‘no theft,’ ‘no coveting’ – each of these translates without difficulty. (I left out bearing false witness on purpose. I will come back to it.)

Kenneth Seeskin, in the preface to his book *No Other Gods* (1995), reports the result of asking bar- and bat- mitzvah students to construct their own set of Ten Commandments to guide them in the world. He found that none of his students proposed a commandment prohibiting idol worship. When he asked if the problem was that no one believed in God, the students said that belief in God had nothing to do with it. They saw no reason why bowing to images of God should be objectionable. He concluded that their education, extensive in many ways, had neglected the heart of the matter: the first and second commandments. We have heroes that we idolize, American Idol, competition in all matters for who and what are the top, the best, the most famous, the most popular.

So, look with me and let us see if we can glimpse something pivotal for us as Jews, something that we may have passed over too quickly, as if, having heard to the words thousands of times, it is impossible to believe that we have not *listened* to them, considered carefully and understood fully what was there.

Torah and our tradition bring us a God that is a revolutionary, transformative, transcendent, but also unnameable force, space, or clearing. Over and over we find ourselves with unsettling or even apparently conflicting instructions from God and our Rabbis.

On the one hand we are instructed to speak directly to Adonai, to practice our speaking, not occasionally but every day, and to engage in recurrent formal liturgical conversations. At the same time, we are confronted with a God-entity or non-entity that could hardly be more difficult to hold in our heads. Whatever you thought He/She/It might be, God is not that.

Seeskin quotes Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel saying that the problem with idolatry is that our monotheistic tradition is at odds with powerful human instincts. Our bodies and ways of being bring to us, and carry forward, powerful habits that trigger idolatrous behaviors.

I propose that one of those habits is our tendency to want to “understand” our world and to think that we know how to move around in it. We like situations in which we think we know what is what. We can tolerate situations where we *know* that we don’t know what is going on – where we are ignorant. (Personally I am happy to remain ignorant about the particulars of the tax codes. Others are happy to remain ignorant about the functioning of computers.) However, none of us are particularly good when we encounter domains where we are what the cognitive scientists call “cognitively blind” – where we haven’t distinctions for understanding, and so don’t really have a clue about what is going on there. In the case of God, that is emphatically the case.

The first and second commandments effectively divide the universe into two mutually exclusive categories – God and everything else. From this perspective, we can understand that we are doing what the commandment calls idolatry when we do anything to blur the line between the two categories, conceive of God in material terms. Seeskin tells us that any material conception of God “leads directly to the trap of thinking that we or some superior power [might, under some circumstances] control God.”

Down through the ages idolatry has shown up in different clothing – in different guises and with different emphases. In the beginning it literally meant picking something powerful in the world – sun, moon, mountain, or animal, for example – naming a god, constructing a model of it, and then praying to that god through the simulacrum of the model. This kind of practice is no longer popular.

Seeskin again: “For Maimonides and the medieval philosophers, the problem [was] not [so much] bowing to a graven image ... but rather believing in an image of God that you have concocted in your mind.” Today, in contrast, “... anyone ...

[who is swept away] with the desire for wealth, beauty, fame, or power is said to *idolize* them.” We are surrounded with things that pull us in these directions: machinery that glorifies power, “advertisements that glorify beauty or sexual fulfillment, books that extol wealth or influence, ....”

Of course this situation is not limited to the secular world. I am only going to hint at examples of idolatry in the religious world and leave it to your imaginations to think about it and explore the possibilities. I don’t want to go anywhere near anything that someone might find offensive in this talk. That is not the point of the talk.

However, my impression is that it may be much easier than we think to mix the sacred and the profane – to do what got Aaron’s sons killed in the Mishkan. All we have to do is to begin to treat some artifact, space, situation, set of words, or the like as implicitly providing special access to God and we are on the way to making our own “little ‘g’ god” to act as an intermediary to God. And that is an act of idolatry.

So I thought about myself and idolatry. What (and who) have I idolized, and what kinds of damage can I see emerging from that. At various moments, I can remember idolizing:

- § My own ideas, sometimes especially ideas I have about how I would like to be interpreted in the world by others.
- § My children, in moments that I have forgotten that they were God’s
- § Work
- § Sometimes colleagues
- § Tools – motorcycles, tech tools
- § Authors

As I think about what I have idolized, I begin to understand that each idolization is like indulging in an affair with one of God’s intermediaries. I have made little ‘g’ gods out of “things” in our world, and then in the same way that having an affair would damage my marriage, I have damaged my capacity to take care of my marriage with God. I have devoted space that is available for encountering, living with, and cleaving to God to an adulterated substitute.

I lean here on Seeskin again, paraphrasing and quoting: Idolatry is more than a matter of making a personal choice or miscalculation. It is a devilishly clever mechanism that plays on our vanity. “Idolatry is not an isolated act but rather a comprehensive worldview according to which nothing is unique and everything can be measured or conceived in human terms.”

To believe in God as a Jew is to stand in awe of something that is greater than you and I, and greater than anything we can imagine. Attempting to get comfortable with a reality that is beyond our ken, we enter into idolatry when we project our own interpretations onto God. It is easy to think that God looks like us rather than our enemies, that God inhabits our territory and stands for our ideas. However, again, God is “none of the above.”

Finally, I want to point quickly to one more factor in the persistence of idolatry that appears in the parashah that has to do with what Heschel called our powerful human instincts.

At verse 27, Moses once again points a finger at the stubbornness of the Jewish people:

*For I know your rebelliousness, your stubbornness. Look! Even while I live with you today you have been defilers with Adonai, surely after my death.*

Who? Me? Stubborn? Never! Ask my wife.

Students of Mussar, a venerable Jewish tradition that explores the working and development of the human character, might organize this conversation around the notion of the *yetzer ha'ra* – “the evil inclination” – a fundamental, inescapable, problematic aspect of being human. In the early 1700’s, Moshe Chaim Luzzatto wrote in *Derekh Hashem*, “Man is the creature created for the purpose of being drawn close to G-d. He is placed between perfection and deficiency, with the power to earn perfection. Man must earn this perfection, however, through his own free will...Man's inclinations are therefore balanced between good (Yetzer HaTov) and evil (Yetzer HaRa), and he is not compelled toward either of them. He has the power of choice and is able to choose either side knowingly and willingly...” (Many in the congregation know that my wife teaches Mussar.)

At the same time, as is so often the case with our tradition, our proclivity for idolatry also turns out to be a **potential** “blessing in disguise.” I emphasize “potential.” If we pay attention, those very same habitual, idolatrous behaviors in turn invite us to consider the shallowness, the absence of the holy, the absence of God in the situations in which we find ourselves, and in that way they can remind us of our relationship to Adonai.

Where does this leave us? First, paraphrasing my wife, I think it leaves us, potentially, fully responsible, and at the same in a condition where trusting surrender to God is also critical. A typical Jewish dilemma – the stuff of a lot of our humor, right?

Let me end my comments with a topical joke. Jim Welsh, of Welsh Money Management LLC, said the following a little over a week ago about how the current economic crisis would be resolved:

*"We will be told that the Federal Reserve and the Treasury have finally gotten it right. The scope and size of the proposed program will arrest the decline in home prices, restore stability to the financial markets, enable banks to get back to the business of lending, and restore the confidence of the American consumer.*

*While the program [that will emerge will] certainly [have] each of these points as a goal, the amount of time to achieve each goal is unknowable, but an important factor. Moses was told he would lead the Jews to the Promised Land. He didn't know it would take 40 years. And, in all due respect to Bernanke and Paulsen, Moses was working with God. They are working with Congress."*

We can understand the deeper meaning of the joke as about false prophets and false gods, and about our choices in the gods we will follow as we take action in this world.

Soon we will be voting for our next generation of leadership in the country. I will be watching carefully for the misdirection of idolatry – of many kinds – and for people carelessly bearing false witness against their neighbors, forgetting that bearing false witness is not merely a matter of “spin.” It is one of the Ten Commandments.

I invite you to join me.

Gemar Chatima Tova