

## The Prohibition of Idol Worship

1. The Master of the universe commanded Adam in the prohibition against serving idols, as it says,<sup>1</sup> “And the L-rd G-d commanded [upon] Adam ...,” meaning that G-d commanded Adam to submit to His Divinity. The Sages explained that there are three meanings in this:

“I am G-d; do not exchange Me” – to rebel and replace Me with another god, which is the prohibition of idolatry.

“I am G-d; do not curse Me” – this being the prohibition of blaspheming G-d’s Name, since for G-d’s honor one must not disgrace and blaspheme Him.

“I am G-d; the fear of Me shall be upon you” – this being the obligation to fear G-d.<sup>2</sup>

The prohibition of idolatry has two facets: the command to recognize and know G-d [this was explained in Lesson 3], and the prohibition against serving idols.

Anyone who serves idols denies all of G-d’s commandments (since he does not accept G-d’s Sovereignty), as well as His honor and His True Existence.

2. The main prohibition against idol worship is not to serve one of the creations, be it an angel, a spiritual power, a constellation, a star or a planet, one of the fundamentals of the physical creation, a person, an animal, a tree, or any other created thing. Even if one *knows* that the Master of the universe is G-d, and he only serves a lofty creation and only in the mistaken manner that Enosh and his generation did (Genesis 4:26, as will be explained below), this is still idol worship.

This concept is written in the Torah:<sup>3</sup> “Lest you raise your eyes to the heavens and see the sun and moon and the stars and the hosts of the heavens, and you are persuaded, and you bow down to them and serve them – those [celestial bodies] that G-d separated for all the nations under the heavens.” This means that a person is able to err in his heart and believe that celestial bodies guide the world, and that G-d has chosen them to be forever alive and existing without ever decaying, for

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:16.

<sup>2</sup> Tractate *Sanhedrin*.

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 4:19.

the sake of the terrestrial world but unlike its way. From this false idea, one may come to think that it is fitting to bow down and serve them. Regarding this it says,<sup>4</sup> “Guard yourselves lest your hearts stray,” meaning: be vigilant to avoid a mistaken thought, by imagining that these creations are acting as intermediaries between people and G-d.

Therefore, a person is also an idol worshiper if he serves G-d along with another entity as an intermediary, even if he says that the L-rd is the “main G-d,” but he also serves another power. This is so regardless of whether one serves the intermediary alone, for example by bringing a sacrificial offering or bowing down to it [or by verbally praying to it], or if he says that his service is for both G-d and the intermediary.

However, if a person serves *only* the L-rd, but he also *believes* there is another power or god under the L-rd’s command that one should also have faith in, then he is called a “believer in an intermediary.” Great Rabbinical authorities throughout history debated as to whether the false *belief* in an intermediary is actually idolatry and therefore prohibited to Gentiles, or if it is not included in the basic Noahide prohibition of idol worship, and therefore it is not forbidden for Gentiles. [It is accepted as the majority opinion that belief in an intermediary is not forbidden, and this is the practical ruling. Nevertheless, it is an unrighteous belief, meaning that a person who believes in it is not one of the Pious of the nations of the world who fully accept and observe the Noahide Code.]

3. Idol worship does not only include the worship of an angel, a physical creation, or some natural or metaphysical power. If one accepts upon himself any created or imagined entity, spiritual or physical, as a deity, and he worships it and totally subdues himself to it, as a servant before his master, this is idol worship.

For example, those who worship spirits of the dead, or any other spirits they imagine to exist, are idol worshipers. Likewise, this applies if one worships any ideal that was imagined by some people to be a motivating reason for the universe, if he serves this spirit or ideal in the manner of those who bow down or bring incense to the ideals of “peace,” “love,” or “humanitarian rights.”

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<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 11:16.

The basic idea is that one who actually serves any part of the physical or spiritual creation (which includes everything except G-d Himself, Who is not created) is an idol worshiper. One should know that all these are natural created things, made for the sake of mankind, to help him in his service to G-d, and they were not created so that people should make them rulers over themselves. Those who exchange the secondary with the fundamental are transgressing the command (explained above in topic 1), "I am G-d; do not exchange Me."

### **The Prohibition of Swearing or Vowing in the Name of an Idol**

1. It is forbidden to swear in the name of idolatry,<sup>5</sup>
2. There is no prohibition for a Gentile to mention the name of an idol casually – unless one intends to honor the idol, or refer to it in a way of importance. It is nevertheless unfitting that a person should make it his habit to mention such a name, since it brings one to be drawn after the idol or to respect it, which is forbidden from the verse, "Do not turn to the idols ..." Therefore, it is permitted to mention the names of idols if there is a personal need for it and it is not in a disrespectful way, and surely if the mention is to dishonor them.

Likewise, if one's intention is to mention an idol's name in order to learn or explain the customs of its worshipers (in order to avoid those things), or in order to avoid transgressing the prohibition of practicing any of their rituals, then it is permitted.

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<sup>5</sup> This and other offshoots of idolatry are forbidden for Gentiles, not from separate prohibitions, but rather from their general prohibition regarding all aspects of idolatry. For example, Rambam rules that Gentiles are forbidden to kiss or hug an idol (as explained in Tractate *Sanhedrin*), even though this is not a capital sin, because anything associated with idolatry is prohibited. This also includes one who verifies something or vows in the name of an idol, for this is one of the ways of an idol's service, just as swearing in G-d's Name is an honor to Him, and is one of the ways of His service. Likewise, one who vows in the name of an entity does so to show that he believes his vow is true, as demonstrated by his belief that the entity he vows upon is true and everlasting. It is clear that anyone who accepts an idol as true, even if he does not serve it, impugns and disgraces G-d.

3. It is permitted to mention people's names that are identical to names of idols, as long as one's intention is for the person's name alone.

4. One should not say to an idol worshiper, "May your god be with you," or "May your god give you success," or "Do this for me in the name of your god," or the like, since it would give honor to the idol.

5. Just as it is forbidden to swear in the name of idols, it is also forbidden to make others swear in their name, because doing so would give recognition to the idol. A person who swears in the name of an entity shows his faith in the truth and everlastingness of the entity, such that it is fitting to always rely upon. Therefore, if one Gentile wishes to swear in the name of an idol of his own accord, it is forbidden for another Gentile to accept such a vow, as this would appear to lend support to the entity in whose name the person swears.

6. It has previously been explained that some Rabbinical opinions maintain that a Gentile is not forbidden to [only] **believe** in the mistaken concept of an intermediary to G-d, and this includes a belief that another entity exists that is fitting to respect because this is the will and honor of G-d. The Rabbinical opinions that say this is not forbidden admit that it *is* forbidden to perform any type of worship service for the supposed intermediary. Nevertheless, if such a belief itself is not forbidden, it is likewise not forbidden to swear in the name of G-d combined together with the intermediary that one believes in as another divinity.

How would a person state such a combined vow? He would mention that he vows "in the name of god" – where his intention in saying "god" is for both the true G-d and the intermediary which he has added. But it is forbidden to swear in the Name of G-d and the intermediary's name separately. (Even if no person serves the intermediary as a separate idol, and it is served as a deity that is secondary to G-d, it is forbidden for one to mention its name in a vow as a separate divinity, because it appears that he considers it to be his god.)

Clearly it is forbidden to vow by including a name of G-d with idolatry (meaning with the name of an idol that is not served as an intermediary to G-d, but rather it is served as a separate god). It

appears that it is forbidden to swear in the name of an intermediary on its own.<sup>6</sup>

7. Even though belief in an intermediary is not forbidden to Gentiles, this belief is not true. It is fitting for every person to see the mistake in this idea, which originated in the mistaken beliefs of Enosh and his generation (see below), and to distance oneself from it,<sup>7</sup> especially since many of the great Sages determined that this belief is actual idol worship, (and according to all opinions, it is considered to be idolatry for Jews). The permission is only for one who wishes to make others swear to something by their beliefs (for example, in a business deal); even if one knows that the one who swears will have intention for his intermediary as well, it is permitted to accept the vow, since there is no prohibition involved for a vow in which the name of actual idol worship *is not mentioned*.

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<sup>6</sup> Even though belief in an intermediary is not forbidden for Gentiles, in this type of vow one actually makes the intermediary into a separate divinity, which is forbidden.

<sup>7</sup> It is proper to instruct a righteous Gentile to believe in G-d alone. It has been previously explained that even for those Rabbinical opinions maintaining that *belief* in an intermediary is permitted for a Gentile, this only means that the person should not be considered as an idolater. But a person does not reach the spiritual level of a Pious Gentile as long as he is holding such a belief.

## The Generations from Enosh to Abraham

1. What was the mistake of Enosh and his generation? In his days, mankind made a great mistake, and the wise men of that generation gave thoughtless and spiritually erroneous advice. They said that since G-d created the stars and the planets with which to control the world, and He put them in the heavens and treated them with honor, making them servants who minister before Him, it is therefore proper to praise them, glorify them, and treat them with honor. These people also said that it is the will of G-d that mankind should honor and make great those whom He magnified and honored, just as a king desires that the servants who stand before him will be honored, for doing so is an expression of honor to the king.

Once they thought this, they began to build places of worship for the stars and to offer sacrifices to them. They would praise and glorify them with words, and prostrate themselves before them, because by doing so, they would – according to their false conception – be fulfilling the will of G-d.

This was the essence of the worship of false gods, and this was the reasoning of those who worshiped them, and the explanation they gave. They did not say that there is no other god except for this star they were worshiping. This is what Jeremiah conveyed:<sup>8</sup> “Who would not fear You, O King of the nations? For [kingship] benefits You, for among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, [it is known that] there is none like You. But in one concept they are foolish and stupid; the vain [idols] which they teach are but wood.” This means that all people knew that G-d alone exists, but it was from their mistake and their foolishness that they said that this vanity of theirs (the concept of independent intermediaries and the worship of idols) was G-d’s will.

2. After many years passed, there arose people – false prophets – who told the people that G-d had commanded them to say: Serve this star – or all the stars – sacrifice to it, offer libations to it, build a temple for it and make an image of it so that all people – including the women, the children, and the common people – could bow to it.

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<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah 10:7-8.

A false prophet would inform them of a form that he had conceived, and tell them that this is the image of the particular star, claiming that this was revealed to him in a prophetic vision. In this manner, the people began to make images in temples, under trees, and on the tops of mountains and hills. People would gather together and bow down to the images, and the false prophets would say: "This image is the source of benefit or harm. It is appropriate to serve it and fear it." Their priests would tell them: "This service will enable you to multiply and be successful. Do this and this, or do not do this and this."

Subsequently, other deceivers arose and declared that a specific star, sphere or angel had spoken to them and commanded them: "Serve me in this manner." The false prophet would then relate a mode of service, telling them: "Do this, and do not do this."

Thus, these practices spread throughout the world. People would serve images with strange practices – one more distorted than the other – offer sacrifices to them, and bow down to them. As the years passed, G-d's glorious and awesome Name was forgotten by the entire population. It was no longer part of their speech or thought, and they no longer knew Him.

Therefore, all the common and uneducated people and their children eventually knew only the images of wood or stone which they were trained from their childhood to bow down to and serve, and in whose name they swore, and in whose temples they worshiped.

The wise men among them would think that there was no G-d other than the stars and spheres for whose sake, and in resemblance of which, they had made these images. The True G-d was not recognized or known by anyone in the world, with the exception of a few individuals: for example, Eno<sup>h</sup>, Methusela<sup>h</sup>, Noa<sup>h</sup>, Shem and Eber.

The world continued in this fashion until the pillar of the world – Abraham the Hebrew – was born.

**Noa<sup>h</sup>, Shem and Eber** - This was Noa<sup>h</sup> and his family, who entered the ark (his wife Na'ama, his sons Japeth, Shem and H<sup>a</sup>m, and their wives), and Eber, who was a descendant of Shem and also a prophet (Genesis 10:25).

**Abraham the Hebrew** - The word "Hebrew" identified him as a descendant of Eber; alternatively, it means "from over," since he came to the land of Canaan from over the Euphrates River.

3. After this mighty man Abraham was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think incessantly throughout the day and night, wondering: “How is it possible for the celestial firmament to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely it does not cause itself to revolve!”

He had no teacher, nor was there anyone to inform him. Rather, he was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters. His father, mother, and all the people around him were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. However, his heart was exploring and gaining understanding. Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there is One G-d who controls the celestial sphere and Who created everything, and that there is no other G-d among all the other entities. He knew that the entire world was making a mistake in worshiping creations. What caused them to err was their service of the stars and images, which made them lose awareness of the truth.

Abraham was forty years old when he became fully aware of his Creator. When he recognized and knew Him, he began to formulate the replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, telling them that they were not following a proper path.

He broke their idols and began to teach the people that it is fitting to serve only the G-d of the universe, and to Him alone is it fitting to bow down, sacrifice, and offer libations, so that the people of future generations would learn to recognize Him. Conversely, he realized that it is fitting to destroy and break all idolatrous images, lest people err and think that there is no One G-d, but rather only these images.

When he overcame them through the strength of his arguments, the king, Nimrod, desired to kill him, but he was saved through a miracle, and he left for H̄aran. There, he began to call in a loud voice to all the people and inform that there is one G-d in the entire world, and it is proper to serve only Him. He would go out and call to the people, gathering them in city after city and country after country, until he finally arrived in the land of Canaan – proclaiming G-d’s true existence the entire time, as it states<sup>9</sup>: “and there he proclaimed the Name

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 21:33



of G-d, G-d of the universe.” When the people would gather around him and ask him about his statements, he would explain them to each individual according to the person’s understanding, until they turned to the path of truth. Ultimately, thousands and tens of thousands gathered around him and he planted in their hearts this great fundamental principle.<sup>10</sup>

4. This established the context for the future Messianic Era and the World to Come, when the occupation of the whole world will be solely to know G-d,<sup>11</sup> as it says,<sup>12</sup> “For then I [G-d] will turn the people to a pure language, so that all will call upon the Name of G-d to serve Him with one purpose.” And all will know that G-d alone exists, and that there is no other divinity aside from Him that is fitting to rely upon. Rather, all will depend on G-d alone, as the prophet says,<sup>13</sup> “G-d will be King over the entire earth; in that day G-d will be One and His Name One.” This means that even His Name will be One and exclusive in the mouths of all, and there will be no belief in any other existence, even as an intermediary, as it says,<sup>14</sup> “You shall know this day and take to your heart that the L-rd [alone] is G-d, in the heavens above and on the earth below – there is no other!”

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<sup>10</sup> Abraham also taught them the Seven Noahide Commandments, which he and the members of his own household were careful to fulfill. But from the time of the passing of Abraham until the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, aside from the family of his grandson Jacob, we only find mention of righteous individuals, rather than entire communities. It seems that for most of the thousands of “people of the house of Abraham” whom he and his wife Sarah attracted, the couple’s exceptional kindness was a temporary counterbalance to the attraction and temptation of the general idolatrous culture.

<sup>11</sup> Rambam, *Laws of Kings* 12:5.

<sup>12</sup> Zephaniah 3:9.

<sup>13</sup> Zehariah 14:9.

<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 4:39.