

AVODAH ZARAH: OF IDOLS & IDEOLOGY

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah: The commandments against idol-worship prohibit recognizing or worshipping any deity other than G-d (Exodus 20:3-5, Deuteronomy 5:7-9, See also Exodus 23:13 Leviticus 19:4, Deuteronomy 7:25-26 Deuteronomy 17:2- 5). A Jew must be willing to die rather than serve foreign gods or forces; he cannot be involved in any idolatrous practices whatsoever; he must not pay homage to idolatrous symbols or images nor should he mention the names of pagan deities.

Idolatry is an affront to Judaism. The greatest and most severe of Torah prohibitions, idol-worship denounces the central tenet within Judaism: belief in a Supreme Being, as the One and Only Power. An almost unique feature of idolatry is that "thought" alone (even without action) is prohibited because of its antithetical ideology opposing the fundamentals of the Jewish faith. Idolatry undermines this - instead of a worldview of "I live to serve" it proposes an alien, alternative outlook: that of "I serve to live".

In Biblical times with the prevalence of prophecy, man did not perceive his "individuality" as his own existence. Instead, he sought to connect with the powerful forces beyond his self, realizing how these were more real and essential than his own self-identification and being!

Not considering himself the focus of existence, he was ready to give over his very being to become the expression of a force beyond him. He surrendered his perception of "self" in the worship of a higher reality, in the service of G-d the Source of all existence within which man is a "slave" whose self-identification lies within his avodas Hashem, divine service.

The deification of the sun, moon and other natural forces, as represented in wooden or metal images, is the transition from venerating these forces as divine ambassadors and then, as in the generation of Enosh, taking G-d out of the equation (See Rambam, Hilchos Kochavim 1:1).

The idol-worshipper denies G-d's control of the universe. He desperately wants to take charge of his own life. He wrongly imputes importance onto powers that deliver him the goods by mistakenly thinking that these forces as independent of G-d. Hence, his focus and worship is reserved for various forces (e.g. rain, sun, moon etc) which, in turn, "serve" the person.

Avodah zarah, literally an "estranged or foreign mode of worship", reflects a mindset of "I serve to live". Idolatrous figures typically incorporate human forms because the worshipper projects himself onto forces beyond him turning them, and by extension, himself, into a god. His existence is that of self-worship as his egoistic life takes center stage. Without belief in G-d, no worship is possible; on

the contrary, man becomes the object of his worship. But any ideology or system that takes G-d out of the picture is an anathema.

Contemporary man regards himself as a self-contained entity. The strong evil inclination of idolatry was abolished by the Men of the Great Assembly as prophecy ceased (Talmud, Sanhedrin 64a; Yoma 69b). Thereafter, the urge to "worship" forces outside of man (like the prophetic experience between man and G-d) all but disappeared.

This shift led to viewing objects and subjects as independent, as self-determining - divorced from defining and relating existence to something beyond: to G-d. Yet the concept of avodah zarah, in terms of paying homage to ideologies foreign to the Torah, continues unabated.

However a Jew is forever driven by the questions of "Who is G-d?" and by extension, "What is my responsibility towards Him?" This is because his credo is "I live to serve". He is a devoted slave whose existence and definition is "serving G-d". Accordingly, his very being is transformed from self-glorification or self-indulgence into a vehicle of G-dliness. His life is exclusively for G-d, not for himself. This explains why throughout the generations the Jew has forever stood ready to relinquish his life and die for his faith rather than embrace idolatry or to worship any ideology or value system that opposes the holy existence of the G-dly Jew. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).