

# KEEPING IDOLATRY AWAY

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

## Rabbi Frand on Parshas Yisro

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*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 360, Dolls and Statues: Problem of Avodah Zarah?  
Good Shabbos!*

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### Let Us Keep Idolatry Away From Our Homes

This week's reading contains the first time that the Torah prohibits idolatry. The second of the Asseres Hadibros [Ten "Commandments"] states: "You shall have no other gods before Me. Do not represent [such gods] by any carved statue or picture of anything in the heaven above, on the earth below, or in the water below the land." [Shemos 20: 3-4] This is the first of many varieties of prohibitions in the Torah relating to Avodah Zarah [literally: foreign worship]. The Torah is replete with such warnings.

Anyone with even a superficial knowledge of Tanach is aware that the problem of 'Avodah Zarah' plagued the Jewish people throughout all of their existence -- up until the time that, as recorded in the Talmud [Sanhedrin 64a], the Men of the Great Assembly prayed for the destruction of the desire, the evil inclination (Yetzer HaRah), for Avodah Zarah. In our day and age, it is very difficult for us to contemplate how anyone could be attracted to graven images, never mind going to such extremes as burning their children for the sake of Avodah Zarah. The abominations that were performed in the name of Avodah Zarah are mind boggling to us.

If we wish to understand an inkling of the strength of the natural urge that existed in Biblical times for Avodah Zarah, we should compare it to the urge that exists today for forbidden sexual relations (Arayos). This, it is said, can be a starting point for our imagining the power of the craving for Avodah Zarah in Biblical times.

Given the fact that no such Yetzer HaRah exists today, it would seem that all of the Torah's many prohibitions relating to Avodah Zarah do not really apply to us. We never find ourselves 'tested' in this area.

In so many areas, we can find ourselves 'tested'. Sometimes we find ourselves 'tested' regarding something prohibited on Shabbos. Sometimes we find ourselves tempted with immoral acts. We are constantly tempted with the urge to gossip (Lashon HaRah). We know that we can be tempted regarding monetary prohibitions. But ostensibly, in our lifetime, we are never going to be tempted with any moral dilemma relating to idolatry.

The Radziner Rebbe (1839-1891) comments that in all likelihood, we will indeed be 'tested' in the area of Avodah Zarah. The Talmud teaches [Shabbos 105b] "Any person who loses his temper, it is as if he worshipped idols." The Gemara derives this from the pasuk [verse] "Lo Yiheyeh becha el zar" -- "There should not be in your midst a foreign god" [Tehillim 81:10]. What foreign god is in a person's own midst? This foreign god is the person's own ego. When a person becomes angry, that is a form of Avodah Zarah.

Part of the reason why a person becomes angry is because things are not going "his way". A person becomes angry when he wants something to happen or someone to listen to him and it does not happen. Why do I become so angry? Because my will has been thwarted. I feel that things should go "my way". The underlying reason why a person becomes angry is because his image of himself is too great. This is a subtle form of Avodah Zarah.

The only being for whom everything goes His way is the Master of the World. If we truly believed that fact, then we would not become angry. We would realize that we do not call the shots. He calls the shots! Therefore, the Talmud teaches that if someone becomes angry, it is as if he worshipped foreign gods. Which foreign god did he serve? He served himself, the exaggerated self-image, the exaggerated ego.

The Radziner Rebbe advises that the next time a person is about to become angry, he should remember that he is becoming involved in a subtle form of Avodah Zarah. When one avoids becoming angry, although so tempted, he has successfully withstood the "test" -- in our time -- of avoiding Avodah Zarah.

An incident is told about the Vizhnitzer Rebbe (1860-1938), that he once went to bake matzos on Erev Pesach [the day before Passover]. Baking matzos Erev Pesach is a very tricky business. If anything goes wrong, one can encounter a problem of Chometz [unleavened bread]. One of the people who was baking the matzos did something wrong and someone else became very angry with him. The Rebbe asked, "Why are you becoming so angry?" The person responded, "But Rebbe, Chametz is prohibited in even the smallest quantity (b'mah-shehu)." The Rebbe responded (in Yiddish) "The smallest quantity of anger is worse than the smallest quantity of chometz". We fail to realize the severity of the sin of losing one's temper. The Gemara equates it with Avodah Zarah. The

Gemara does not equate just 'any' prohibition with Avodah Zarah.

Therefore, no matter what the situation, we must remember this week's Parsha. Whether the children do not behave as well as we think they should, or when we do not receive the honor that we thought we deserved... When we are about to become angry, we must remember this week's Parsha. "Do not have other gods before Me." Let us make a pledge: This Week, we will not have any Avodah Zarah in our homes!

### **The Zohar Points Out -- There Are No Pauses In The Pasuk Prohibiting Falsehood**

There is a fascinating Zohar in this week's parsha. The Zohar points out that in the commandments: "Do not murder; Do not commit adultery; Do not steal", the note 'tipcha' is used each time that the word "Lo" [Do Not] is used. [There are notes associated with entire Torah. These notes indicate the precise "trup," or melody, used when reading from the Torah in public.] The note 'tipcha' indicates a pause. In other words, the Zohar says that we are commanded: Do Not... pause... Murder! Do Not... pause... Commit Adultery! Do Not... pause... Steal!

The Zohar says that the reason for the pauses is because there are occasions when for the welfare of the world, the Torah sanctions murder, adultery, and theft. Is it ever permissible to kill? The answer is yes. When one sees someone running after his friend to kill him, he should take the initiative and kill the pursuer. Mind-boggling as it may seem, the Torah says (of course under the strictest of conditions) that murder is permitted. Therefore, there is a pause between 'Do Not' and 'Kill'.

The Zohar applies the same rationale and says that if 'Niuf' [adultery] were always forbidden, one would not even be allowed to engage in the marital act with one's own wife, even for the purposes of procreation. Of course, that is not technically adultery because it is with one's own wife. But the Zohar is indicating that the Torah is pointing out here that unlike certain other religions, the Torah does not forbid all sexual relationships. The Torah says, "Yes, husband and wife must engage in the marital act - for the sake of mitzvah, for the sake of pleasure." That form of "Tinaf" is separated by a pause from the word "Lo" [Do Not].

"Do Not"... (Pause)... "Steal". Sometimes stealing is, in fact, permitted. If two people come to a judge for adjudication of a court case, the judge must try to ascertain who is telling the truth and who is lying. A smart judge may attempt to determine the truth by setting the person up, by asking the type of questions that will sometimes trick one of the parties. In other words, sometimes the judge must use "Geneivas Da'as" - (literally: 'theft of the mind'), misleading a person with cunning and trickery. There are occasions when there is a pause between the "Do Not" and the "Steal".

However the Zohar points out that in the next commandment, "Do not bear false witness against your fellow man", there is no pause between the negation (lo) and the rest of the commandment. Outright lying is never permitted. Yes, one can "change for the sake of peace". This, however is failing to tell the whole truth, which is not the same as "lying for the sake of peace", which is never

permitted. Falsehood is so fundamentally wrong and destructive that the Torah does not allow any pause that might indicate that it would sometimes be permitted.

I once heard from Rav Pam (zt"l, 1913-2001) that he attributed his sense of honesty to his mother. His mother lived to be a very old woman. Never, in her entire lifetime, did Rav Pam hear his mother say the word 'Sheker' [lie]. It was such a dirty word in the Pam household, that she would refuse to use it. If someone told a lie, at most she would say, "He is not telling the truth". That may be part of the 'secret formula' for raising a child to grow up to be on the caliber of a 'Rav Pam'.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Yisro are provided below:

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