

WHO SERVES "I"DOLS?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vaeschanan

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"Lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image." (4:16)

Sefer Devarim is replete with warnings against idolatry, but perhaps the parashah in which the repetitiveness is most obvious is Parashas Va'eschanan. Dozens of pesukim — including nearly one third of the pesukim in the second rendering of the Ten Commandments — contain numerous admonitions not to serve idols.

Nowadays, these stern exhortations seem entirely superfluous. Almost no sane human being today has any interest in worshipping a graven image of any sort. In fact, it seems strange to us that anyone ever had such a passion.

Truthfully, our utter disinterest in idol worship is not a credit to our advanced, developed intelligence or our purer faith in God. The Anshei Knesses HaGedolah, a group of 120 sages, some of the greatest Torah scholars ever, convened during the era of the second Beis HaMikdash and determined that the inclination to serve avodah zara was too strong for mankind to withstand. The Talmud (Yoma 69b) relates how the Anshei Knesses HaGedolah captured the yetzer hara for idolatry and destroyed it.

We can still have an idea of how strong the inclination for idolatry was before they conquered it. The Talmud tells us that the Anshei Knesses HaGedolah were encouraged by their success in conquering one of the two major passions of mankind, so they decided to turn their sights on the other major passion: the inclination for promiscuity.

When the sages succeeded in capturing the passion for promiscuity, however, they came to the

realization that if they destroyed this passion people would no longer procreate, so they released it.

We are all aware of how difficult it is to control the inclination for licentiousness. Chazal teach us that people once had an equal passion to serve idols.

Nevertheless, we are left wondering, did Chazal do such a good job of abolishing idolatry that the countless warnings in the Torah not to worship idols no longer apply at all?

Actually, some of us come close to serving idols on a regular basis, says the Radziner Rav.

The Talmud (Shabbos 105b) teaches us that a person who becomes angry and loses control of himself is considered to be serving avodah zara.

Dovid HaMelech wrote, "There shall be no foreign god within you" (Tehillim 81:10). The Talmud asks, "Which foreign god is within a person? This is referring to the yetzer hara."

To understand this passage, we have to dissect the anatomy of a temper tantrum.

Consider this not uncommon scenario. Mr. Baal HaBayis comes home from shul on Shabbos morning and finds that the table is not set and the food is not ready. He turns to his wife and asks, "Why can't you have everything prepared on time?"

His wife realizes that he is in no mood for explanations, so she silently speeds up the preparations. Then the meal starts, and the children are a little too overactive. "Why are you making so much noise?" Mr. Baal HaBayis shouts.

The children quiet down for a short while, but soon enough, the rowdiness starts once again. This time, Mr. Baal HaBayis decides that enough is enough. "I WANT SILENCE!" he shouts, his face taking on a deep crimson hue. "THE NEXT ONE WHO MAKES NOISE IN HERE IS GOING TO GET IT!" he adds for good measure.

What happened? All the children did was act their age. Why did Mr. Baal HaBayis lose control?

The problem is that Mr. Baal HaBayis considers his will to be the final word, so he cannot handle the impudence of those who don't defer to his supremacy. In other words, he considers himself god.

Mr. Baal HaBayis does not stop to consider that perhaps Hashem willed that he wait a few minutes for his Shabbos seudah to be ready, or that Hashem ordained that his children should be noisy and boisterous, like all other normal children. HE wants quiet; HE wants his meal on time. HE was probably already insulted when he came home because the gabbai gave him chamishi instead of shishi, and because the guy sitting next to him in shul didn't greet him with the respect that HE deserves. Who is god in Mr. Baal HaBayis's mind? HE, himself.

This parable may be exaggerated; not all of us become upset over these sorts of things. But most of us have our own little pet peeves that vex us and cause us to lose control.

We may no longer have any passion to serve little graven images of hand-constructed gods, but many of us still engage in "I"dolatry.

If "I" am so absolutely important that anyone who challenges my overblown image of myself makes me lose control, then I am serving an "I"dol, not Hashem.

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