

The Relevance of Idolatry in Heschel's *The Insecurity of Freedom*

Parashat Matot-Masei

Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them: When ye pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their figured stones, and destroy all their molten images, and demolish all their high places...

But if ye will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then shall those that ye let remain of them be as thorns in your eyes, and as pricks in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land wherein ye dwell. And it shall come to pass, that as I thought to do unto them, so will I do unto you. (Bamidbar 33: 51-56)

Little does contemporary religion ask of man. It is ready to offer comfort; it has no courage to challenge. It is ready to offer edification; it has no courage to break the idols, to shatter callousness. The trouble is that religion has become “religion” – institution, dogma, ritual. It is no longer an event. Its acceptance involves neither risk nor strain... There is no substitute for faith, no alternative for revelation, no surrogate for commitment... We are guilty of committing the fallacy of misplacement. We define self-reliance and call it faith, shrewdness and call it wisdom, anthropology and call it ethics, literature and call it Bible, inner security and call it religion, conscience and call it God.

What prevails in the field of religion is intellectual as well as spiritual illiteracy, ignorance as well as idolatry of false values. We are a generation devoid of learning as well as sensitivity... “Love thy neighbor as thyself” is, according to Rabbi Akiba, the essence or epitome of the Torah. However, according to Rabbi Ishmael, the epitome and the design of the Torah is the design to

keep our people away from idolatry. Rabbi Akiba's view is known to all of us; Rabbi Ishmael's view is forgotten. Manasseh, we are told, placed an idol in the Temple. Is it not possible that there are idols in our homes, in our minds, in our temples? Religion finds itself in a continuous battle with idolatry. It is bound to reject as vulgar and destructive certain values that our own people cherish and worship!

Image and likeness of God. What these momentous words are trying to convey has never ceased to baffle the reader of the Bible. In the Bible, *tselem*, the word for image, is nearly always used in a derogatory sense, denoting idolatrous images... The meaning of having been created in the image of God is veiled in an enigma. But perhaps we may surmise the intention was for man to be a witness for God, a symbol of God. Looking at man one

should sense the presence of God. But instead of living as a witness, he became an impostor; instead of being a symbol, he became an idol. In his bristling presumption he developed a false sense of sovereignty which fills the world with terror.

As a standard of values and behavior, race operates as a comprehensive doctrine, as racism. And racism is worse than idolatry. Racism is Satanism, unmitigated evil... What is an idol? Any god who is mine but not yours, any god concerned with me but not with you, is an idol. Faith in God is not simply an afterlife-insurance policy. Racial or religious bigotry must be recognized for what it is: blasphemy... God is every man's pedigree. He is either the Father of all men or of no man. The image of God is either in every man or in no man.

Our tradition insists that we must neither defy desire nor vilify it. Far from defying legitimate needs, it regards authentic needs as spiritual opportunities. It tries to teach us not only to satisfy needs, but also to surpass them. The error or idolatry is to idolize needs, to convert needs into ends. As I have said elsewhere, the goal is to convert ends into needs. To develop a need for that which we may not feel the need of, to desire what is commanded... The central issue is not man's decision to extend formal recognition to God, to furnish God with a certificate that he exists, but the realization of our importance to God's design; not to prove that God is alive, but to prove that man is not dead; not to prove him, but to prove ourselves.

The purpose of faith is not to satisfy curiosity or to fulfill a human need, but to confront man with a sublime challenge, to satisfy a divine need. What will make us worthy of faith? What will give us the strength to pray? This is how the religion of Abraham begins. "The Lord said to Abraham, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Genesis 12: 1). Religion begins as a breaking off, as a going away. It continues in acts of nonconformity to idolatry.

Unless we realize that dogmas are tentative rather than final, that they are accommodations rather than definitions, intimations rather than descriptions; unless we learn how to share the moment and the insight to which they are trying to testify, we stand guilty of literal-mindedness, of pretending to know what cannot be put into words; we are guilty of intellectual idolatry...

The wonder defies all descriptions; the mystery surpasses the limits of expression. The only language that seems to be compatible with the wonder and mystery of being is the language of music. Music is more than just expressiveness. It is rather a reaching out toward a realm that lies beyond the reach of verbal propositions. Verbal expression is in danger of being taken literally and of serving as a substitute for insight. Words become

slogans, slogans become idols. But music is a refutation of human finality. Music is an antidote to higher idolatry.

Every act of man and especially every mitzvah rests on both performance and inner intention, on the deed as well as on the kavanah. The duties of the heart take precedence, in fact, over the duties to fulfill practical precepts... In Jewish tradition we exalt the deed, but we do not idolize external performance. Nor was this so in the past, not even in the ritual in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Egypt and Assyria are locked in deadly wars. Hating each other, they are both the enemies of Israel. Abominable are their idolatries, and frightful are their crimes. How does Isaiah, the son of a people which cherishes the privilege of being called by the Lord "My people," "the work of My hands" (Isaiah 60: 21), feel about Egypt and Assyria? "In that day Israel shall be a third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth which the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying: Blessed be My People Egypt, and Assyria, the work of My hands, and Israel, My inheritance (Isaiah 19: 23–25).

Our God is also the God of our enemies, without their knowing Him and despite their defying Him. The enmity between the nations will turn to friendship. They will live together when they will worship together. All three will be equally God's chosen people.