

Vayishlach

“And Yaakov said to his household and to all who were with him: ‘Rid yourselves of the alien gods in your midst, purify yourselves, and change your clothes.’” (Bereishis 35:2)

After Shimon and Levi violently avenge the honor of their sister Dina on the people of Shechem, Hashem commands Yaakov to leave the area and travel to Beis El. Yaakov calls upon his family to depart and instructs them to remove the idols which they apparently had with them. They heed his command and give him the idols, which he disposes of.

This passage has aroused wonder for generations. Could it really be that the saintly family of Yaakov had idols? How did this elite group of servants of the One God stumble into the crass evil of idolatry?

R. Nachman of Breslev (1772-1810) suggests that in reality, this command was directed not at Yaakov’s children, but at the converts he had attracted. R. Nachman explains that like Avraham, his grandfather, Yaakov had created a circle of hangers-on who perceived the truth of his message. Wisely, Yaakov did not attempt to force these converts to abandon their old ways all at once. Now, however, upon his return to Beis El, he saw this as the correct time to uproot idol worship. (See also Tanna debei Eliyahu Zuta, 4:1.)

However, the words “And Yaakov said to his household” remain unexplained. If Yaakov’s words were directed at the newcomers, why did he have to address his household, which presumably included his family?

The Be’er Mayim Chayim (R. Chaim Tyrer, 1740-1817) comments in reference to our parsha that avodah zarah, idol worship, is unique among the prohibitions of the Torah in that it may not even be in one’s possession. While it is permitted to own things which may not be consumed, like shellfish or dogs, idols may not even be found in one’s home. Why is this?

The Be’er Mayim Chayim says that idolatry is such a profound evil that its very presence carries malevolence. Mere possession of idols is damaging enough that it is forbidden; the false ideas implied by the simple existence of a physical god are far too unsafe to be in a Jewish home. This, he says, is why Yaakov instructed his household to rid themselves of the idols. Even though of course Yaakov’s family did not worship these idols, their presence alone posed a formidable spiritual risk.

The problem with this explanation is that it, too, seems to be incompatible with the verse. It may

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indeed be the case that the possession of idols is terribly dangerous. But why did Yaakov's family own idols?

Perhaps we can combine the two approaches and resolve the question. Of course, as the Be'er Mayim Chayim explains, there is no way the righteous children of Yaakov worshipped idols. However, the converts they had gathered around them were not yet weaned from their former idolatrous ways. This posed a severe problem because this group, the nascent people of Israel, shared a camp. The very presence of idols was a profound existential threat. So--as R. Nachman suggests--Yaakov had to request that they finally cut themselves loose from the idols they still possessed. This way, Yaakov's camp was ready to return to Beis El and fully engage in the service of Hashem.

Shabbat Shalom

The JSN Team

