

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Re'eh

In Parshat Re'eh, Moses continues his final address to the Jewish people on the banks of the Jordan. His focus, as is so much of the monologue recorded in the book of Devarim, is to prepare the nation for their imminent conquest and eventual settlement of the land of Canaan. Before the Jewish people can move in permanently they will first need to clear the land of its spiritual waste.

You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations that you are driving out worshipped their gods, whether on the high mountains, on the hills, or under any leafy tree. You must tear down their altars, break up their sacred pillars, burn their idolatrous trees, chop down the statues of their gods, and obliterate their name from that place. Devarim 12:2-3

The Jews must not only spurn the idolatrous practices of the ancient Canaanite tribes but eliminate any trace of their prior existence. The lure of idolatry was very real indeed and perhaps the only to safeguard against it was to deny it ever existed. Out of sight, out of mind.

Such ethical cleansing would prove simple enough when it came to the destruction of temples, alters, and statues dedicated to false gods, but how does one "obliterate their name" exactly? Surely once all signs of idol worship will have been eliminated, the names of the false gods they glorified will be forgotten of their own accord? What special action need be taken in this regard? The question is an old one. It troubled none other than Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Akiva said to (Rabbi Eliezer): Behold it is stated "you shall utterly destroy." If so, what more does the Torah add by stating "you shall obliterate their name"? [It means] give them degrading nicknames. For example, if idolaters call their temple "the House of Exaltation" (*Beit Galya*) call it instead "The House of Ruin" (*Beit Kalya*); if they call their god "the Eye of All" (Ayin Kol) call it instead "the Eye of a Thorn" (Ayin Kotz). Talmud, *Avoda Zara* 46a; Rashi ad loc.

Very punny. Make a mockery of the idols and their places of worship. That will show them! But will it really "obliterate" them? How does this practice of poking fun at idolatry do justice to the Torah's injunction to eradicate the name of false gods?

We must be careful not to underestimate the destructive power of words. The pen is mightier than the sword and the tongue can be even sharper. Nowhere does it wreak its havoc as potently as when employed in service of scoffers to profane the sacred. King David opened the Book of Tehilim (Psalms) with the admonition, "in the company of scoffers do not sit" (Tehilim 1:11). He was warning the reader of the potential dangers of associating with those who make light of serious matters, those who poke fun at the profound. Years later the great Kabbalist, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, would echo these words in his classic treatise on character development.

Behold the harmfulness of scoffing and its immense corrupting influence. It may be likened to a shield



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greased with oil to deflect all arrows flung in its direction... That is how scoffing operates in the face of rebuke and one's own conscience. With one derisive comment or one minor jest, a person will repudiate so much spiritual awakening and inspiration, casting it to the ground without it leaving any impression on him whatsoever. *Mesilat Yesharim*, chapter 5

Yes, derisive humor can be a menacing force indeed. A joke, a wise crack, even a roll of the eyes can undermine what should otherwise be taken most seriously. We might be flying high but then a simple scoff will knock us down. But for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, and the same holds true in the spiritual world as well. As much as humor has the power to undermine positive spiritual strivings, it may also be employed to uproot the effect of negative influences as well.

Our impressions of reality are influenced by the attitudes of those around us whether we like it or not. It is very difficult to take seriously something that others scoff. And the converse is also true: when the whole world is wrapped up in events that they consider to be of utmost importance, it is difficult not to take notice. But humor offers an antidote, but it must be handled with care. All mockery is prohibited except for the mockery of idol worship. Talmud, *Magillah* 25b

Mockery is a volatile substance. Its powers of subversion, to make light of the weighty, must be contained. There is but one exception: it may be used only when fighting fire with fire.

In permitting the use of mockery, the Sages certainly saw idolatry as the paradigm, even though in principle the idea should apply to all manner of evil. Nevertheless, that particular evil (i.e. idolatry) fed off of the same power of inversion inherent in mockery. It was only natural then that a servant of God would attempt to muster the power of mockery most deliberately against idolatry. Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, *Pachad Yitzchak*, Purim 1:4

Throughout the history of the Jewish people, we have been thrown into the midst of a myriad of foreign cultures with values sometime highly at odds with those of our own. Idolatry is but the most extreme example of a worldview antithetical to the Torah's *weltanschauung*. More so than anything else, though, idolatry gave credence where credence was certainly not due. Religion is a serious matter, as worship is a weighty endeavor. To attribute divinity to the mundane and then to subjugate oneself to it constitutes the most egregious warping of values ever committed by mankind. Ancient idolatry, not unlike its modern day equivalents, invested meaning in the meaningless, giving pomp and circumstance to the utterly vapid. The only way to destroy its effect was to mock the mockery that it was.

The Jew has been courted by many a would-be prophet as well as countless causes and 'isms.' A modicum of wit always served to inoculate us against the warped perspective of dominant cultures. Even the first Jew realized that he would have the last laugh, as Abraham was told by God to name his son "Yitzchak," literally *he will laugh*. Indeed he has, and indeed he will.

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