



Theology and Ethics After the Holocaust

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

◇ God

See also Deuteronomy 12 where core aspects of covenant are framed with a call to “utterly destroy all the sites” of idolatry that remain in the Land of Canaan.

COURSE INTRODUCTION

Judaism teaches that there is only One God, the Creator Who sustains all life. This God is on the side of life and calls on us, as covenantal partners, to increase life in the world, in both quantity and quality. The Torah sets up the direct opposite of this life-affirming path, namely, idolatry, a religion of death. It is in these terms that Moses summarizes the covenant role of Israel:

SOURCE #1 ס

דברים ל:ט-כ	Deuteronomy 30:19-20
<p>19...החיים והמוֹת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבַחֲרַתְּ בְּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תַּחְיֶה אִתָּה וּנְרַעַךְ: 20לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשִׁמְעַ בְּקִלּוֹ וּלְדַבְּקָה־בּוֹ...</p>	<p>19...I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live—20by loving God your Lord, heeding His commands, and holding fast to Him...</p>

Following God’s path is one of life—for us, for our children, for the world. Following the path of idolatry, on the other hand, only leads to death:

<p>30:17 וְאִם־יִפְנֶה לְבַבְךָ וְלֹא תִשְׁמַע וְנִדְחַתְּ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לְאֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְעַבַּדְתָּם: 18 הִגַּדְתִּי לְכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֶבֶד תֵּאבְדוּן...</p>	<p>30:17 But if your heart turns away and you give no heed, and are lured into the worship and service of other gods, 18 I declare to you this day that you shall certainly perish...</p>
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But what is idolatry? Why is it associated with death? What makes it so offensive in the eyes of God? ◇

Share with your havruta reflections on the following questions:

1. How do you understand “idolatry”? Have you ever witnessed something that seemed idolatrous to you? How did it make you feel?
2. In Hebrew, the word for idolatry is “*avodah zarah* (strange or foreign worship).” It doesn’t specifically mention idols. What makes idolatry strange or foreign to Judaism?
3. Does the idea of Judaism as a covenant of affirming life resonate with you? Why or why not?



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SESSION 1 Why the Jews? The Absolute Clash of Judaism and Idolatry

God your Lord

The traditional translation of this Hebrew phrase (“Adonai Elohekha”) would be “the Lord your God.” This is misleading, however, because in English, “Lord” is a “job title,” while “God” is a name, while in Hebrew, God’s name is YHVH (pronounced Adonai), and God’s job title is Elohim. So we have translated this in the more natural, but less traditional, way. Otherwise, all biblical translations are from JPS.

IDOLATRY AS THE RELIGION OF DEATH

Here are two other sources that associate idolatry with death. Certainly this is not the end of the matter, but it is a taste to understand the fundamental thesis: Judaism vs. idolatry is a war of life vs. death.

SOURCE #2

דברים יב:כח-ל

כִּי־יִכְרִית׃ יְקֹנֵךְ אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת־
הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה בֹאֲשָׁמָה
לְרִשְׁתָּ אוֹתָם מִפְּנֵיךְ וַיִּרְשָׁתָּ
אֹתָם וַיִּשְׁבְּתָּ בְּאַרְצָם׃ הִשְׁמַר
לְךָ פֶּן־תִּתְנַקֵּשׁ אַחֲרֵיהֶם אַחֲרֵי
הַשְּׂמָדִם מִפְּנֵיךְ וּפֶן־תִּדְרֹשׁ
לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם לֵאמֹר אֵיכָּה יַעֲבֹדוּ
הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֹהִים אֶת־אֱלֹהֵיהֶם
וְאֶעֱשֶׂה־בְּךָ גַם־אֲנִי׃ לֹא־
תַעֲשֶׂה כֵן לִיקוֹן אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי
כָל־תּוֹעֵבֹת יְקֹנֵךְ אֲשֶׁר שָׂנֵא
עָשׂוּ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם כִּי גַם אֶת־
בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת־בָּנֹתֵיהֶם יִשְׂרְפוּ
בְּאֵשׁ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם׃

Deuteronomy 12:28-30

28When God your Lord has cut down before you the nations that you are about to enter and dispossess, and you have dispossessed them and settled in their land, 29beware of being lured into their ways after they have been wiped out before you! Do not inquire about their gods, saying, “How did those nations worship their gods? I too will follow those practices.” 30You shall not act thus toward God your Lord, for they perform for their gods every abhorrent act that God detests; they even offer up their sons and daughters in fire to their gods.

When the Torah reaches for an example of a forbidden idolatrous practice, it discusses child sacrifice as an abhorrent and—at best!—woefully misinformed method of worship.

1. Why do you think the Torah moves to such an extreme example?

◆ **attic of Beit Nitzah**

Rabbis of this early period are often described as meeting in the attics of people's houses. While Lod is a town in Southern Israel, it is unclear what is the significance of this location or Beit Nitzah.

2. Child sacrifice is given as the reason to not follow the ways “the nations worship their gods.”

If their practice were not so morally repulsive (some examples of potentially innocuous religious practices: lighting candles in church, praying to Mecca five times a day, even worshipping a statue), do you think the Torah would still exhort us to not follow their practice? Put another way, is the child sacrifice an extreme example of why Jewish distinctiveness is important, or is Jewish distinctiveness only important in that it creates a moral way of life?

SOURCE #3 

<p>תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין דף עד עמוד א</p> <p>אָמַר ר' יוֹחָנָן מִשּׁוּם ר' שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן יְהוֹזָדָק: נִמְנוּ וְנִקְרְרוּ בְּעֵלִית בֵּית נִתְזָה בְּלוֹד, כָּל עֲבֻרוֹת שְׁבִתוֹרָה אִם אָמְרִין לְאָדָם "עֲבוֹר וְאַל תִּהְרַג" - יַעֲבֹר וְאַל יִהְרַג, חוּץ מֵעֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים וְגִלוּי עֲרִיּוֹת וְשִׁפְיֻכוֹת דָּמִים.</p>	<p>Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 74a</p> <p>Said Rabbi Yoḥanan in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak: They voted and decided in the attic of Beit Nitzah ◆ in Lod [that] all the transgressions in the Torah, if they say to a person, “Transgress this and don’t be killed,” they should transgress and not be killed—except for idolatry, sexual prohibitions, and murder.</p>
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1. Think about with your *havruta* each of the three items listed in this text (idolatry, sexual prohibitions, murder). *What do they have in common? Which ones make the most sense and which make the least? For each one, why might we be required to give our life before transgressing them?*
2. Quote from Rabbi Greenberg, *The Triumph of Life* (forthcoming): “All three have this in common: the Rabbis judge that violating these laws for the sake of upholding life is wrong. Such actions destroy life and the reverence for life which is the purpose of the Torah. Therefore, permitting one to violate them to save his own life would harm, not uphold, the principle that life is uppermost.”

*What do you think about this? How do Rabbi Greenberg’s thoughts compare to what you generated with your *havruta*?*

◇ **The Rabbis**

I.e. the authors and teachers of canonical Rabbinic literature—Mishnah, Talmud, etc.

◇ **Israel**

For more on this topic, see A. Roy Eckardt, *Elder and Younger Brothers: The Encounter of Jews and Christians* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967).

◇ **people**

Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), p. 346.

NAZISM AS IDOLATRY

Now that we have explored the war of Torah vs. idolatry, we turn to Judaism vs. Nazism. Rabbi Greenberg's thesis is that Nazism is a typical form of idolatry (*Triumph of Life* [forthcoming]):

SOURCE #4

Idolatry consists of taking a finite human being or a limited human institution or creation and declaring it or worshipping it as absolute. God is a Force/Presence extending beyond all human limits, not controllable by finite creatures. Therefore, any attempt to make a finite human principal absolute is an attempt to cut off a piece of reality from the Infinite God. That is why Judaism considered idolatry as the anti-God. The Rabbis ◇ were convinced that if idolatry did win out, it would be the end of human dignity and of human life. Idolatry is equated to the other two cardinal sins—murder and sexual violation (such as incest)—which also are death for the human body or soul.

The reverse is also true. For idolatry to succeed, it must eliminate God from the picture. The very presence of God refutes the absolute nature and claims of the idolatry. Therefore, totalitarian movements have typically tried to crush any other traditional religions in their orbit. An alternate strategy is to take over those religions and get them to “domesticate” or limit God's claims, thereby making them subservient to—and supportive of—the human absolute. The Nazis tried to do this by setting up a German Christian church that would be racially and doctrinally purified, as a vassal of National Socialism...

This then was the theological agenda behind the Holocaust: to make a human leader and a system absolute and unchecked, one had to eliminate the unlimited, uncontrollable God of Israel. The only way to do that was to obliterate the people Israel. ◇ Eric Metaxas reports Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reaction to Kristallnacht as follows: “...that day, and as he meditated and prayed, Bonhoeffer realized that the synagogues that had been burned in Germany were God's own. This was when Bonhoeffer most clearly saw the connection. To lift one's hand against the Jews was to lift one's hand against God himself. The Nazis were attacking God by attacking his people...” ◇

◆ **Holocaust**

In Eva Fleischner (ed.), *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav, 1977).

1. Think back to the way you and your *havruta* discussed idolatry at the beginning of this session. *How do Rabbi Greenberg's words fit in to what you discussed? What has this definition of idolatry, and its instantiation in Nazism, made you think about anew?*
2. *What do you think of the idea that, parallel to the physical assault of Jews by Nazis, there was a theological war between God and idolatry as well? Does it change the way you think about the Holocaust? Why or why not?*

FUNDAMENTAL CHALLENGES TO THE MODERN WORLD

Nazism was not a revolt against modernity, but in fact a natural outgrowth of it. Nazism was modernity with its limits unshackled. There is no understanding of Nazism and idolatry today that doesn't contend with the potential for idolatry, for this religion of death, inherent in modern culture.

SOURCE #5

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, "Cloud Of Smoke, Pillar Of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, And Modernity After The Holocaust"◆

No assessment of modern culture can ignore the fact that science and technology—the accepted flower and glory of modernity—now climaxed in the factories of death; the awareness that the unlimited, value-free use of knowledge and science, which we perceive as the great force for improving the human condition, had paved the way for the bureaucratic and scientific death campaign. There is the shock of recognition that the humanistic revolt, celebrated as the liberation of humankind in freeing man from centuries of dependence upon God and nature, is now revealed—at the very heart of the enterprise—to sustain a capacity for death and demonic evil.

1. *How can we avoid the conditions of modernity—especially of science and bureaucracy—that made the Holocaust possible? Can we?*
2. *What other aspects of modern culture seem to you "idolatrous" and part of the "religion of death"? How can these be mitigated to avoid catastrophic results?*
3. *Post-modernity has included a return to God and religion in ways that were perhaps unimaginable to those living in the mid-20th century. Do you think these factors change the picture of allowing idolatry to flourish? Do you think there are any new factors in today's society, e.g. the social media revolution, that would help or hinder this process? Could a new Holocaust on this scale happen today?*