

Reflections of Redemption

Essays on the Weekly Torah Reading and Moshiach,
Based on the talks of the
Lubavitcher Rebbe,
Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

Reprinted for Parshat Vayishlach, 5782
(Vol. 8)



VAAD L'HAFOTZAS SICHOS
788 EASTERN PARKWAY • BROOKLYN, NY 11213
5782 • 2021

IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Horav **Schneur Zalman Halevi** עי"ה
ben Horav **Yitzchok Elchonon Halevi** הי"ד
Shagalov

Passed away on 21 Tamuz, 5766

Reb **Dovid Asniel** ben Reb **Eliyahu** עי"ה
Ekman

Passed away on 5 Sivan - Erev Shavuot, 5765

Mrs. **Devora Rivka** bas Reb **Yosef Eliezer** עי"ה
Marenburg

Passed away on the second day
of Rosh Chodesh Adar, 5766

Reb **Yitzchok Moshe** (Ian)
ben Reb **Dovid Asniel** עי"ה

Ekman (Santiago, Chile)

Passed away on the 24th day of Shevat, 5769

ת. נ. צ. ג. ה.

AND IN HONOR OF

Mrs. **Esther Shaindel** bas **Fraidel Chedva** שתחיל
Shagalov

DEDICATED BY

Rabbi & Mrs. **Yosef Y.** and **Gittel Rochel** שיחי
Shagalov

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Printed in the U.S.A.

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by
Dovid Yisroel Ber Kaufmann

Vayishlach

THE IMPURITY OF IDOLATRY

Removal of idolatry is a pre-requisite for Redemption. The tumah, ritual impurity, of idolatry can affect both the object and the person. Every sin is an act of idolatry. “Removing the strange gods” breaks through the barriers concealing G-d’s Presence.

It is well known that serving idols and accepting G-d’s sovereignty are mutually exclusive. Idolatry is an obstacle to the complete revelation of G-d’s presence. Thus, one of the accomplishments of the era of Moshiach will be elimination of the spirit of impurity, the source of idolatry. When the nations will be motivated to serve G-d, then all forms of idolatry will be destroyed.

Idolatry itself has two negative consequences. First, the practices and rituals violate G-d’s Will. Second, idolatry creates ritual impurity, a distancing from holiness. The term for this in Hebrew is *tumah*. The concept of *tumah*, which has far-reaching consequences, may be understood as follows: G-d is the source of life. Anything that reveals, or can potentially reveal, the innate G-dliness, the Divine life-force, is in a state of ritual purity (*taharah*). Anything that conceals, obstructs or impedes the flow of G-dliness is *tumah* – ritually impure and prohibited from being in contact with holiness.

According to Maimonides, this week’s Torah reading contains an allusion to the impurity of idolatry. As Jacob prepares to return home with his family, he gives them the following instruction: “Put away the strange gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments.” Here we see a clear connection between idolatry – the “strange gods” – and *tumah*, or impurity.

By removing the “strange gods,” the idols, the household of Jacob will purify itself. Jacob’s instruction will be completely and literally fulfilled in the era of Moshiach when, as the prophet declares, the spirit of impurity will be removed.

The *tumah*, or impurity, caused by idolatry falls into two categories. First, the *tumah*, or impurity, may apply to the idolatrous object itself. That is, just as the Torah prohibits one from deriving any benefit or pleasure from an object used in idolatry, so the rabbis decreed that an object used in idolatry is *tumah*, ritually impure.

However, the impurity, or *tumah*, of idolatry, may apply only to the individual, the actual idolater. That is, while the Torah prohibits idolatry, the object worshipped does not in and of itself become ritually impure. Rather, it is the person engaged in idolatry who becomes *tameh*. The rabbis decreed an idolater ritually impure – in a state of *tumah* – so that people would distance themselves from ‘strange gods.’

These two categories emphasize different aspects of idolatry. When we say that the impurity applies to the idolatrous object itself, what is emphasized is the repulsiveness of the object. The idol is disgusting. On the other hand, when we say that the individual, the idolater, is *tameh*, the need to distance one’s self from idolatry, to “remove the strange gods among you,” is emphasized. There should be a complete distancing and total separation from the slightest vestige of idolatry.

Maimonides cites Jacob’s declaration from this week’s Torah reading as proof that idol-worship makes one *tameh*; that is, worshipping idols makes one ritually – and spiritually – impure. By doing so, he stresses the second aspect, the need to distance one’s self from “the strange gods among you,” rather than the first aspect, the repulsiveness of idolatry. Maimonides’s explanation that the passage in this week’s Torah reading – “remove the strange gods among you” – indicates that *tumah* applies mainly to the

individual also helps us understand a general principle of idolatry. Understanding this general principle requires two preliminary observations.

First, there is a fundamental difference between the prohibition of idol-worship and all other prohibitions in the Torah. All other prohibitions prohibit something of real substance. For example, the Torah prohibits eating *chametz* on Passover, or eating an animal that died of natural causes, and so forth. In each case the thing prohibited actually exists: there is *chametz*, a dead animal, etc., that one is not allowed to eat. Idolatry, on the other hand, is an illusion. True, the tree or stone being worshipped is real. But to imagine that the tree or stone or other object has any ability to harm or benefit is delusional. Therefore, in regard to idolatry, any act that would lead one to think that the 'strange gods' are actually real or have any effect is forbidden.

The second preliminary observation concerns the difference between prohibiting benefit or pleasure and the concept of impurity, or *tumah*. The purpose of a prohibition is to negate something, nullifying its significance. If something is *tameh*, on the other hand, this means the object, however loathsome, has the ability to affect the person who comes in contact with it. One who touches *tumah* himself becomes *tameh*. One who is impure thus cannot enter the Temple, the place of holiness, because he would bring impurity within its gates.

The whole concept of idolatry raises the question: how can something which denies G-d's Oneness exist in the world made by G-d? How can G-d allow a person to think that an idol has any reality, to the point where there is a need to destroy the idol and its associated rituals?

The answer lies in the wording Maimonides emphasizes. Jacob tells his household, "Remove the strange gods." The key action is the removal of the "strange gods," that is, the idols, by Jacob and

his household. In other words, idolatry exists only so that the very possibility of idolatry will be completely eliminated through the actions of the Jewish people. G-d wants holiness to be brought into this world and revealed through the efforts of the Jewish people.

The reason G-d permits these false notions to exist is for the Jewish people to reveal that idolatry is a lie, without any substance. By negating idolatry, a true belief – belief in the One G-d – is revealed.

Every sin or transgression is a miniature act of idolatry. Belief in the Oneness of G-d means more than accepting that there is no other god. It means recognizing there is no other existence, and that all creation is an expression of the “word of G-d” which gives it life and being. Any thought or feeling of self-sufficiency – any violation of G-d’s commandments – denies, at least in a subtle way, the Oneness of G-d.

The same may be said of forbidden objects: they oppose the Oneness of G-d. We may apply the same logic to the “miniature” idolatry: prohibited objects exist for the sake of the Divine service of the Jewish people. *Tumah*, the sense of being a separate existence and other oppositions to holiness – all appear to have substance and reality because the Divine life-force that animates them is covered up and concealed. Once the concealment of the Light of the Infinite is removed, the innate G-dliness within even the most mundane aspects of the world will be revealed. As Jacob commanded his family, “remove the strange gods from among you,” so too must we “remove the strange gods,” break through the barriers and concealments, and reveal the G-dliness within every aspect of creation. Then will be fulfilled the prophecy concerning the era of Moshiach, that the “spirit of impurity will be removed from the earth.”

(Based on Likkutei Sichos 30, pp. 155-160)

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Mr. Zelig Yisroel שיח'י Zipp

On the occasion of his birthday, 18 Kislev

Rabbi Mordechai שיח'י Leaderman

On the occasion of his birthday,

on the auspicious day, 19 Kislev

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IN HONOR OF

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On the occasion of her birthday, 13 Kislev

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