



WEEKLY PARASHA

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So, What's the Story With ... Christianity?

Last week we explored how the Torah's prohibitions against idolatry fall into two categories: 1) the belief in and worship of foreign gods and 2) the representation or worship of God through an image or any physical concretization. These recur throughout the book of Devarim in regular warnings against the seductions of idolatry, and we find them again in Parashat Eikev:

The graven images of their gods you shall burn with fire: thou shalt not desire the silver or gold that is on them, nor take it unto thee, lest thou be snared therein: for it is an abomination to the Lord thy God. Neither shalt thou bring an abomination into thine house, lest thou be a cursed thing like it: but thou shalt utterly detest it, and thou shalt utterly abhor it; for it is a cursed thing (7:25–26).

The attraction here is not sexual; it is the desire for wealth. It does not begin with the intent to worship idols, merely to take the gold and silver statues because of their value. But doing so ignores the seductive power of such idols: once they are in your house you will be drawn to them, and you will be led astray. Thus the Torah prohibits any connection with these graven images, not just the worship of foreign gods or the making of idols. In *halakhic* terms, idols or things connected to them are *assur bi'hana'ah*, items from which a person is forbidden to derive any benefit.

These verses also serve as the basis for the Rabbinic prohibition against renting a house to an idolatrous Gentile. The Torah states that we shall not bring idols into our homes. When we rent a house it still belongs to us, so if the Gentile brings idols in with him, we will have allowed idols to be brought into our house, thereby transgressing this Torah law.

Both of these *halakhot* led to practical challenges in the Middle Ages. The consensus of the Rishonim was that Christianity fell into the category of *avodah zarah*. People might be shocked or offended by this categorization today, but as we saw last week, *avodah zarah* is not limited to the worship of foreign gods. Saying that Christianity is *avodah zarah* is not saying that they worship a different God or that their belief in the Trinity is a form of polytheism. Rather, it is a statement that their use of statues, icons, and images is a “foreign worship,” a worship prohibited by the Torah. The *poskim* discuss the degree to which this continued to apply to post-Reformation Protestants who rejected the use of such images and icons but maintained their

belief in incarnation, God in a physical form. Recently, there have also been those who have pushed for an adoption of Meiri's position that Christianity was never *avodah zarah*. For Meiri, the belief in a single, transcendent God was enough to put Christianity outside the category of *avodah zarah*, despite the use of forms and icons in worship.

Be that as it may, for the Rishonim Christianity was *avodah zarah*, and yet Jews were engaged in buying and selling religious items, not only to lay Christians, but even to the Church itself. Jews also rented houses to Christians even though they would presumably bring in their icons and statues. The *halakhists* of the time had either to declare that all of this activity was forbidden, or to find a way to justify it within the *halakhic* system. They chose to do the latter, leading to interesting reformulations of the status of Christianity and Christians.

In the trade of religious objects, the problem was not so much the status of *avodah zarah* items as *assur bi'hana'ah*. This status applies only to items that have been worshipped or used in worship. Thus, trade in used religious items would be problematic, but there was no problem in deriving financial benefit from trade in items that had yet to be used. There was, however, another problem. Since the Noahide Laws prohibit idolatry, a Jew could not give or sell a Gentile an object that would be used in worship. This would be a violation of *lifnei eever*, the prohibition against putting a stumbling block before the blind, that is, assisting someone in committing a sin.

There were two ways to address this problem. The first was to limit the scope of *lifnei eever*. Thus, some Rishonim stated that if the Gentile could readily purchase the object from someone else, then selling it to him would not be the cause of his “stumbling.” Even if this were true, it would be somewhat ironic to apply it in a situation where all the other sellers were Jews. The act of an individual Jew would not be a transgression because other Jews were doing the same thing!

The other approach, beginning to reassess the status of Christianity and Christians, was of broader significance. Tosafot (Avoda Zara 2a) solved this and many similar problems by distinguishing between the two: Christianity is *avodah zarah*, he asserted, but Christians are not *ovdei avodah zarah*, worshippers of *avodah zarah*! Tosafot separates the two by stating that Christians worship not out of a deep knowledge of their faith, but because they follow practices passed down through the generations and inherited from

their parents. Many people will find this assertion disquieting. First, its historical truth is doubtful. If anything, Christians in the Middle Ages were very sincere, and if they were not sincere Christians, it was often because they were backsliding into pagan religions! Beyond that, there is something quite patronizing in saying that the members of another faith are not sincere in their worship, let alone applying this to all practitioners.

Nevertheless, it got the job done. Through this distinction, Tosafot was able to avoid compromising his definition of *avodah zarah*, leaving Christianity as taboo while opening up a wide range of opportunities—primarily financial—to interact with Christians. Following this, one could sell religious items to Christians because their use was not considered real *avodah zarah* worship. This still did not explain how people could sell items to the Church, for as a rule, Tosafot did not claim that Christian priests were unknowledgeable or insincere in their faith. Nevertheless, this argument went a long way toward justifying the current practice of the people.

The distinction between Christians and Christianity has had a long echo through later *halakha*. It became an effective strategy for navigating real-world situations in which *halakha* made it difficult for Jews to interact with the Christian population. It did not solve all problems, however, and this gets us back to renting houses.

Rema ruled that a Jew could rent his house to a Christian, stating, “nowadays, they do not bring their icons into the house” (YD 151:10). This sounds like another legal fiction, and Shakh called him on it: “This is difficult, because we see that they do bring their icons into the house, and they even keep them there on a permanent basis. And it is difficult to claim that nowadays, since Christians are not worshippers of *avodah zarah*, their icons are also not considered to be *avodah zarah*” (YD 151:17). Shakh is saying that we must draw a limit to this distinction. It is one thing to allow a range of interactions with Christians because we do not consider them worshippers of *avodah zarah*, but how can we find even the icons to which they pray to be unproblematic?

Of course, if one thinks about it logically, the two should go together. If Christians are seen as insincere in their worship, then their praying to an icon should not be an act of *avodah zarah*, the status that makes it forbidden. Although this logically follows, I believe that Shakh is recognizing the same recoil that we find expressed in the verses from our *parasha*. It is one thing, he is saying, not to see Christians as taboo. They are people, after all, and the laws that govern our interaction with them come by and large from the Rabbis. But how could we not see the very object that was worshipped as taboo?! Can we really live in a legal fiction and say that the very item the Torah calls *cherem*, a cursed thing, and tells us to abhor utterly is not problematic?

From a religious perspective, Shakh’s reaction makes a great deal of sense. And yet there were *poskim* who did not hesitate to draw the logical conclusion and argue that, if people are not true worshippers, icons are not true idols. Despite the Torah’s mandate to “utterly abhor” anything associated with *avodah zarah*, ongoing interactions between Jews and Christians provided the catalyst for rethinking *halakhic* categories related to *avodah zarah* and the attendant prohibitions, a process which continues even today.

Shabbat Shalom!

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