

## In Praise of Idols

No doubt about it, the title of this article requires some explanation. Actually I couldn't resist choosing it.

If you subscribe to one of the three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christian, Islam—red flags don't just go up but better prepare yourself to be either beheaded or burned at the stake. Another way of putting it is the title is a death wish for all to behold. For a foretaste of this, just take a cursory look at the scriptures of any one or all three of these traditions, the ones, of course, included here. Top of the list are prohibitions of the severest kind against idols. The One True God can't tolerate this for a second, so in a way you're in good company falling in right behind him.

It's precisely this almost over-the-top, give-no-quarter attitude which is so fascinating and what I wish to explore. Such a stark contrast gave rise to the title not so much to praise idols but to recognize their persistence throughout human history. Why so and why such a severe response from the Lord? Two obvious questions at least on the surface. However, the instant animosity we see among defenders of monotheism seems to lay bare an issue that most would prefer remaining hidden and therefore not discussed. How can anyone ignore the fact that the practice of idolatry has been such a sore spot? Because it has been with us from The Beginning and remains very much alive despite the drastic steps at eradication it we simply cannot avoid it. Even today current talk is filled with the term idol. Most of the time it's negative but not in such a harsh way as earlier in history simply because religion has lost much of its influence.

A brief mention as to what got this article off the ground. I refer to a simple experience, the importance of which didn't dawn on me until I got it underway, so why not give it brief mention. One early spring morning I sat in a comfortable spot with an unobstructed view of the full moon. The moon is famous in the Zen tradition as representing reality in and by itself compared with our tendency to take the finger pointing at it as ultimate reality. In sum, such is one way of considering the finger as an idol. By contrast, this bright orb in all its glory has a way of taking you over and making you part of its reality. All that's required is to look...to stare...right at the moon without blinking. Soon it swoops down and lifts you up like Elijah in the chariot ascending to heaven.

When approaching a subject like this which can involve all sorts of misunderstandings, sometimes it's best to start off with the most general or comprehensive point of view and narrow it down from there should that be possible.

In the case at hand that means consulting a concordance to the Bible in order to find the number of times “idol” and “god” occur in both Testaments. I figured the latter was pretty much a synonym for the former, so I decided to include it. If need be, from there the focus could be narrowed down somewhat. Should it leads to a dead end, no problemo. At least that avenue is out of the way, and I can move on to something else. As for my research, I came across an unexpected surprise, actually an initial disappointment. “Idol” totaled not quite two columns, but the greater surprise was the New Testament, only eleven references. If that wasn’t bad enough, none at all in the four Gospels. This made me wonder...why so few? Then I found out that I was barking up the wrong tree or rather, the lesser tree. It dawned on me that the word “god” is pretty much the same as “idol” which totaled almost five columns in the concordance.

From what I could determine, “god” is more potent than an idol. As for the Hebrew spelling, by far the most common word is *‘elohym*<sup>1</sup> which is the same for God, the Lord of Israel. That puts “god” on a very competitive level. Then we could throw in a few other related words, *‘el*, *‘eloah* and *‘elah*. By comparison, an idol usually evokes something fashioned by human hands.

So where to begin? The temptation is rush in with *‘elohym* and bypass “idol.” Instead, I decided upon starting with the latter simply because that word was what got this article underway. Obviously *‘elohym* is more attractive by reason of it’s association with *‘Elohim*. Right away the distinction is blurred which makes looking at this word all the more challenging. It’s as though the former were a likeness of the latter but not an image of it. In order to grasp the meaning of this word we’d have to go down a rabbit hole of so many intricacies which are fascinating in and by themselves. However, that is not the aim of this article.

The first impression with regard to these two words? It appears quite easy to switch between them without a problem, something we’re tempted to do without considering the differences. Furthermore, the two are in the plural and represent something along the lines as belonging to a given category. Before getting into examining the source of idolatry and “god worship” (I like to call that phrase in light of the distinction as well as similarity noted above), it might be helpful to take a look at a few references to both *gilulym* and *‘elohym*, the former as idol<sup>2</sup>. Like *‘elohym*, *gilulym* is in the plural which leads to the fact that something in human nature needs a plurality of

---

<sup>1</sup> “(*Elohim*) is not only used of the one true God but is also used on occasion to refer to human rulers, judges, and even angels. If you saw one exhibiting supreme rule and expressed mighty power, the word you would use would be *Elohim*.” From a generic list of words related to *‘Elohim* on the Internet.

divinities. This is true even with ‘*Elohyim*’ as applicable to the Lord, that obviously in the plural.

Let’s start with a few examples of *gilulyim* followed by ‘*elohym*’. The list could dribble on almost endlessly but the limited amount of references presented here suffices to give a good idea of what’s going on. Following this list which includes some observations with regard to each verse comes the reason for presenting them. As for *gilulyim*, there’s something intriguing about it, the verbal root for which is *galal* meaning to roll and can refer to a piece of wood easy to roll on the ground. It thus conveys a certain mobility as well as dead weight. As for the latter, it’s important by reason of being the same as ‘*Elohyim*’ as already noted.

### *Gilulyim*

**And I will destroy your high places and cut down your incense altars and cast your dead bodies upon the dead bodies of your idols; and my soul will abhor you [Lev 26.30].**

This is the very first verse in the Bible relative to *gilulyim* and as good as it gets, something we expect. The verse starts off with the conjunctive *v-* or “and” (many verses as are as such) which show the close connection with just went before and what will come after. Actually we have here a total of four conjunctives which add to the intensity of intent contained within this text. Another way of looking at it is that *v-*, unobtrusive as it is, makes for smooth, seamless reading.

The Lord is at his best here. Just look at the three verbs associated with him, all wrapped into one: *shamad*, *karath*, *natan* and *gahal* or to lay waste, to cut off, to give and to loathe. The best part is casting (*natan*) of human bodies on the equally dead bodies of the idols they had worshiped. In other words, dead-upon-dead! And to top this off, the Lord says almost as an after-thought that his soul...his very *nephesh*...will abhor or loathe these idol worshipers even when their dead bodies are piled on high.

**And you have seen their detestable things, their idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold which were among them [Dt 29.17].**

This verse is preceded by Moses’ words to the Israelites when they had dwelt in Egypt. That dwelling, if you will, had lasted over four hundred years. So when Moses speaks of detestable things and idols made from various materials, he’s referring to this extended period of time lasting many generations. The way he puts it—“you

---

2 This is one of the more common words for idol. There are quite a few others, *hatsav* being the second in popularity and whose verbal root means to form or to fashion.

have seen”—suggests that the Israelites had observed this idol worship which was all around them yet managed to retain their own identity. However, that is questionable.

In the verse at hand, *gilulym* are called *sheqesh* (singular) or detestable things, this word often applicable to what is ceremonial unclean. It also evokes creepy things, distasteful in every way. Even the word’s pronunciation conveys this. Moses continues by saying that during their prolonged stay in Egypt the Israelites had seen these *sheqesh* which were among the locals, *qerev* almost as the very midst of something. Thus the identity with them was complete, and living in such an environment implies the same for the Israelites.

**They have stirred me to jealousy with what is no god; they have provoked me with their idols [Dt 32.21].**

The context is the song of Moses which he spoke “in the ears of all the assembly of Israel” [vs. 1]. In other words, it’s a *shyr* which is *davar* or spoken in the sense of conveying an expression. Thus it seems that *shyr* and *davar* are interchangeable. Moses utters this at the end of his life and at the end of Israel’s trying forty years in the Sinai wilderness.

*Qana’* is the verb to be jealous and well as to envy with regard to what is no god or no ‘el. Similarly the Israelites provoked the Lord with their idols, *kahas* also as to irritate. The noun *hevel* for idol breath or vapor and therefore something as transitory as the wind. Interestingly the Lord is envious of this, that the devotion to such transitory things makes him jealous. Looking at it from the meaning of the word, it isn’t very flattering with regard to the Lord in that it connotes a petty attitude.

**They served their idols which became a snare to them [Ps 106.36].**

*Havad* is the verb to serve and also means to be a slave which would apply here. This servitude, in turn, is transformed into a snare or *moqesh*, also a noose. Implied is that such idols lay hidden, ready to spring. The noun in this instance is *hatsav* or anything that’s fashioned. The verb is also the root for pain, toilsome labor. One such reference is Ex 23.33: “They shall not dwell in your land lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.”

Both the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah have their share of references to idols, less so with regard to the latter. However, Ezekiel has the most for any single prophet.

**So I went in and saw; and there portrayed upon the wall round about were all kinds of creeping things and loathsome beasts and all the idols of the house of Israel [Ezk 8.10].**

Reference is to the Jerusalem temple, center of Israel's religious life. The invitation for Ezekiel to go in comes from "a form that had the appearance of a man" [vs. 8]. He tells him to dig a hole in the wall which led to a door. In other words, what Ezekiel is about to see lies completely hidden from everyone else. It's even too much for the Lord which is why he had delegated a heavenly being literally "as the appearance of fire." Actually the invitation he extends through this intermediary is to stealthily enter his very own home and therefore come away with a report. He'd rather not have that done, but given the circumstance—a violation of the most sacred place on earth—where something sinister is going on deep within the temple is too abominable to be ignored. In fact, it's something lifted straight from a horror show.

As for what Ezekiel saw, they are creeping things and loathsome beasts, *remesh* and *sheqets*. The former pertains to things that crawl on the ground and the latter things (not necessarily living) that contaminate places wherever they are. Last but not least are the idols belong to the house of Israel, *gilulym*. Imagine a room dimly lit with these depictions plastered on all the walls and most likely the ceiling. No small wonder the Lord himself wouldn't go there. As for Ezekiel in the company of that "form that had the appearance of a man," no words were exchanged between them. Surely Ezekiel couldn't get out of there as quickly as possible. One more step was required. Ezekiel had to see seventy elders of Israel offering incense and proudly proclaiming among themselves that the Lord doesn't see them because he has forsaken the land.

**For they have committed adultery, and blood is upon their hands; with their idols they have committed adultery; and they have even offered up to them for food the sons whom they had borne to me [Ezk 23.37].**

This verse has two references to adultery, *na'aph* applicable to both men and women. The first seems to be with regard to human beings while the second is with idols or *gilulym*, the two being interchangeable. Worse than this, is human sacrifice put disgustingly as food for these idols, the verb being *harav* which connotes giving as a pledge. The Lord makes this all the more poignant by saying that the people had given birth to these sons for him alone.

**I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness and from all your idols I will cleanse you [Ezk 36.25].**

The Lord stresses the fact that the water he will sprinkle (*zaraq*, also to scatter) on the people is clean, not taken from any common source. *Taher* is the verbal root here which means to be pure and connotes brightness. In other words, the Lord has such water in reserve and is not found for normal human consumption. It alone will cleanse

the people from their uncleanness and idols, *tum'ah* and *gilulym* being pretty much the same, the former also as pollution.

### *'Elohyim*

**For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord [Ex 12.12].**

*Havar* or to pass through also means to pass over and connotes doing it quickly. The passage is even more stealthy by reason literally “in night” and “in Egypt.” While this *havar* is going on, the Lord is striking (*nakah* also to slay) the first born in Egypt. As for the gods of that country, the Lord will make (*hasah*, also as to do) judgment or *misphat* on them all, this noun also as to give sentence as a judge.

**You shall not make gods of silver to be with me nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold [Ex 2.23].**

The key words here are “to be with me.” That is, elevating something made (*hasah* being the verb). To engage in this is in a way the people equating themselves with the Lord.

**When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” [Ex 32.1].**

The delay at hand goes back to Chapter Twenty-Four during which time Moses was receiving detailed information about the covenant. Though the people considered Moses being away quite a while, the time Moses was experiencing on the mountain differed vastly from normal time, that is, *kairos* vs. *chronos*. The people thus used this as an opportunity to give air to what they’ve been wanting to do ever since they had left Egypt. They gathered around Aaron, Moses’ brother and second in command, the verb being *qahal* which often refers to an assembly. Actually here *qahal* is more like ganging up on Aaron who could see this coming.

This forceful entry, if you will, is further communicated by the people telling Aaron to get up or arise (*qum*) and make gods to go before them. They had a somewhat valid point saying that they had no clue as to what had happened to Moses. As the text continues, Aaron shows his weakness and willingly complies. At once he decides upon a golden calf, possibly having seen some as objects of worship in Egypt. After that, it

was anyone's guess what would happen to the people who've been in the Sinai desert for some time now.

**For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours [Dt 3.24]?**

*'El* is the word for god here which Moses freely applies to the Lord as he stands on Mount Pisgah overlooking Canaan from which he's not allowed to enter. He has in mind previous experiences with both the Egyptians and Israelites and their worship of gods, this having sunken so deep in their collective unconscious. Perhaps the Lord listened in tongue-in-cheek knowing that he will still be confronted with the people's worship of idols and gods once they've entered Canaan.

**and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods who they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them [Dt 29.26].**

This verse is part of an extended sentence beginning with the previous verse. Actually it's what people would say about Israel who had forsaken the covenant with the Lord. Note that vs. 26 begins with "they went" (*halak*, to go) before serving other gods, *havad* also being a verb which can apply to being a slave. Thus from this position of servitude the Israelites worshiped other gods, *shachah* also to prostrate, to bow down. The people did not know these gods nor did the Lord allot them, *chalaq* as to divide or to meet out in the sense of assigning.

**So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you [Jdg 2.3].**

An angel (*mal'ak*, also as messenger) of the Lord is presented here as having brought Israel from Egypt (cf. vs. 1). Because the people failed to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan—*garash* also as to thrust out or to spoil—they will remain and become hostile. The Hebrew text reads literally "they will become to you sides" or *tsad* which perhaps means they will remain right next to the people. If so, their gods will become a snare, *moqesh* also as a noose. In other words, Israel will become a prisoner in the land of promise.

**But if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes but go and serve other gods and worship them, they I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them [1Kg 9.6-7].**

The Lord not only speaks of his people but their children meaning he has in mind the future of the nation. He holds before them the threat of cutting off Israel, *karath* also as to destroy from the land in which they are in. In other words, they will become

homeless. Such is the result of failing to keep the Lords commandments and statutes. Note the verb *halak* or to go which precedes becoming slaves to other gods. In other words, *halak* here is not unlike *‘acherym* or other as far as they pertain to alienation. Thus Israel has the potential of abandoning the Lord, exchanging *shamar* or to keep for *havad* or becoming slaves to such gods.

**Because they have forsaken me and have burned incense to other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the work of their hands, therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched [2Kg 22.17].**

First comes *hazav* followed by *qatar*, abandoning the Lord and then offering incense to other gods, as though the Israelites couldn't wait to do so. The way this verse is phrased is that they do this deliberately, to provoke the Lord, *kahas* also to irritate. It seems the Israelites first fashion these gods, the work of their own hands. As a result the Lord's anger or *chemah* (also as heat) will be kindled against Jerusalem. Perhaps more specifically he has in mind the temple designated as *maqom* not just place but for emphasis, "this place." The result? It will not be quenched, *kavah* also as to put out.

**There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god [Ps 81.9].**

Here *‘el* or a god which is strange or *zar* (also an enemy) must not be literally "in you." Furthermore, the Lord bids his people not to bow down (*shachah* with *l-* or to) before an *‘el* which is foreign or *nekar* (also as strange), the verbal root as to be strange, to alienate.

**Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me [Is 43.10].**

*Lepanay* or "before me" has an air of defiance coupled with some jealousy as well as a boast. In other words, the Lord is supremely confident that no god (*‘el*) was formed nor will any exist after him. The verb *yasar* or to form, to fashion, refers to Israel setting up gods as a substitute for worship of the Lord. In other words, it simply will not happen.

**As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve strangers in a land that is not yours [Jer 5.19].**

First comes *hazav* followed by *havad* or abandoning and being subjected as slaves to gods (*‘elohey*) which are strange or *nekar*. This word is in sharp contrast with *‘erets* or the land which belongs to Israel, "your" making it all the more personal. Because of this, Israel will suffer the consequences. Her people will be slaves (*havad*) to those who



are strangers in a land or *'erets* not their own. *Zor* is the participle for strangers and akin to *zar* as with Ps 81.9 above.

What now to make of these biblical verses? A quick glance shows that the language prohibiting worship of idols is undoubtedly strong, nothing new for anyone acquainted with the Bible. Not only that, you get a sense of a clash that has had its origins in prehistory, one we find difficult to comprehend and tend to poo-poo as totally passé. That, of course, is a big mistake as will be detailed later. This clash continued with God's revelation to Israel and finally with the advent of Jesus Christ it reached a turning point. While the Christian world continued to do battle with the gods for quite a long time, the line had been drawn.

Although idolatry and worship of various divinities had been the norm since the advent of monotheistic religions, both evolved (if that's an appropriate word) to assume various forms of Gnosticism which are more sophisticated compared with outright worship of objects fashioned by human hands. That's another thing that awakens the ire of the Lord...not so much the objects in and by themselves but the very act of their creation. This implies deliberate, well-thought out plans which those making them had in mind for quite some time. Now they are coming to light and are out there for all to behold. While many may be enthralled by them, from his heavenly abode the Lord is gazing within the hearts of those who had made them and finds that they are a potential rival to his divinity.

On most occasions the Lord unleashes an almost uncontrollable anger which despite the intent of the humans involved, seems way out of proportion. So when reading through these excerpts and considering such terms as detestable things, adultery, creeping things, strange or foreign god, you can't help but wonder why the almighty Lord allows himself to get so worked up. The usual explanation is that he's jealous for his people and wants the best for them. No contest there. However, this point of view can cover up something that usually slips under the radar. Such is the purpose of this article, to present an ulterior motive.

As noted in the notations following the first entry the passage from Leviticus (26.30), it doesn't get any better when it comes to showing the Lord's attitude with regard to idols or *gilulym*. In truth all the succeeding verses hang upon that one. As the brief notation says, it's helpful to pay attention to the four verbs, *shamad*, *karath*, *natan* and *gahal* or to lay waste, to cut off, to give and to loathe, *natan* as to give pertaining to the casting of human bodies upon the idols. Truly the Lord took great delight in

clearing the field, so to speak, that nothing might stand in the way between him and the humans who are supposed to offer him due praise and sacrifice.

From our human point of view there's a pretty stark gap between us and the Lord. It's more so given the fact that the culture which gave rise to this monotheistic worship was in a desert environment under the clear blue sky. In other words, little below except sand and nothing above except the crystal clear sky. It presented an unyielding sense of no-escape no matter where you went. The only exceptions were shaded areas like an oasis, a cleft in a rock or a deep valley. That's what everyone had their eyes focused upon, to seek the nearest shade and, of course, water. Any meaningful activity is accomplished in either early morning or evening. And to think that the God of Israel is bearing down upon the people with the constancy of the blazing sun. If the overall environment was under that heavenly orb, so much more was it so in the Sinai wilderness. No small wonder people sought relief as in the guise of an idol to avoid being constantly under unrelenting gaze of the Lord above.

When Moses went up the mountain to converse with the Lord and to receive the Law, the people were somewhat relieved, he constantly telling them do this do this and don't do that after they had left Egypt. Indeed, his absence was a welcomed kind of rest. Chances are that some saw Moses' absence a golden opportunity to flirt with images of gods they stole away from Egypt or picked up from local tribes in the Sinai. God forbid that Moses caught sight of them earlier in their journey. With Moses' whereabouts being thrown into question, the people decided to approach his brother Aaron who wasn't as forceful a leader as his brother even though early on he had been spokesman when dealing with Pharaoh.

Aaron didn't offer the slightest resistance. Everyone knew this would be the case, he in essence having no real leadership qualities. As soon as the people approached Aaron to make gods, he went ahead collecting their gold rings. There must have been a lot because just prior to leaving Egypt the people gladly gave the Israelites whatever they wanted (cf. Ex 12.35-36). In a way, stuck to these golden rings carried was some residue, if you will, of the gods from that country. It had remained latent waiting for a moment like the one at hand to exert its power. Perhaps this is what's meant a bit later once Aaron had fashioned a molten calf and when he named it by the plural gods (cf. Ex 32.4). Thus the calf and the gold were completely interchangeable.

Shortly after Aaron had given in to the will of the Israelites he would have hell to pay. That's why of all the people in the camp he the most dreaded the return of Moses from the mountaintop. Aaron acted quickly and desperately by making a festival for the Lord on the morrow in which the people unhesitatingly participated. In other

words, freely and without question they shifted between the Lord and the gold calf. As noted earlier, it's perfectly understandable given the harsh environment in which they had been living.

In the meanwhile this activity didn't escape the keen eye of the Lord who was dealing with Moses. Note the language he uses now, almost as though he were whining. First of all he breaks off at once the important delivery of the Law to Moses and bids him to go down at once because the people have corrupted themselves, *shachat* also to spoil by rotting away. Then he adds the revealing word "quickly" in vs. 8, *maher* which connotes impetuosity with regard to having turned aside from the way (*derek*, also as way of life) which he had commanded them. The last word is a real favorite of the Lord. *Tsavah* connotes bossing around at will, something that peppers any relationship the Lord has with his people. One Hebrew concordance has six columns of *tsavah* and related words, all expressing an attitude of I'm-the-one-in-charge.

After venting himself, the Lord turns to Moses whom he needs desperately to lean upon when he calls the people stiff-necked, *qasheh* also being hard or obstinate. Next like a small child he dismisses Moses and says to him "let me alone" or *nuach* fundamentally to be at rest. He wants to be left alone so as to let his anger burst forth, the verb *nachar* meaning to breath hard through the nose. It's force will consume them at once, that is, eat them up. Then in his impetuosity the Lord turns back to Moses saying that he'll make of him a great nation. At least the Lord is credited with aiming his wrath toward those who are guilty. It shows that he does have the capacity for some maturity and foresight yet still needs to learn a lot more.

Armed with reassurance that the Lord won't totally blot out the people in vs. 11, Moses pleads with him to spare them. His trump card is not unlike a manipulative child, to insinuate that the Egyptians will find out that the Lord had wiped out Israel. That's only half the story. The other half is that the Egyptians would take great delight in the Lord being put to shame, broadcasting this far and wide. And so after Moses made what seemed to be an effective plea, the Lord repented of the evil he was ready to hurl against his people, *nacham* also as to grieve, to take comfort. End of story? Not quite.

Things begin to unravel with vs. 15 which like many verses begins with the conjunctive *v-* translated as "and" where Moses first turns and descends the mountain. More precisely he turns away from the Lord knowing what he must do even though he'd rather remain on the mountain. As he sets out, Moses takes one last look at the Lord, an unforgettable sight as he was fuming away on the mountaintop's splendid isolation. However, he does leave with the two tablets of the Law suggesting

that the Lord had finished just in time and was going to dismiss Moses even if word as to the people's apostasy did not come to fruition. When Moses discovered what was going on in the camp, like the Lord his anger flared up, the same verb being *nachar*.

We know what happened next. When Moses confronted his brother Aaron, in typical fashion when someone is caught, he passes the buck onto the people who forced him to fashion the molten calf. One of the best lines in the Bible ensue: "I threw it (gold) into the fire, and there came out this calf." Now Moses is even more incensed. If it weren't for Aaron being his brother, he would have struck him down on the spot. Next he gathered the Levites who were among the volunteers to go kill those who participated in worship of the golden calf. Vs. 27 puts it vividly, "go back and forth (*havar* and *shuv*) from gate to gate throughout the camp." This passing which takes place at lightning speed mirrors the Lord's outrage followed more immediately by that of Moses.

On the morrow Moses wastes no time and ascends the mountain to give a report to the Lord. Despite seeing all that had just taken place, like anyone who enjoys being angered, the Lord takes delight in hearing it from someone who had been there. It that way he can justify all the more any action to be taken. Once again Moses dutifully intercedes on behalf of the Israelites who reluctantly agrees to allow the people to continue their passage through Sinai. In the meantime he's wondering what he had gotten himself into, dealing with such a fickle divinity. Again, the Lord was fearful of reports filtering back to Egypt if he had killed them all.

A key word in vs. 34 is "nevertheless," another rendering of the conjunctive *v-*. In the next verse the Lord couldn't help but cryptically mention a day when he will visit his people, *paqad* usually a military term as to muster. He uses it also with regard to the sin the people had committed. Thus both uses of *paqad* become a veiled threat hanging over the heads of everyone, designed more to keep them in line. However, the Lord couldn't resist sending a plague, the impact of which isn't recorded. Again, that is a fairly typical immature response given that the Lord is almighty and that the people are mortal.

The second major incident of idol worship is taken to an extreme and is far more offensive. That is to say, it pertains to the vision the prophet Ezekiel has of abominations being committed in the Lord's very own home, the Jerusalem temple in Chapter Eight. What makes it particularly loathsome is mention of beasts, *remesh* and *sheqets*, creeping things and beasts which are offensive. The former pertains to things that crawl on the ground and the latter things (not necessarily living) that contaminate places wherever they are. These things are not live but portrayed on the

wall which possibly was adjacent to the Holy of Holies. Not only that, all the idols of the house of Israel are included. Approximately seventy men were present worshipping these images followed by the Lord telling Ezekiel that he'll see even more abominable things...not once but two separate occasions.

Nevertheless, in 8.18 the Lord says that he will extend his wrath or *chemah* nor will he spare nor have pity, *chus* and *chamal* also as to have compassion and to spare. One thing that stands out with regard to this incident and what follows is that while the Lord is understandably upset, he shows restraint. Indeed, he seems to have learned a lot after dealing with his wayward people.

As for how the people respond to the Lord's rantings, threats and punishments, they repent which is a way of ingratiating themselves with the Lord. Nevertheless, while preferring to worship idols, they're willing to strike a bargain of sorts with God whom many have come to see as a somewhat dim-witted divinity. That's something that must be kept under wraps though most people have woken up to this fact. It suits them just fine, for it allows them to slide back to their good ol' idols and gods. The problem is that quickly they can get comfortable with this and forget that the Lord's anger will flair up again. After all, he is almighty. And so it goes, generation after generation.

A suggestion as to the origins of this antagonistic relationship, that is, mythically speaking. If we go back to the Genesis narrative, the Lord goes to great length preparing a suitable dwelling for the first man and first woman. The prohibition not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is presented to the man before the woman's creation. After that, the serpent makes an appearance and tempts the woman to eat of this fruit. In other words, despite the wonders of the garden, the attention of the first man and woman cannot be taken away from this tree no matter how hard they try. They must have used every diversionary tactic in the book. How could it be with the tree in the garden's very center with a sign hanging from its largest branch, "Do not eat?" No matter where you walk in the garden, you're going around this tree even if it isn't visible. It's simply unavoidable even at night when the man and woman tried to lay down and get some sleep.

And so we could call this tree the first idol that had come into existence, the creator no other than the Lord himself. If he were more thoughtful of the welfare of the man and woman, he would have planted the tree in some discreet corner of the garden. No, the Lord planted it smack in the very center where it is begging for attention. It's as though the Lord wanted to trip the two up but decided to do this indirectly through the serpent while he stood back waiting for the inevitable outcome. And so it

happened as expected. Once the Lord discovered the two who went into hiding, he laid it on them as thick as could be. He gave them a lecture never to be forgotten which is exactly how it turned out to be. Included in this lecture is the serpent who slinked away to begin his career of going after the descendants of the first man and first woman. As for the serpent, this too is an idol of sorts which grabbed the woman's attention. Thus another responsibility which caused untold trouble to be pinned on the Lord.

After the lecture, the Lord banished the man and woman from the garden. The memory of this lecture had a more far ranging impact than perhaps the Lord expected. Memory of the Lord's words before the banishment not only stayed with the first man and first woman but was transmitted to their offspring. It was so unintentionally strong that it lasted full force through subsequent generations down to the present day. If in the first place the Lord had went ahead with a punishment followed by reconciliation, things would have turned out far better. We'd have to wait until the coming of Jesus Christ to remedy that.

Later when the Israelites worshiped gods, let alone other peoples of the earth, he was really pissed off as the above biblical verses reveal. Being all-mighty and all-knowing, the Lord was fully in charge and could slap his people around at will. Then along came Job who stood up to the Lord's bullying. This is especially evident towards the end of the book when the Lord resembles an uncouth teenager who cannot stop boasting as to his all-mightiness. Job stood there, of course, and at the end of the Lord's harangue obliged the Lord by saying he's just dust and ashes. That, however, didn't sit comfortably with the Lord though he didn't respond. Actually he was too afraid. The only thing the Lord could do now was restore Job's fortunes which he did in haste. Though this was comforting for Job, he must have credited himself for at last being the first human being to show what a bully the Lord has been throughout all these ages.

As a means towards summing up this article, I return to a topic covered in a good number of articles on this homepage, that is, our faculty of recollection or *anamnesis*. Rather than describe that yet again, suffice it to say that *anamnesis* is our very essence, our ability to make present the transcendent source from which we've come. Perhaps you could call it awareness more or less sustained. The more we tap into it, the better off we are. We can't do it all the time but enough in the course of a given day for it to count. When we forget this transcendent source, we substitute an idol or some kind of divinity and latch on to some kind of image which is in our own likeness. Actually it's somewhat a revelation how quickly we succumb to this temptation.

In light of this article, perhaps the best part about *anamnesis* is that avoids any starkness as I like to call it. By that I mean awareness of the sharp division between heaven above (God) and earth below (where we function) already noted. It's quite difficult to live in a setting like that, under the constant glare of the sun. No small wonder the Israelites gravitated toward worship of the moon and stars which were far more amenable and easier to incorporate into daily life. These heavenly bodies make their appearance under the cover of darkness or better, in the cool of the desert night.

While *anamnesis* isn't a cure-all, here is another instance when it comes to the rescue. How could it be otherwise when it's our very selves? *Anamnesis* thus avoids the dangers of a sharp monotheistic division on one hand and a tendency to drift toward polytheism as well as anything gnostic. At the same time it keeps us on an even keel. While the days of idol worship in the blatant sense depicted in the Bible are past, nevertheless we can easily fall prey to the starkness sometimes associated with one God and the murkiness of multiple divinities.

Towards the beginning of this article I mentioned an experience of watching the full moon and a finger pointing to it. The former represents reality or let's say transcendent reality and the latter, our thoughts and insights into it. Though enjoyment of that experience took place well before the beginning of a day and the emergence of the usual craziness of daily life, what counts is recalling this experience throughout the day. This is true even if *anamnesis* of it is in bits and pieces. That's from our point of view but in reality it's present like the moon in the day, whole and entire. Being aware of this is what counts.

How is it done or better, sustained? Not by remembering the moon (a pseudo-*anamnesis*, if you will) but by recalling—and here we're getting into the *anamimnesko* part, that is the verb—the gift the moon has transmitted. That consists not of cultivating any image as we'd expect but an awareness of our physicality. That's our most immediate field of reference, inescapable really, yet almost always overlooked as the vehicle for *anamnesis* as here pertaining to the moon.

So the realm of physicality is now perceived as the exact same realm in which idols and gods took their reality. It's a paradox which our minds can't wrap around nor can it ever be as such. The physical realm is informed...has a form imparted to it...which enables it to place us in direct or immediate contact with the divine instead of stumbling into the useless pursuits of divinities we tend to fashion in order to transform physical reality into something other than what it already is. The key, of course, is close attention to this realm which precludes manipulating it. When we apply this attention, the temptation to slip into such manipulation becomes all the

sorer by reason of how vulnerable we are by nature. That's a difficult thing to cope with but sure better than the alternative to go down the rabbit hole of worshipping the finger over the moon.

+