

Avodah Zarah as Falsehood—Denial of Reality and Rejection of Science

By: DAVID GUTTMANN

*Rambam as he prepares to discuss the *ta'amei ba-mitzvot*, the reasons for the different *mitzvot*, prefaces with two chapters¹ discussing idolatry. He makes the following statement:

The knowledge of these opinions and practices [of idolatry] is of great importance in explaining the reasons for the commandments. For the foundation of the Law and the pivot round which it turns consists of the effacement of these opinions from the minds and of these monuments [idols and their temples] from existence... This [eradication of idolatry] is the principal and first objective of the whole Torah, as our Sages distinctly told us in their transmitted explanation of the words "Even all that God commanded you by the hand of Moses" (Num. 15:25). For they say, "Hence we learn that those who follow idolatry deny as it were their adherence to the whole Torah, and those who reject idolatry follow as it were the whole Torah" (*Kiddushin* 40a). Cognize this. (MN 3:29)²

In other words, the eradication of idolatry in both opinions and practice is the underlying reason for many *mitzvot*. This is the case for

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¹ *Moreh ha-Nevuchim* (MN) 3:29-30.

² In all citations of *Moreh ha-Nevuchim* in this article I used Friedlander on line edition for ease, editing where I thought it necessary for clarity and at times using Shlomo Pines' edition. See also MT *Hil. AZ* 2:4: מצות עבודה זרה, כנגד כל המצוות כולן היא: שנאמר "וכי תשגו—ולא תעשו, את כל המצוות" (במדבר טו, כב). ומפי השמועה למדו, שבעבודה זרה הכתוב מדבר. הא למדת, שכל המודה בעבודה זרה—כפר בכל התורה כולה, ובכל הנביאים, ובכל מה שנצטוו הנביאים, מאדם עד סוף העולם: שנאמר "מן היום אשר ציווה ה', והלאה—לדורותיכם" (במדבר טו, כג). וכל הכופר בעבודה זרה, מודה בכל התורה כולה; והיא עיקר כל המצוות, כולן.

David Guttman, a businessman, lives in Flatbush.

not only negative commandments, *mitzvoṭ lo ta'aseh*,³ but also affects some *mitzvoṭ asseh* like those pertaining to *korbanot* and the *Beit Hamikdash*.⁴ The term “idolatry” in the contemporary modern mind translates to an early [or pre] civilization practice where statues and other artifacts were invested with divine powers. The broader term, *avodah zara*—alien service—is understood traditionally to be the worship of multiple gods or objects representing those gods. This type of thinking is generally classified under the rubric of polytheism, or belief in the existence of multiple gods. It would therefore seem to a modern observer that these practices have been eradicated in a globally ascendant Western society. If the great majority of *mitzvoṭ* pivot around the “effacement of these opinions from the minds” one can argue that they have no relevance in our contemporary culture. After all, who would nowadays worship a statuette as a god? It is the intention of this article to explore Rambam’s understanding of idolatry and why, once idolatry supposedly no longer existed, he still saw as relevant the *mitzvoṭ* that are meant to keep us from idolatrous practices. I will try to define exactly what *avodah zarah* stands for—the ideas that underlie it.⁵ I will also try to address why many *mitzvoṭ* are still relevant to a contemporary Jew even if their main purpose is the eradication of idolatry. Has idolatry really been eradicated from our midst?

³ Additional *mitzvoṭ* that in Rambam’s view were directed towards the eradication of AZ, besides those directly involved, are *sha’atnez*, cross dressing, *kilayei ha-kerem*, *kilayei zeraim*, *orlah* and others.

⁴ *Korbanot* will be discussed further. *Beit ha-Mikdash* is discussed in MN3:45 in this context. However *Beit ha-Mikdash* is seen as an a priori *mitzvaḥ*, as a place to worship through prayer and not necessarily exclusively *korbanot*. See *Sefer Hamitzvoṭ, Asseh* #5.

⁵ I am not concerned with what idolatry in its original practice was other than how it affects our contemporary thinking. I do not think Rambam was concerned too much with that either, although he quotes extensively from books written about it. He extracted the underlying concepts that fueled the practice to see if they still had an impact on society during his time. We should be doing the same in our current culture.

Much has been written⁶ about Rambam's organizational skills in composing his works especially *Mishneh Torah*. Much less has been written about the organization of the *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*⁷ (MN). In *Mishneh Torah*, the organization is conceptual. Subjects that are related conceptually are placed in the same *sefer*. By reviewing the halachic heading under which a specific issue is categorized one gets an insight into its underlying concept. Even within a chapter, the way Rambam organizes the details often gives us an idea of his thinking in regard to the underlying reason for that rule. In the introduction to his *Perush ha-Mishnah*, Rambam explains that Rabbeinu ha-Kadosh's organization of the Mishnah is based on a similar conceptual approach. He apparently emulated him in his writings. In the introduction to MN in the section where he tells us how to read it, Rambam states⁸ "And nothing has been mentioned out of its place, save with a view to explaining some matter in its proper place."⁹ Clearly, organization plays a big role in Rambam's writings. With this in mind, we have to look

⁶ In traditional sources, every perceptive analysis of Rambam takes this into consideration and great insights are gleaned from where Rambam placed a halakhah. In modern scholarship, see Rav Tzair (Chaim Tchernowitz) in his *Toldot Hapossekim* vol. 1 page 222 onward. For a recent study, see the excellent "Mishneh Torah: Polemic and Art" by Prof. Haym Soloveitchik in *Maimonides After 800 Years* edited by J. M. Harris, Harvard University Press: 2007. See also *Literary Structure and Ethical Theory* by Prof. Bernard Septimus in above.

⁷ See Shimon Rawidowitz, "The Structure of the Moreh Nebuchim" reprinted in *The Maimonides book of Tarbiz*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem: 1985.

⁸ As I mentioned in note 2, quotes from MN are from the Friedlander online edition with changes as I saw fit, using the Pines edition. As a point of interest in this particular instance Friedlander translates, "Nothing of what is mentioned is out of place, every remark will be found to illustrate the subject-matter of the respective chapter." This translation gives a completely different meaning to this sentence. I therefore used Pines which is in line with the Hebrew of R. Shmuel Ibn Tibon, R. Kafieh and Schwartz Editions.

⁹ Regarding Metaphysics, however, Rambam writes, "And even these have not been methodically and systematically arranged in this work, but have been, on the contrary, scattered, and are interspersed with other topics which we shall have occasion to explain. My object in adopting this arrangement is that the truths should be at one time apparent, and at another time concealed."

at the placement of the chapters preceding Rambam's discussion of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*.

After a lengthy dissertation on Divine Providence,¹⁰ and before opening the discussion of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, MN 3:25 discusses whether there is a purpose to the existence of the different components of our world. A similar discussion was already ongoing in MN 3:13 and 14, as an introduction to Divine Providence with an emphasis on existence in general. The conclusion there is that the whole of existence cannot be understood other than as the result of God's absolute will. The intent is to negate the idea that everything was created for man's sake, anthropocentrism. This is a key element in Rambam's understanding of Divine Providence. On the other hand, here in MN3:25 Rambam argues that each component of the world is interconnected and necessary for the survival of the other components. He also sees a hierarchy in which as things get closer to sentience they become more important in the sense that all those below are seen as existing for the existence and survival of those above. In this hierarchy, man is at the highest level and all is there to enable him to come into being and survive. The whole of the system itself is seen as exquisitely fine-tuned for its own survival. Every component has a built-in self-survival mechanism but, more importantly, plays a role in the survival of the whole. In such a system, man too has a role to play in the survival and maintenance of that whole. Rambam explains that the word *tov* that we find repeatedly in the story of creation refers to continuity and survival. "When the creation of any part of the Universe is described as durable, perpetual, and permanent, the phrase 'that it is good' is used" (MN2:30). When creation was completed and all the components were in place, when man was also finally created, the Torah says - וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה, וְהִנֵּה-טוֹב מְאֹד -

When therefore Scripture relates in reference to the whole creation (*Beresbit* 1:31), "And God saw all that He had made, and behold it was exceedingly good," it declares thereby that everything created was well fitted for its object, and would never cease to act, and never be annihilated. This is especially pointed out by the word "exceedingly," for sometimes, a thing is temporarily good; it serves its purpose, and then it fails and ceases to act. But as regards the

¹⁰ See my "Divine Providence—Goals, Hopes and Fears" in *Hakirah* Vol. 5.

Creation it is said that everything was fit for its purpose, and able continually to act accordingly. (MN3:13)

As I discussed in my article on Divine Providence,¹¹ what differentiates man from all other biological entities is his ability to think beyond his own immediate survival. Unlike all other living things who act for their own survival, man can act for the survival of the whole. The challenge for man is to know how to act correctly with that long-term perspective in mind. By understanding the workings of the universe and God's role in it as the Creator, he can learn God's ways and emulate them. Using his complex intellectual makeup and freedom of will, man can also act in unforeseen ways. It is because of these unique potential capabilities that the Torah tells us that when man was created, creation was complete. Its continued eternal a parte post existence was assured. Thus, Rambam defines man as the final, most important component of the world with a key role to play in its continuity. He sees man as an entity that has the flexibility to rise to the occasion and act responsibly fulfilling his objective and destiny in the continuity of the whole of existence. Clearly, anything that promotes the fulfillment of this role is seen as good and anything that hinders it is seen as bad. This chapter therefore closes the discussion of Divine Providence and opens the one regarding *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* indicating that Torah is the tool to help the individual and the whole of humanity to fulfill its intended objective and destiny. If the eradication of *avodah zarah* is one of the most important and common underlying reasons for many *mitzvot*, to the extent that when one rejects *avodah zarah* it is as if he kept all *mitzvot*,¹² it must have bearing on man's fulfillment of his destiny and role in existence. What is the connection? To better understand this we must first define *avodah zarah* and its consequences. We will also have to further define man's role and objective as part of the whole of existence.

¹¹ See note 10.

¹² *Kiddushin* 40a.

What is *Avodah Zarah*?

The Mishna *Avodah Zarah* 4:7 reads as follows¹³:

The sages while in Rome were asked, “If [God] does not want *avodah zarah* why does He not abolish it?” They replied, “Had they [the idol worshippers] been worshipping things the world does not need He would have done so. They, however, are worshipping the sun, moon, stars and signs [zodiac]. Should the world be destroyed because of fools?”¹⁴ They [the questioners] said, “Let Him destroy the [worshipped] things that are not necessary for the world leaving those that are.” They replied, “That would further strengthen their worshippers. That would further strengthen the legitimacy of the ones that were not destroyed, as gods.”

Rambam comments on this Mishnah:¹⁵

You need to know that the perfected philosophers do not believe in talismans.¹⁶ They laugh at them and at the people who believe

¹³ שאלו את הזקנים ברומי אם אין רצונו בע"ז למה אינו מבטלה אמרו להן אילו לדבר שאין צורך לעולם בו היו עובדין היה מבטלו הרי הן עובדין לחמה וללבנה ולכוכבים ולמזלות יאבד עולמו מפני השוטים אמרו להם אם כן יאבד דבר שאין צורך לעולם בו ויניח דבר שצורך העולם בו אמרו להן אף אנו מחזיקין ידי עובדיהם של אלו שאומרים תדעו שהן אלוהות שהרי הן לא בטלו.

¹⁴ This seems to be the basis of Rambam's commentary placing the stars at the root of idol worship. The verse in *Devarim* 4:19 suggests a similar idea as read by Rambam in MT AZ 2:1. Contrast this to Ramban's reading of the same in *Devarim* 4:15. It is also quite obvious as *avodat ha-kochavim* is synonymous with AZ in rabbinic literature.

¹⁵ ממה שראוי שתדעו, שהפילוסופים השלמים אינם מאמינים בטליסמאות, אלא צוחקים מהם ומאלה החושבים שיש להן השפעה. וביאור זה יארך, ואמנם אמרתי זאת ליודעי שרוב בני האדם ואולי כולם מרומים בהם תרמית גדולה מאד, ובהרבה דברים מסוגם, ויחשבו דברים אמיתיים, ואינם כך עד שהטובים חסידים מאנשי תורתנו חושבים שהם דברים אמיתיים אלא שהם אסורים בגלל התורה בלבד, ולא ידעו שהם דברים בטלים כזבים שהזהירה מהם התורה כמו שהזהירה מהשקר.

¹⁶ Traditionally, three varieties of talisman have been recognized: 1. the astronomical, having the characters of the heavenly signs or constellations; 2. the magical, with extraordinary figures, occult words, or the names of angels; and 3. the mixed, engraved with celestial signs and barbarous words. To this list Thomas D. Fosbrook, in his *Encyclopedia of Antiquities* (1825), adds two others: 4. the *sigilla planetarum*, composed of

that they have an influence [on the physical]. To explain this will be lengthy. I say this because I know that most people, indeed possibly all, are fooled by this great deception, and by many other similar things, considering them to be true. They are not. [The deception is so great] that even the best of the Chassidim [faithful] among our men [scholars] of Torah,¹⁷ think that they are true but forbidden because the Torah forbids them. They do not realize that they are nonsensical false things that the Torah warned against, just as it warned us against [believing in] falsehoods.

Rambam does not want us to even entertain the possibility that there is some legitimacy to *avodah zara*. It is an unfortunately successful deception perpetrated by man in a deliberate and premeditated fashion, as we will see. What is the rationale for this misconception? Rambam in *Mishneh Torah Hilkehot Avodah zarah* 1:1 says:¹⁸

At the time of Enosh, people made a great mistake. The mind of the wise of the generation became brutish¹⁹ and Enosh erred along with them. This was their error: They said, being that God created these stars and spheres to run the world, placing them on high and dignifying them as they are His servants, it is therefore appropriate to praise and embellish them and treat them with dignity. That is the will of God, blessed be He, [for us] to aggrandize and dignify those He aggrandized and dignified, just as the king wants us to dignify his servants and entourage. Thus is the majesty of a king.

The problem at the core of *avodah zarah* is an erroneous and innocent mistake in thinking which leads to a regression in education—

Hebrew numeral letters, used by astrologers and fortune-tellers; and 5. one with Hebrew names and characters (*Occultism & Parapsychology Encyclopedia*).

¹⁷ In fact Ramban insists that is the case and scoffs at the ones who “Nit-chasdu” and believe it does not work. See Ramban *Al ha-Torah Devarim* 18:9. Also, see the famous comment of G”ra in SA YD 179:13.

¹⁸ בימי אנוש טעו בני האדם טעות גדולה, ונבערה עצת חכמי אותו הדור; ואנוש עצמו מן הטועים היה. וזו הייתה טעותם: אמרו הואיל והאל ברא כוכבים אלו וגלגלים אלו להנהיג את העולם, ונתנם במרום, וחלק להם כבוד, והם שמשים המשמשים לפניו—ראויים הם לשבחם ולפארם, ולחלוק להם כבוד. וזה הוא רצון האל ברוך הוא, לגדל ולכבד מי שגידלו וכיבדו, כמו שהמלך רוצה לכבד עבדיו והעומדים לפניו, וזה הוא כיבודו של מלך.

¹⁹ The language Rambam uses is noteworthy. It connotes a lack of education and in this case even a regression.

brutishness. Man is so awed and overwhelmed by the forces of nature that govern his environment that he personifies them as separate entities that represent their Creator. He therefore reveres them and thinks that through them he shows respect to their Creator and Lord. But more importantly, he also thinks that by doing this he is fulfilling God's wishes.

כיון שעלה דבר זה על ליבם, התחילו לבנות לכוכבים היכלות, ולהקריב להם קרבנות, ולשבחם ולפארם בדברים, ולהשתחוות למולן—כדי להשיג רצון הבורא בדעתם הרעה. וזה, היה עיקר עבודה זרה.

Once this idea took root they started building temples to the stars, offering them *korbanot*, praising and embellishing them verbally and prostrating themselves to them. All this was so that they can apprehend God's will with their evil mind. This was the core of *avodah zara*.

I read Rambam's statement - כדי להשיג רצון הבורא—as “so that they can apprehend God's will.” In his existential struggle to understand the purpose of his existence, Man turns to his environment. He wants to understand what it is that he is expected to accomplish. He hopes to do that by reading God's will, the God he has to first find. He tries to do that by looking at God's creations and through them, he hopes to find Him and learn His ways. He mistakenly personifies these entities and takes the first step into error—evil mind. The next logical step is to worship these separate and powerful entities and to curry their favor, and this is where the human tragedy starts. Hierarchies of “knowledgeable experts” in worship appear, new traditions are formed and before long, some of these experts profess to having “received” divine instructions on how to best fulfill God's will. Worship takes on a life of its own and it is not long before the inanimate entities that represent their Creator take on a will and mind of their own demanding specific types of service.

Other falsifiers [liars] followed saying that the star itself or the sphere or the angel spoke to them, saying, “Worship me thus and thus.” He then told them the ways of his worship telling them to do thus and thus.²⁰

²⁰ והתחילו כוזבים אחרים, לעמוד ולומר שהכוכב עצמו או הגלגל עצמו או המלאך דיבר עימם ואמר להם, עבדוני בכך וכך, והודיע להם דרך עבודתו, ועשו כך ואל תעשו (כך (הלכות עבודה כוכבים א, ב).

The practical consequence of this type of thinking is explained in the commentary on this *Mishnah* in *Avodah Zara*.

They honored the stars attributing to them actions that were not theirs. They [the early idolater] are the ones that established the laws [that apply to the use of the powers] of the stars, magic, incantations, the bringing down of spirits, talking with the stars, the *sheidim*, ghosts, prestidigitations of all types, consultation with the dead and many of such similar matters that the True Torah²¹ unsheathed its sword and destroyed. They are at the root of idolatry and its offshoots. The first deception was [the establishment of] astrology, whose basic premises we can disprove empirically and scientifically. For they [the astrologers] say that this specific star augurs good while the other augurs bad. They also say that a certain part of a sphere is compatible with a certain star and incompatible with another although they [the spheres] are one body without parts or compositions. These two propositions are the basis for astrology and if disproved—and they have been—all their details to the last, will fall apart.

A second deception was grafted on the first one—the Talismans. They said that if a certain star which augurs good finds itself in a compatible place [on the sphere] and if one makes a certain form [shape] in this and this way, it will be beneficial. If a certain star that augurs bad finds itself in a place that is incompatible with it, a different form [shape] will protect against it. These details broadened and spread as did astrology.

And now a third deception was grafted on the first two and that is Alien Worship- *avodah zarah*. It was said that a form made during a specific sign [of the zodiac] on this specific altar and then certain kinds of incense are burned accompanied by specific words while genuflecting at such and such, this will stop the harm brought by a star [also] bringing a specific benefit.²²

²¹ Or in context: the Torah of truths.

²² והיו מגדלים את הכוכבים ומייחסים להם פעולות שאינן להם והם אשר יסדו את גזירת הכוכבים והכישוף והלהטים והורדת הרוחניות ושיחות הכוכבים והשדים והקסם והניחוש לכל ריבוי מיניהם, ודרישת המתים, והרבה מאלה הענינים אשר שלפה התורה האמיתית חרבה עליהם וכתתה אותם, והם שורש עבודה זרה וענפה. וזה, שהכזב הראשון הוא גזירת הכוכבים, אשר מוכח במופת בחכמה הטבעית ביטול הקדמותיה הראשונות, באומרם כוכב פלוני מזלו רע ופלוני מזלו טוב, וחלק פלוני מן הגלגל מתאים לכוכב פלוני, ומתנגד לכוכב פלוני, עם היות הגלגל כולו גוף אחד שחלקיו דומים, אין ניגוד בהם ולא הרכבה. ואלו שתי ההקדמות הן עמוד גזירת

There is a progression that begins with the innocent misconception that God wants man to show respect to His intermediaries even though they are inanimate. The next step, which is a natural progression from this supposed obligation, is the attribution of powers to inanimate²³ objects. That leads to believing in a pantheon of “spiritual” entities as the tools used by the stars to wield their power. It is only a small step from here to argue that their effect can be deflected, redirected and controlled by the cognoscente. These knowledgeable specialists devise a whole rulebook of rituals and practices that are supposedly effective and “have been known” to work. The next step is for these savants to use their “secret knowledge” to control the populace.

All these were done for a specific purpose. In times past, these [beliefs] were used to unify nations, fooling the general masses. They were told that the welfare of their land depended on these idols [lit: forms] and they should therefore gather into their temples showing respect to the elders teaching their secrets. The government was thus maintained stable. They [the masses] believed that all this was true, saying that this is a matter that belongs to this star or that sphere. They aggrandized them and followed them. They believed in them just as we believe that our prophets are perfected and elevated individuals. Note how they are referred to in Scriptures—prophets of Ba'al and prophets of the Asheirah.²⁴

הכוכבים, אשר אם יתאמת ביטולן, כמו שכבר התאמת, יתבטלו פרטיה עד האחרון שבהם. אחר כך הורכב כזב שני על זה הכזב הראשון, והן הטליסמאות, ואמרו שאם יהיה כוכב פלוני שמזלו טוב במקום פלוני המתאים לו, תיעשה צורה בתואר כך והיא תביא תועלת כך, ואם היה כוכב פלוני שמזלו רע במקום פלוני המתנגד לו, תיעשה צורה בתואר כך והיא תרחיק נזק כך, והתפשט זה הענין כפי התפשטות גזירת הכוכבים ומה שמיוחס להם מן הפרטים. אחר כך הורכב כזב שלישי על זה השני, והיא עבודה זרה, ונאמר שזאת הצורה אשר תיעשה במזל כך ועל מצבה פלונית אם יוקטר לה באופן פלוני ויתפללו אליה במילים כך וישתחוו לה, וכך וכך, הרי היא תפסיק נזק כוכב פלוני ותביא תועלת פלוני (פירוש המשניות עבודה זרה ד, ז).

²³ Inanimate is not a precise term to use, when addressing the stars and spheres Rambam knew. Medieval philosophers saw them as sentient entities that had in fact greater knowledge of metaphysics than man did. See MN 2:7 which to me is one of the most difficult chapters in *Moreh* to explain in a modern context.

²⁴ ואלה הדברים כולם נעשו לצרכים, וזה, שבזמנים שעברו אוהדו בהם המדינות והוטעה בהם המון העם, ונאמר להם שתיקון ארצכם ומצביכם באלה הצורות ושתקבצו לבתיהן, ותגדלו אלו הזקנים אשר ילמדו סודותיהן, והתקיימה בזה

This is the final step in this tragedy of ignorance and erroneous thought. We now have an oppressed and very controlled society where even thought is restricted.²⁵ The dark ages are upon human-kind.

As time went by, the name of the dignified and fearsome God was forgotten [lit: sunk] from all humanity [lit: living things] and from their mind. Nobody knew Him. Thus the masses, the women and children, know only the shape [lit: form] of wood or stone and the temple, that they were taught from childhood on, to prostrate themselves in front of, worshipping them and swearing in their name.²⁶

Analyzing this progression, we see that this whole process started with an intellectual quest that got derailed. The erroneous assumption that there are mysterious “spiritual” powers which cannot be proven scientifically, fueled by emotions and the imagination, lead to a form of worship fueled by the same senses. Instead of trying to understand their environment, people develop a sense of mystery and occultism. People with fertile imaginations are therefore needed to help understand this mysterious world. A whole tradition of occult and mystical “scientific secrets” followed by exotic and imaginative worship is developed. One shaman now outdoes the next in a runaway proliferation of rituals, rules and general outlandish forms of worship. What started with intellect now becomes a practiced religion with evolving rules and rituals fed by emotions and the imagination. The more imaginative the ritual, the more it is appreciated and seen as pleasing

המלכות, והאמינו שהוא דבר אמיתי, והיו אומרים, זה דבר כוכב פלוני וזה דבר מזל פלוני, ויגדלו אותו וילכו אחריו ויאמינו בו, כמו שנאמין אנהנו בנביאים עליהם השלום מן השלימות והמעלה. הלא תראה איך קראם הכתוב נביאי הבעל ונביאי האשרה.

²⁵ Similarly in MN 3:37 in a different context Rambam writes: “We must also point out those originators of false, baseless, and useless principles scheme and plan for the firm establishment of their faith. They tell their fellow men that a certain plague will befall those who will not perform the act by which that faith is supported and confirmed for ever; this plague may one day accidentally befall a person, who will then direct his attention to the performance of that act, and adopt idolatry.”

²⁶ וכיון שארכו הימים, נשתקע השם הנכבד והנורא מפי כל היקום ומדעתם, ולא הכירוהו: ונמצאו כל עם הארץ והנשים והקטנים, אינן יודעין אלא הצורה של עץ ואבן וההיכל של בניין, שנתחנכו מקטנותן להשתחוות להן ולעובדן, ולהישבע בשמן

to that particular god. Talented artists depict these gods in statues and paintings and ritualistic experts devise ways to worship them. The idea is to develop ways to please the god and curry his favor so that he uses his powers for our benefit and not our detriment. The rituals take on a life of their own and proliferate according to the fancy of the ritualistic expert. With time, these experts wield power over their followers using threats and promises to allay the natural fears of a populace that finds itself at the mercy of the elements supposedly controlled by these spirits. This eventually evolves into a stratagem to control the populace. These acts of unregulated worship are therefore symptomatic of deeply rooted lies and falsehoods. *Avodah zarah*—Alien Service—is the practical expression of a theology through unregulated worship that results from man’s imagination and emotions.

***Korbanot* as Regulated Worship**

I believe that this perspective on *avodah zarah* will help us understand Rambam’s famous explanation of *korbanot* (MN 3:32). Rambam explains that *korbanot* are a concession to human nature. People grew up with this ritual having been inculcated since childhood with the idea that this type of worship is how one expresses one’s devotion to a god. It would be too much to ask them to suddenly accept that this is not necessary with a transcendental God. As a concession to this human weakness which became part of their psyche, the Torah instituted *korbanot*. Much has been written and debated about this Rambam. It raised the hackles of many *risbonim*²⁷ and *aharonim*. It is difficult for them to accept that a whole section of halakhah and worship is only a concession to human weakness.²⁸

²⁷ See Ramban *Al Hatorah* on *Vayikra* 1:9.

²⁸ *Meshekh Hokhmah* in his introduction to *Vayikra* tries to mediate between Rambam and Ramban arguing that Rambam is correct regarding *bamot* but Ramban is correct regarding a *korban* brought in the *Beit Hamikdash*. This is valid if one accepts Ramban’s idea that *korbanot*, as other *mitzvoth*, have an intrinsic value. Rambam would disagree and clearly does so in MN 3:32 where he explains Yeshayahu’s criticism of *korbanot* as proof for his position that they are a concession to our hu-

I believe that if we focus on understanding how *korbanot* differ from *avodah zarah*, Rambam's thinking will come into focus. As we saw, rituals and worship are the practical application of a theological and intellectual quest. However, a theology that is based on imagination and emotions does not have preset boundaries. It grows and takes on a life of its own as does the practical application of ritual and worship. It is an unregulated worship without boundaries.

A theology that is based on reality is bound by reality. A transcendental and therefore unique God, removed from all physical existence, affords very limited potential for physical worship. Imagination cannot run amok for He is unimaginable. In fact, physical and practical worship has no place in such a theology other than the reality of humans needing a practical outlet for the emotions that are triggered by their intellectual apprehension of God. They need a way to practically act out their devotion. Rationally, worship of a transcendental God should not be anything physical. Prayer and similar intellectual ways of expressing devotion would be more appropriate were it not for the human condition that needs some physical act to express an emotion. The question is what would be the appropriate expression of this devotion? Since worship through sacrifices was so ingrained, the Torah allowed this as a form of expression of devotion. In fact, it encouraged us to take this ingrained custom and transform and redirect it towards God. Unlike the old practice of sacrifices to idols, the worship appropriate to these circumstances has to be strictly regulated and prescribed to the most minute detail. It is to be kept to a minimum as a restricted worship not letting imagination and emotions run amok. Unlike *avodah zarah*—which is an unregulated worship—no matter the emotional devotion and the need to do more, it is forbidden to go beyond the narrowly prescribed worship.

The one kind, which consists in offering sacrifices, although the sacrifices are offered to the name of God, has not been made obligatory for us to the same extent as it had been before. We were not commanded to sacrifice in every place, and in every time, or to build a temple in every place, or to permit any one who desires to become priest and to sacrifice. On the contrary, all this is prohibited unto us. Only one temple has been appointed... in no other

manity. Yeshayahu was criticizing contemporary practice in the *Beit ha-Mikdash*.

place is it allowed to sacrifice... and only the members of a particular family were allowed to officiate as priests. All these restrictions served to limit this kind of worship, and keep it within those bounds within which God did not think it necessary to abolish sacrificial service altogether. (MN3:32)

Although *korbanot* are the purely devotional segment of worship, where the natural inclination would be to think that the more the better, Torah has put careful restrictions on it with the most rules and regulations. The Torah has set down the exact form this worship may take and no priest or prophet or any other expert may change those rules. Sages may interpret the Law and rule on questions that may arise on a case-by-case basis but the basic rules remain without any possible addition or omission. The prophets insist that, unlike the old objective of bribing the gods through these offerings, the transcendental God gets nothing from it. It is only a very restricted and regulated act of devotion on our part—an outlet. The actual worship is not the act but the underlying connection and relationship with God which is expressed through bringing a *korban*. Imagination and emotion are strictly contained and ruled by the intellect. Learning the *halakhot* related to *korbanot* to know how to perform them properly is one of the most taxing intellectual exercises in all of Torah study. *Kohanim* were therefore seen as “*zerizim*,” very detail-oriented and careful, trained from childhood in all the minutiae from which they could not deviate at the risk of rendering the *korban, passul*.

Paradoxically, because it is so heavily regulated and restricted, the offering of a *korban* is also seen as the paradigm of worship. When the Mishnah in *Avot* (1:2) says that the world exists by virtue of three things, Torah, *avodah* and *gemilut hassadim*, Rambam explains that *avodah* is *korbanot*.²⁹ All worship of God has to be within boundaries and as prescribed, with no deviations—just like *korbanot*. The worship of a God that can only be apprehended through the rational faculty has to be governed by that faculty and cannot be left to unfettered imagination and emotion. And it is here that we experience a shift. Just as

²⁹ יאמר, שבחכמה, והיא התורה, ובמעלות המידות, והן גמילות חסדים, ובקיום ציווי התורה, והן הקרבנות—התמדת תיקון העולם, וסידור מציאותו על האופן השלם ביותר. It is important to note that with these few words Rambam summarized his understanding of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* and gives its Tannaitic source.

unregulated worship is seen as a symptom of irrational imaginings, so too, strictly regulated worship becomes a symbol for rational thought. The specificity of the commandment and the many minute details that have to be followed, keep the rational faculty involved during the whole ritual. It now takes on the form of a rational commandment from a rationally transcendent God performed under the control of the rational faculty. It is no longer a concession but an a priori sanctioned *avodah*. This shift can be seen in the verse Rambam uses at the opening of *Sefer Korbanot*³⁰ in MT: ,משאת כפי ; מנחת-ערב תכון תפילתי קטרת לְפָנֶיךָ ; מנחת-ערב. “Let my prayer be set forth as incense before You, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (*Tebillim* 141:2). *Korbanot* became so central that they became the model for prayer, the originally preferred form of worship.

Avodah Zarah as Falsehood

As we saw in the commentary on the Mishnah cited above, Rambam defines *avodah zarah* as falsehood—“They do not realize that they are nonsensical false things that the Torah warned against, just as it warned us against [believing in] falsehoods.”

In MN 1:36 Rambam explains further. After noting that whenever we find in the Torah and the Prophets that God is angry it is always connected with *avodah zarah*,³¹ Rambam explains:

The Prophets in their writings only make this strong assertion, because it concerns a false opinion in reference to God, namely *avodah zarah*. For if anyone believes for example that Zaid³² is standing, while in fact he is sitting, he does not deviate from truth as much as one who believes that fire is under the air, or that water is under the earth,³³ or that the earth is a plane, or things similar to these. The latter does not deviate so much from truth as one who believes that the sun consists of fire, or that the heavens form a

³⁰ Rambam starts every *Sefer* with a verse that is the underlying philosophical current for that *Sefer*.

³¹ Much has been written about this comment of Rambam both by medieval and modern commentators. After all, we do find anger with Moshe and other such instances. It is not within the scope of this article to discuss this. See Rav Kafieh’s comment in note 4 ad locum.

³² “Zaid” is an Arabic name Rambam uses in examples.

³³ These two assertions contradict Aristotelian physics.

hemisphere,³⁴ and similar things. And this second deviation from truth is less than the deviation of a man who believes that angels eat and drink, and the like. The latter again deviates less from truth than one who believes that something besides God is to be worshipped. For ignorance and infidelity concerning a great thing, that is a thing whose high rank in what exists is well established, are of greater importance than those which refer to a thing which occupies a lower rank.³⁵ By infidelity, I mean the belief that a thing is different from what it really is. By ignorance, I mean ignorance of what it is possible to know.

As Pines notes in comment 15 ad locum, the word infidelity here is rendered *kufr* in the original Arabic which, as in its parallel in Hebrew, *kefirah*, is popularly understood to mean disbelief in one or several principal religious dogmas. Rambam is pointing out that in his etymology it means believing that something is different from what it really is. In other words, religion is a belief system that has to be rooted in reality. Ignorance is at the root of infidelity because by refusing to learn to one's full capability, a person inevitably denies reality. As all things in our reality are ranked in a hierarchy of cause and effect, the cause is always at a higher plane in this hierarchy, than the effect. An erroneous understanding of the cause will prevent us from apprehending the true reality of the effect. An erroneous understanding of God, the First Cause, will hamper our ability to understand the true reality of our existence. If one were to believe that anything other than God might be worshipped, one would have to assume that these "others" are independent entities that wield powers that affect us. Being independent, they must have some sort of physical properties.³⁶ Independence connotes boundaries and boundaries are by definition spatial thus physical. Clearly, their physicality is different

³⁴ These too contradict Aristotelian understanding of physical reality.

³⁵ For a discussion of rank in this context see my "Negative Attributes and Direct Prophecy" in *Hakirah* vol. 1, pp. 75-78.

³⁶ Ramban in his *perush* on *Beresbit* 18:1, disagreeing with Rambam's understanding of angels writes: "מלבד", יושג לעיני בשר בזכי הנפשות כחסידים ובני הנביאים הוא כבוד נברא במלאכים, יקרא אצל היודעים. Angels may be seen physically with **our own eyes** if we purify ourselves! This understanding of the existence of semi-physical entities is at the root of Ramban's conception of idolatry therefore being based on reality but forbidden.

from ours and worlds of spirits are created in the mind, populated by as many different entities as the imagination can muster. There is now a direct interaction between the spiritual and the physical. When confronted with a scientific mystery, for example. the effects of gravity or magnetism, instead of looking for an answer in the physical realm, it is explained away as a “spiritual” phenomenon. Sickness is not biological but caused by bad “spirits” and has to be treated by removing evil spirits and replacing them with good ones. These purported solutions to physical mysteries become the accepted “truth” and any deviation from it is “*kefirah*.” Thus, real knowledge and human advancement is stymied. “Infidelity”, falsehood and ignorance invariably bring about intellectual dark ages. History can vouch for that. Anyone who has studied, even superficially, the development of science through the middle Ages and early Renaissance in the Western Hemisphere can attest to this.

Humanity’s Role

As mentioned earlier in this article, Rambam in MN 3:25 explains that man has an important role to play in ensuring the continuity of the whole of existence. With his ability to think abstractly, he can discover scientific truths and thus take control of his environment.

As man’s distinction consists in a property which no other creature on earth possesses namely, intellectual perception, in the exercise of which he does not employ his senses, nor move his hand or his foot, this perception has been compared—though only apparently, not in truth—to the Divine perception, which requires no corporeal organ. On this account, that is, on account of the Divine intellect with which man has been endowed, he is said to have been made in the form and likeness of the Almighty. (MN 1:1)

In the introduction to *Avot, Shemoneh Perakim*,³⁷ Rambam de-

³⁷ והחלק השכלי—הוא הכח הנמצא לאדם, אשר בו ישכיל, ובו תהיה ההתבוננות, ובו יקנה החוכמות, ובו יבחין בין המגונה והנאה מן הפעולות. ואלו הפעולות, חלק מהן מעשי, וחלק עיוני. והמעשי, ממנו מלאכתי, וממנו מחשבתי. והעיוני, הוא אשר בו ידע האדם הנמצאות שאינן משתנות כפי מה שהן, ואלו הן אשר יקראו 'חכמות' סתם. והמלאכתי, הוא הכח אשר בו נלמד המלאכות, כמו הנגרות, ועבודת האדמה, והרפואה והספנות. והמחשבתי, הוא אשר בו יתבונן בדבר אשר ירצה לעשותו בעת אשר ירצה לעשותו, האם אפשר לעשותו אם לא, ואם אפשר—איך צריך שיעשה

scribes the human mind as a composite of various abilities with the rational faculty as the one defining the essence of a human being. It is important to note that, to Rambam, all these components of the mind are really one fully integrated entity that functions as a whole. There are no separate parts that one can point to and call “soul.” There is no external “spirit,” for in Rambam’s world there is only the physical and the one Transcendental—God. When talking about “components” of the mind we are only describing different functions of a multi-tasking organ. The rational component itself can be divided into two parts, the intellectual and the practical. The human mind can take the intellectual concepts it learns and translate them into a plan of action. Man can thus transform original concepts into practical applications that have an impact on his environment and his existence within it, as well as on their collective continuity. Scientific discovery and the practical advancement that comes from that is one of the principal roles of man in his environment. He is expected to impact it in a way that will insure its continuity, fulfilling God’s will of וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה, וְהִנֵּה-טוֹב מְאֹד—*And God saw all that He had made, and behold it was exceedingly good.* Explaining what defines the Torah as divine, Rambam makes the following statement:

You will also find laws which, in all their rules, aim, as the law just mentioned, at the improvement of the material interests of the people but besides, tend to improve the state of the faith of man. A law that takes pains to first inculcate correct notions of God, and of angels, and to make man wise, by instruction and education, to an accurate knowledge of the Universe: this education comes from God; these laws are divine. (MN 2:40)

For one to have an accurate knowledge of the universe one has to have correct notions of God and the angels. One has to understand that there is an unbridgeable gap between the physical and transcendental. It is only then that science can advance and man can take control of his environment fulfilling his intended destiny and role.

Conclusion

Idolatry in its classical sense, the worship of idols, is only a symptom of a much deeper misconception of our existence. It teaches that there are “spiritual” forces that are involved in the physical world we live in. The gamut of ideas based on this misconception runs from spiritual forces directing every aspect of life on earth to only affecting certain events. As long as people can accept such thinking, the underlying root of *avodah zarah* has not been eradicated. This nefarious thinking is so deeply embedded in the human psyche, it is so compelling when man faces an environment that he cannot completely understand and therefore fully control, that 3,000 years of Torah have not been completely successful in eliminating it. As Rambam so eloquently stated: “[The deception is so great] that even the best of the Chassidim [faithful] among our men [scholars] of Torah, think that they are true but forbidden because the Torah forbids them. They do not realize that they are nonsensical false things that the Torah warned against, just as it warned us against [believing in] falsehoods.” Humanity influenced by the Jewish people and the teachings of the Torah disseminated by them, has come a long way towards rejecting the world of spirits. The advancement in sciences could only come once a more realistic understanding of the world and the underlying metaphysics was attained. Humankind over the last few centuries has therefore been able to take great strides towards fulfilling its role of understanding, thus insuring the continuity of the environment it lives in. But as long as a “spiritual” explanation for mysterious and not yet understood phenomena continues to be accepted, humanity still has some ground to cover.

Those *mitzvot* of the Torah that have as their central theme the eradication of idolatry are eternal because even when the day comes and idolatry is eradicated, the possibility of recidivism is so great that eternal vigilance is needed.³⁸ In context of the Messianic Era in *Hilkehot Melakhim* 11:3, Rambam legislates:³⁹

³⁸ Rabbi Buchman pointed me to Rambam *Sefer Hamitzvot, Asseh* 187 where Rambam has a somewhat lengthy (for him) discussion of the difference between *mitzvot* that are temporal and *mitzvot* that are eternal but one has no longer the ability to perform them. For example, the seven nations and Amalek no longer exist and therefore the *mitzvah* of

The principle is as follows: The Torah and its laws will never change. One does not add or subtract anything from them. Anyone that adds, subtracts or erroneously reads the *mitzvoth* not literally [allegorically or metaphorically] is for sure evil and an *apikores*.

According to this understanding of *avodah zarah*, can we, the Jewish people, the light to the nations, assert that it no longer exists? I leave it to the reader to decide.⁴⁰ ❧

eradicating them can no longer be practiced. The obligation in itself, however, is what makes it eternal. Let us hope that the same can be said one day about the *mitzvoth* that deal with *avodah zarah*.

³⁹ ועיקר הדברים, ככה הן: שהתורה הזאת אין חוקיה ומשפטיה משתנים לעולם, ולעולמי עולמים, ואין מוסיפין עליהן, ולא גורעין מהן; וכל המוסיף או גורע או שגילה פנים בתורה והוציא הדברים של מצוות ממשוטן—הרי זה בוודאי רשע ואפיקורוס.

⁴⁰ Unfortunately, contemporary Judaism has embraced what is supposedly an extension of the “non-rational” approach of Ramban and his followers. I say “supposedly” because I believe that had Ramban been around in our times he would have without question, changed many of his opinions. Ramban based his ideas on the reality and science he understood. For an insightful discussion on this issue see Rabbi Buchman’s article “*U-Madua Lo Yresem*” in *Hakirah* vol. 2, available on line at <http://Hakirah.org/Vol 2 Buchman.pdf>. This approach has brought about the sad state that we witness where, when difficult times are upon us, instead of self-reflection and *teshuvah*, people turn to miracle working “Mekubalim,” Rebbes and Gedolim. As the community’s economic well being has grown, the new phenomenon of traveling to Uman, Meron, Lisensk and other such places has become fashionable. The proliferation of Tehillim clubs, pamphlets that promise protection by “Gedolim”, prayer in return for contribution to *tzedakah* organizations and other such talisman type of behaviors have become mainstream and accepted, nay encouraged. I leave it to the reader to see how deeply the mystical approach has become embedded in our community and its practices. It is quite clear that there is an element of societal control similar to the one described by Rambam about pagan societies. It is imperative that our leaders resuscitate Rambam’s thought in its real and true form without apologetics and distortions to redirect and bring balance to this sad state of affairs.