

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH PROJECT

The Noahide Laws - Lesson Fifty-Three



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Introduction

Idolatry III: Idolatry in Deed



In the last lesson we examined some of the fundamentals of idolatry and especially idolatry in thought and belief. One is not liable to earthly punishment for these types of idolatries. However, idolatry in deed is much more severe and may actually incur such liability. In this lesson we are going to examine the *halachos* of practical idolatry.

The Elements of Idolatry

Idolatry usually involves the confluence of four factors:

- 1) The **object** of idolatry (the idol),
- 2) The **method** of worshipping the idol,
- 3) The **utensils** of worship, and
- 4) The **worshipper** himself.

When a person commits a culpable act of idolatry, there are ramifications for all four factors:

- 1) The **object of idolatry** usually (but not in all cases) becomes prohibited (we will discuss what this means shortly),
- 2) The **act of worshipping** that item incurs a transgression that may be deserving of death or punishment at the hands of heaven,
- 3) The **utensils of worship** become prohibited whether they are decorations or offerings to the idol,
- 4) The **worshipper** himself has committed a grievous transgression for which he is either subject to punishment at the hands of heaven or liable to punishment by earthly courts. It also gives him the halachic identity of an

“idolater” that affects how Jews and Noahides may interact with him (this will be discussed in the next lesson).

Prohibitions of Benefit

What do we mean by “The object of idolatry becomes prohibited?” It means that one may neither own nor derive any benefit whatsoever from such items.¹ These items must be destroyed or nullified (“nullification” will be described below). Once the item is nullified, it may be owned and even benefited from.²

An important note to keep in mind: one person cannot render prohibited an item that does not belong to him unless he physically alters it in some way.

Objects of Idolatry: “Idols”

An object of idolatry is either **representational** or **natural**:

- **Representational idols** - A man-made statue or image that either represents a deity, is believed to be the deity, is believed to be an intermediary between man and a deity, or is believed to contain or embody some aspect of a deity. Not only may one not worship such idols, but one may not make or own any two dimensional or three dimensional representation of anything for the purpose of worship or to represent God or a god.³ Owning such items is also prohibited.⁴ There is a slight difference between representational idols made by Jews and those made by non-Jews:
 - **Made by a non-Jew for the sake of idolatry** - it is immediately prohibited as an item of idolatry.
 - **Made by a Jew for the sake of idolatry** - If a Jew makes such an item, it does not become prohibited until it is actually worshipped.⁵

¹ *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 146:14. See also Ramban’s commentary to *Avodah Zara* 59b.

² [*Hilchos Avodas Kohavim* 8:9.](#)

³ [*Hilchos Melachim* 9:2.](#)

⁴ See Rashi and *Mechilta* to Exodus 20:3.

⁵ [*Hilchos Avodah Zara* 7:5](#)

- **Natural idols** – A natural idol is not man made, but is something created by God. This includes trees, rocks, animals, streams, rivers, mountains, etc. There are two type of natural idols:
 - **Natural idols in their naturally occurring condition** – A naturally occurring item in its original condition, unaltered in any way for the sake of idolatry, does not become prohibited for benefit if it is worshipped.⁶ Therefore, the rocks and stones of an idolatrous mountain are permitted for benefit. Waters from an idolatrous wells or rivers are also permitted as are animals. So too, the fruits of a tree worshipped as an idol are permitted. Anything offered to such an idol remains permitted for benefit. However, any adornments fashioned to honor or beautify the idol are prohibited for benefit.
 - **Natural idols that are altered (with idolatrous intent) from their naturally occurring conditions** - Any naturally occurring item whose condition is altered for the sake of idolatry becomes prohibited like an item fashioned as an idol. The item itself is prohibited as is anything offered to the idol. For example, if a stone is rolled to a new location for the sake of idolatry, then it becomes prohibited and anything offered to it also becomes prohibited. However, if the stone was worshipped in its original, naturally occurring position, then neither it nor anything offered to it become prohibited. Another example: a tree in its natural condition does not become prohibited as idolatry if worshipped. However, if it was planted for the sake of idolatry, or if it is in any way altered for the sake of idolatry, then it is prohibited and so too is anything offered to it.

- **Decorative figures** – The Torah additionally prohibits the making of any three-dimensional representations of humanoid or angelic figures for the purpose of decoration.⁷ This includes making sculptures of angels, demons, and mythical humanoid creatures (satyrs, mermaids, etc.) If such sculptures are not used for

⁶ These *halachos* and those in the following section are found in the *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 145 and Maimonides, [*Hilchos Avodah Kokhavim Chapter 8*](#).

⁷ *Shach, Yoreh Deah* 141:20 to 21.

the purpose of decoration, then they may be made.⁸ Therefore, mannequins, medical models, and CPR dummies may be constructed. Whether it is permitted for Noahides to own a prohibited item is unclear and a dispute between many Torah authorities.⁹ If one wishes to keep such an item for decoration, it should be nullified; altered in such a way as to make it an imperfect form. For example, if the item is a sculpture of a hand, then a finger should be removed. If a face, then the nose should be cut off. This is nullification, and will be discussed in more depth below. One may make two dimensional representations of other humanoid or angelic forms.

- **Appurtenances to idolatry** – Besides the idol itself, there are many other objects involved in acts of idolatry:
 - **Items offered to idols** – These fall into three categories:
 - **Items offered to man-made idols** – are prohibited for benefit.
 - **Items offered to unaltered natural idols** – do not become prohibited.
 - **Items offered to natural idols that have been altered for the sake of idolatry** – are prohibited from benefit.
 - **Vessels of service**¹⁰ – Goblets, bowls, or other containers made for use in serving the idol are also prohibited.
 - **Decorations for the idol**¹¹ – Any items made for decoration or enhancement of the idol are prohibited for benefit. This is not limited to items that are attached or in contact with the idol, but

⁸ See for a more detailed examination of these laws, see *Chasam Sofer* 128.

⁹ The *Tur*, *Rema*, and *Shach* to *Yoreh Deah* 141:4 concur that there is no Torah prohibition on owning such items. However, the *Maharam M'Rottenberg*, *Ramban*, *Rambam*, *Rif*, and *Maharit* disagree and hold it is a biblical prohibition. Nevertheless, Jews are prohibited from owning such items due to rabbinic injunction. Although Noahides have no such injunction, the great disparity of opinion among the Rishonim is enough to give pause to anyone who owns such items. Therefore, many *poskim* conclude that Noahides should not own or use such items.

¹⁰ These laws are found in *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh Deah* 139.

¹¹ *Shulchan Aruch* *ibid*.

includes candles, rugs, incense,¹² etc. Flowers and other items, though natural, are also prohibited. One may not smell or otherwise use them.

- **Buildings or structures erected for the idol** – Any house or building constructed for the purpose of idolatrous worship or later renovated for such a purpose is prohibited for benefit.¹³ Such a structure must be destroyed or nullified. Churches have the status of houses of idolatry. Therefore, a Noahide should not enter or admire such places. When family events are held in churches, and one's absence would cause strife, it is possible to attend. However one should be very, very cautious to neither participate in any religious aspect of the service nor admire nor benefit from the things within the church. Nevertheless, one may enter a church for any practical purposes (i.e. work requirements). One may enter a mosque for any reason because it is not at all idolatrous.
- **Music of idolatry** – One may not benefit from music of idolatry if there is not a practical purpose for doing so.

Modes of Worship

All forms of idolatry are forbidden.¹⁴ However, one only incurs capital liability and prohibits the items involved by worshipping idols in one of the following ways:

- **In a method specific to the idol** – If one worships an idol in a way that is established as particular to that idol, he transgresses and the idol and items involved become prohibited.
- **Using any action reserved for *HaShem* in the temple** – Certain methods of worship are specific to the worship of the Holy One, Blessed is He. If one uses any of these methods in worship of an idol, even if this method is not particular to that idol, he transgresses and renders the idol and all items involved prohibited. There are four modes unique to the Temple.¹⁵

¹² Meaning incense burned to enhance the environment and not as an offering.

¹³ *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 145.

¹⁴ *Hilchos Melachim* 9:2.

¹⁵ Both of types of liability are discussed in *Nodab BiYebudab* II: 148 and *Minchas Chinuch* 26. According to some (*Tzafnas Paneach Tinyana, Avodas Kokhavim* 3), singing before any idol is also

- **Bowing** – One is capitally liable if he bows to an idol and brings his face to the ground.¹⁶ This is even if bowing is not the normal method of worship for this idol. However, if bowing even less than this amount is customary for this type of idolatry, then even a lesser form of prostration incurs liability. If one bows as a sign of respect, but not intending to recognize the idol as a God, one still transgresses because the act of bowing is itself an act of submission and acceptance.¹⁷ However, if the bowing is in no way intended to be a sign of respect, but instead one bows for some other reason (i.e. fear of persecution or death), he is not liable.¹⁸ Similarly, one may bow down to avoid danger.
- **Slaughtering an animal** – This is incising an animal's neck on either its front or the back,¹⁹ or chopping the neck with a sword or axe.²⁰ The species of animal is irrelevant.²¹
- **A burnt offering** – Burning anything for the sake of the idol is prohibited.²²
- **Offering a libation** – This is the throwing or pouring for the sake of an idol of any substance that can splash or splatter. This includes

prohibited because it was a form of worship in the Temple (see *Hilchos Kli HaMikdash* 3:3). It is not clear if this opinion is recognized the majority of *poskim*. It should be avoided, however, because it is a normative method of worship in most idolatrous faiths.

¹⁶ *Hilchos Avodah Kochavim* 6:8. See also *Shu"t Tashbatz* III: 315.

¹⁷ *Ritva*, Shabbos 72b.

¹⁸ Sanhedrin 61b.

¹⁹ *Hilchos Avodah Kochavim* 3:3.

²⁰ *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 139:4.

²¹ *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 139:4. The *Shulchan Aruch* does not rule like Maimonides, but instead follows the *Raavad* that the act of slaughter, not the object of slaughter, is what transgresses the prohibition. Therefore, even if one slaughtered a locust to an idol, even though a locust is not fit to be offered in the temple, the act is prohibited. See *Avodah Zara* 51a; *Hilchos Avodah Kochavim* 3:4 with *Kesef Mishnah* and *Raavad*.

²² *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 179:19. This even includes anything that was not burned on the altar in the temple. The issue is the act of burning, not the item being burned or offered.

oil, blood, water, etc.²³ It does not include solid material or hard substances like clay.²⁴

Placing an Item Before an Idol

- **Placing items before an idol** - Merely placing any item before an idol is not automatically an act of idolatrous worship unless it is the normal mode of service for that idol. However, if such a “placing” involves items resembling those offered in the temple, then the action and the items are all prohibited in all cases.²⁵ Such “placings” include:
 - The meat of any species of sacrificial animals, such as sheep, cows, or goats.
 - Whole doves.²⁶
 - Wine, bread, oil, salt, water, blood, wheat, or grapes.²⁷

Nullification

Once an item has been made into an idol, what do we do with it? Since it is prohibited for benefit, it cannot be owned or used by anyone for any purposes. The *Halacha*²⁸ depends on who made the item into an idol:

- **The idol of a Jew** – An idol made prohibited by a Jew can never be nullified. It must be destroyed as completely as possible.
- **The idol of a non-Jew** – A non-Jewish idol can be *mevatel*, nullified. This allows it for benefit and ownership. One nullifies an idol by marring it in a conspicuous way with the intent of removing its status as an idol. For example, if the idol is

²³ This would even include materials such as honey and fruit juices that were not offered on the altar in the Temple. See *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 139.

²⁴ See *Shulchan Aruch* 139:3. Note that the *Shulchan Aruch* and most *poskim* do not agree with *Maimonides, Avodah Kochavim* 3:4 on this point.

²⁵ See *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 139.

²⁶ *Taz, Yoreh Deah* 139:5.

²⁷ See *Tosafos* and *Rosh* to *Avodah Zarah* 50a.

²⁸ These laws are in *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 146.

a human face, then the nose should be cut off. If it is a hand, then a finger should be removed. Any non-Jew can nullify the idol of any other non-Jew. A Jew, however, cannot nullify anyone's idol.

Secondary Services & Practices

The Talmud in Sanhedrin 56b states that Noahides are warned against numerous forms of divination, sorcery, and necromancy. Though many of the Torah's specific examples of divination are no longer practiced,²⁹ the types of divination mentioned remain prohibited.³⁰ These acts are not actual idolatry, but are secondary practices. While prohibited, they do not incur capital liability. The following are prohibited forms of divination:³¹

- Any forms of fortune telling, such as tarot, scrying, etc.
- Interpreting events and sights as omens for the future. This includes casting lots or dice and interpreting the results as signs for the future.
- One may not select a sign for himself, saying, "If such and such occurs, then I will do such and such." This is forbidden when there is no logical connection between the sign and the person's action.
- It is permitted to look back and appreciate the connections between past events and the results of those events, saying "That was good for me, everything got better after that."
- One may not practice incantations, meaningless words believed to have magical effects.
- One should not try to command supernal, supernatural, or spiritual forces for his own needs.

²⁹ See Deut. 18:9-12.

³⁰ Maimonides does not mention these prohibitions in his summary of the Noahide laws. However, he mentions them in other places as either outright idolatry or, it appears, as part of the prohibition against turning to idolatry. See *Hilchos Avodah Kokhavim* Ch. 6, Ch. 11:6; *Peirush HaMishnayos Avodah Zarah* 4:7; *Sefer HaMitzvos* N9; and many, many other locations).

³¹ These are based on [Hilchos Avodah Kokhavim Ch. 6](#) & [Ch. 11](#); *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 179.

- One may not attempt to contact the dead.
- Astrology is permitted for Noahides. It may be foolish or inappropriate but it is not prohibited.³²

Summary

1. The definition of idolatry is the same for both Jews and non-Jews.
2. Idolatry is the worship of both man-made idols and natural items. When one worships a man-made idol or a natural idol that has been altered for idolatrous reasons, the item, its offerings, and the utensils of worship all become prohibited. Neither a natural item in its natural condition nor the items offered to it ever become prohibited for benefit. However, the decorations that are upon the item do become prohibited.
3. One may not make a three-dimensional representation of any humanoid or angelic figure.
4. All idolatrous decorations, texts, and offerings (except as mentioned above) are prohibited from benefit.
5. A non-Jew's idol can be "nullified" by defacing it. The resulting item may be used and owned.
6. Divination, scrying, and necromancy are all prohibited.
7. Astrology is permitted, although it may be foolish or inappropriate.

³²Jews, however, are explicitly prohibited from such things. Noahides are not – see Shabbos 156a.