YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat Yitro**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**“You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me”**

Translated by David Strauss

**I. The Obligation to Believe in God and the Prohibition to Accept Another Deity**

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. 

You shall not make to you a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them, nor shall you serve them… (*Shemot* 20:2-5)

The statement "You shall have no other gods before Me" includes four prohibitions. The first relates to acceptance in the heart: a person must neither believe in another god nor accept it as a god. The other three involve actions: the prohibition of making a graven image, prostration, and other forms of service (such as offering a sacrifice or burning incense or the like). It is not clear, however, what the relationship is between the first prohibition and the other three: Are the latter necessarily connected to acceptance of another god in one's heart? We shall return to this question below.

The scholars of the Masoretic tradition divided the verses (in accordance with *ta'am ha-tachton*, the "lower cantillation notes") in the manner cited above, joining the prohibition of having another god with the positive commandment of belief in God – "I am the Lord your God" – in one verse.[[1]](#footnote-1) Connecting the two in this way implies that the very belief in God includes belief in His unity, that is to say, that there is no god other than Him. This understanding is apparent in Rabbi Yishmael’s *derasha* in the *Sifre*:

“And if one soul should sin in error” (*Bamidbar* 15:27): … Rabbi Yishmael says: The verse refers to idol worship, as it is stated [later in the same section]: "Because he has despised the word of the Lord" (*Bamidbar* 15:31) – he despised the first commandment that was given to Moshe from the mouth of the Almighty: "I am the Lord your God… you shall have no other gods before Me." (*Sifre Bamidbar* 112)

So it would appear from the following *midrash* as well:

And so too the Holy One, blessed be He, when He said: "You shall have no [other gods before Me]," they said: What king wants to have a partner? (*Bamidbar Rabba* 8, 4)

The Rambam and the *Yere'im* also link belief in God and the denial of other gods:[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is [the meaning of] their [*Chazal*’s]dictum: "They heard 'I' and 'You shall not have' from the mouth of the Almighty" – they mean that these words reached them just as they reached Moshe our teacher, and that it was not Moshe our teacher who communicated them to them. For these two principles, the existence of the deity and His being one, are knowable by human speculation alone… (*Guide of the Perplexed* II, 33)[[3]](#footnote-3)

Since it is stated: "I am the Lord your God," we have learned that the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded us to set Him as King over us. But we have not [yet] learned that we must not join some other deity to Him. Therefore it is stated: "You shall have no other gods before Me" – you shall not join another deity to Him. (*Sefer Yere'im* 242, old edition 63)

The relationship between these *mitzvot* is a complex halakhic issue that cannot be fully analyzed in this forum, but we will explore it in part.

Most of the authorities who listed the 613 *mitzvot* counted the mitzvato believe in God and the mitzvato believe in His unity (that there is no deity other than Him) as two separate commandments.[[4]](#footnote-4) Accordingly, the prohibition of "You shall have no other gods before Me" should be seen as a matter separate from the mitzvaof "I am the Lord your God," which commands belief in His existence. We can also see this distinction in Rashi’s view that the people of Israel did not become liable to annihilation when they said about the Golden Calf: "who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (*Shemot* 32:4) – because they did not deny that God brought them out of Egypt, but "merely" joined another deity to Him.

"Were it not for the *vav* in *he'elukha*" [which turned the verb “who brought” into plural] – For they did not totally reject the Holy One, blessed be He, but they joined Him to another deity. (Rashi, *Sanhedrin* 63a)

This is how the Rema (*Darkhei Moshe*, *Yoreh De'a* 151), along with other halakhic authorities, understood the words of Rabbeinu Tam (*Tosafot* *Bekhorot* 2b, s.v. *shema*), who permitted entering into a business partnership with a non-Jew, and accepting an oath from him, even if his oath connects another deity with God. Thus writes Rabbeinu Yerucham:

Even though they [non-Jews taking an oath to a Jew] mention the name of heaven, and have in mind Jesus, nevertheless they do not mention the name of an idolatrous god and they also have in mind the Creator of heaven and earth. And even though they join the name of heaven to another deity, we do not find that there is a prohibition to cause others to join God to other deities. Nor does the prohibition of setting a stumbling block before a blind person apply, for the descendants of Noach were not prohibited to combine the name of God with another deity. (*Toledot Adam ve-Chava* 17:5)

It would appear from here that although a non-Jew is obligated to believe in God, he is not prohibited from combining that belief with belief in some other deity (and hence the mitzva of belief in God is separate from the mitzva of the belief in His unity).

However, the *Noda bi-Yehuda* (2nd series, 148) and many other authorities were of the opinion that non-Jews are also bound by the prohibition against combining belief in God with belief in another deity (though an oath taken in the name of such a combination is indeed permitted). This seems to be the position of the Meiri, who equates the belief in an “additional” god with the denial of the existence of God:

Even the commandment of "I [am the Lord your God]" is a warning against idol worship, for the denial of His existence and the belief in a deity other than Him are both expressions of idol worship. (*Beit Habechira*, *Horayot* 8a)

Returning to the matter at hand, the first and second commandments can be understood as making one and the same statement: The God of Israel is God and belief in any other god is forbidden, for the essence of belief in Him is that there is no god other than Him. But it can also be argued that these are two different matters, which do not belong in the same verse and which constitute two different commandments: one is belief in God and the second is the prohibition to accept another deity.

In any case, we learn from the commandment "You shall be whole-hearted with the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 18:13) that it is not enough to serve God; one must also not give even a small part of his faith to diviners, soothsayers, or other people with supposed "powers." Man's faith and conduct on a daily basis must be directed exclusively to God, not to foreign powers.

**II. The Prohibition to Make a Graven Image or any Manner of Likeness**

The Torah forbids the making of a graven image or any manner of likeness. Is this prohibition a detail of the prohibition of idol worship, that is to say, that the image or likeness represent the foreign power that the Torah forbids one to worship? Or is it perhaps an expansion of the first commandment, "I am the Lord your God," warning us not to create images that are meant, as it were, to represent God Himself? It seems that this issue is the subject of a dispute among the *Rishonim*.

The Rambam understands the verse to be dealing with a graven image or likeness of a foreign god:

And the second commandment is that we are prohibited to make an idol that is to be worshipped. There is no difference between making it with one's own hands and commanding somebody else to make it. This is what He said: "You shall not make to you a graven image, nor any manner of likeness." (Rambam, *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, negative commandment no. 2)

This is the position of the majority of the *Rishonim* (the Ramban in his strictures to *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, negative commandment no. 5; *Semag*, negative commandment no. 20; *Sefer Mitzvot ha-Katan*, no. 161), and so it would appear also from the *Mekhilta* (*Yitro parasha* 6, s.v. *lo yihiyeh*). Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, on the other hand, in his *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, maintains the second position – that the Torah forbids forming an image that represents, as it were, the God of Israel. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi offers a defense for the sin of the Golden Calf in accordance with this position. He explains that they tried to create an image to which they could direct their minds when worshipping the God of Israel, and that this did not involve idol worship:

Their sin consisted in the manufacture of an image of a forbidden thing, and in attributing Divine power to a creation of their own, something chosen by themselves without the guidance of God… This sin was not on a par with an entire lapse from all obedience to the One who had led them out of Egypt, as only one of His commands was violated by them. God had forbidden images, and despite this, they made one. (*Kuzari* I, 97)

His words indicate that the commandment "You shall not make to you a graven image, nor any manner of likeness" relates, as in the incident of the Golden Calf, to an image that is intended for worship of God but that involves embodiment. This embodiment does not mean belief that God has a body, but the improper thought that one is permitted to serve Him by means of an image, so that we, as human beings bound by physical senses, can direct our service to God. The prohibition of making a graven image or likeness negates this approach. Compared to the meaning that the Rambam ascribes to this prohibition – a graven image to another god – Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's understanding is a lighter prohibition.

The verses in *Devarim* support Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's understanding of the prohibition:

And the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, **but you saw no likeness**; only a sound… Take you therefore good heed to yourselves, **for you saw no manner of likeness on the day that the Lord spoke to you** in Chorev out of the midst of the fire; **lest you deal corruptly, and make you a graven image**, even the likeness of any figure, the form of male or female, the form of any beast that is on the earth, the form of any winged fowl that flies in the heaven, the form of any thing that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the water under the earth. (*Devarim* 4:12-18)

These verses contain a warning to remember and well understand that at the revelation at Mount Sinai – despite the depth of the experience that is described through visual means – the people of Israel did not see an image of God. One whose imagination convinces him that God was seen as a real figure is liable to make a graven image of a beast, an animal (a calf), a bird, a fish, or the like, and direct his worship to it – as representing God the giver of the Law. It follows that the prohibition to make a graven image or likeness relates to an image whose purpose is to perpetuate what God said at Mount Sinai, which is similar to the position of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi mentioned above.

**III. “Nor Shall You Serve Them”**

The simple understanding of the prohibition is that one may not serve a foreign god whose service is an *alternative* to the service of the God of Israel. However, a different prohibition emerges from the Rambam’s words. This is what he writes in the fifth of his thirteen principles of faith:

The fifth foundation is that He, may He be exalted, is He whom it is proper to worship and to praise; and [that it is also proper] to promulgate praise of Him and obedience to Him. This may not be done for any being below Him in existence, from among the angels, the spheres, the elements, and that which is composed of them, for all these have their activities imprinted upon them. They have no sovereignty [of their own] and no choice [of their own] other than His will, may He be exalted.  Do not make of them intermediaries in order to reach Him through them, but direct your thoughts toward Him, may He be exalted, and turn away from that which is other than He. This fifth foundation is the prohibition against idolatry, and there are many verses in the Torah prohibiting it. (Rambam, Commentary to the Mishna, *Sanhedrin*, introduction to chapter 10)

According to the Rambam, idolatry involves worshipping beings that minister to God, *as a means* by which to reach Him. He spells this out in greater detail elsewhere:

During the times of Enosh, mankind made a great mistake, and the wise men of that generation gave thoughtless counsel. Enosh himself was one of those who erred. Their mistake was as follows: They said God created stars and spheres with which to control the world. He placed them on high and treated them with honor, making them servants who minister before Him. Accordingly, it is fitting to praise and glorify them and to treat them with honor. [They perceived] this to be the will of God, blessed be He, that they magnify and honor those whom He magnified and honored, just as a king desires that the servants who stand before him be honored…

After many years passed, false prophets arose among people who told [their nations] that God had commanded them to say: Serve this star, or all the stars, and sacrifice to it, offer libations to it, build a temple for it, and make an image of it so that all people – including the women, the children, and the common people – could bow to it…

As the years passed, [God's] glorious and awesome name was forgotten by the entire population. [It was no longer part of] their speech or thought, and they no longer knew Him. Thus, all the common people, the women, and the children knew only the image of wood or stone and the temples of stone to which they were trained from their childhood to bow down and serve, and in whose name they swore. The wise men among them, such as their priests and the like, thought that there is no God other than the stars and spheres for whose sake, and in resemblance of which, they had made these images. The Eternal Rock was not recognized or known by anyone in the world, with the exception of a [few] individuals… (Rambam, *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* 1:1-2)

From what the Rambam says here, it appears that while the lowest level of idolatry is that of those who believe in the power of a foreign god, the root of idolatry was worshipping those who minister to the God of Israel in order to honor Him. This type of worship is forbidden just as the absolute worship of idols is forbidden.

1. My revered teacher, Rabbi Mordechai Breuer, elaborated on this idea in his book, *Pirkei Mo'adot* (Jerusalem 5746, part II, pp. 379-396). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. So would it appear also from the *Semag* (negative commandment no. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is also evident from his words in Rambam’s *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* (negative commandment no. 1), that the people of Israel only heard "I am the Lord your God" and "You shall have no other gods" directly from God, while "You shall not make to you a graven image" and "You shall not bow down to them, nor shall you serve them" were heard from Moshe. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The first is derived from "I am the Lord your God," while the second is derived from "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)