

Radical Aggadic Readings

You must know that the words of the sages are differently interpreted by three groups of people.

The first group is the largest one. I have observed them, read their books, and heard about them. They accept the teachings of the sages in their simple literal sense and do not think that these teachings contain any hidden meaning at all. They believe that all sorts of impossible things must be. They hold such opinions because they have not understood science and are far from having acquired knowledge... They understand the teachings of the sages only in their literal sense, in spite of the fact that some of their teachings when taken literally, seem so fantastic and irrational that if one were to repeat them literally, even to the uneducated, let alone sophisticated scholars, their amazement would prompt them to ask how anyone in the world could believe such things true, much less edifying... this group expounds the laws and the teachings of our sages in such a way that when the other peoples hear them they say that this little people is foolish and ignoble.

The second group is also a numerous one. It, too, consist of persons who, having read or heard the words of the sages, understand them according to their simple literal sense and believe that the sages, understand them according to their simple literal sense and believe that the sages intended nothing else than what may be learned from their literal interpretation. Inevitably, they ultimately declare the sages to be fools, hold them up to contempt, and slander what does not deserve to be slandered. They imagine that their own intelligence is of a higher order than that of the sages, and that the sages were simpletons who suffered from inferior intelligence... They are more stupid than the first group; many of them are simply fools. This is an accursed group, because they attempt to refute men of established greatness whose wisdom has been demonstrated to competent men of science.

There is a third group. Its members are so few in number that it is hardly appropriate to call them a group... This group consists of men whom the greatness of our sages is clear. They recognize the superiority of their intelligence from their words which point to exceedingly profound truths. The members of this group understand that the sages knew as clearly as we do the difference between the impossibility of the impossible and the existence of that which must exist. They know that the sages did not speak nonsense, and it is clear to them that the words of the sages contain both an obvious and a hidden meaning. Thus, whenever the sages spoke of things that seem impossible, they were employing the style of riddle and parable which is the method of truly great thinkers. All students of rhetoric know the real concern of a riddle is with its hidden meaning and not with its obvious meaning... if you belong to the third group, when you encounter a word of the sages which seems to conflict with reason, you will pause, consider it, and realize that this utterance must be a riddle or a parable.

(Rambam, Introduction to Perek Chelek)



Capturing the Urge for Idolatry

"And they cried out in a great voice to Hashem their God" (Nechemia 9:4).

What did they say... "Woe! Woe! This is what destroyed the Temple, and burned the Sanctuary, and killed all the righteous ones, and exiled the Jews from their land, and it still dances among us.

Did you give it to us for any reason at all other than to receive reward for overcoming it? We do not want it, nor do we want the reward for overcoming it!" . . .

They fasted for three days and three nights, and it [the yetzer for idolatry] was delivered to them. The likeness of a fiery lion cub emerged from the Holy of Holies.

The prophet said to Israel, "This is the yetzer hara for idolatry." As they seized it, a hair slipped from its mane, and it roared, and the sound went out over an area of four hundred parsangs.

They said: "What shall we do? Perhaps, God forbid, Heaven will have mercy on it." The prophet replied: "Cast it into a lead cauldron and cover the opening with lead, for lead absorbs sound." (Yoma 69b)

[That night] Manasseh [King of Judah] came and appeared to him [Rav Ashi] in a dream...He questioned him, 'Since you art so wise, why did you worship idols?' He replied, 'if you would have been there, , you would have lifted up your robe and run after me.' (Sanhedrin 102b)

ויצעקו אל ה' אלהים בקול גדול

מאי אמור אמר רב ואיתימא ר' יוחנן ביא ביא היינו האי דאחרביה למקדשא וקליה להיכליה וקטלינהו לכולהו צדיקי ואגלינהו לישראל מארעהון ועדיין מרקד בין

כלום יחבתי לך אלא לקבולי ביה אגרא לא איהו בעינן ולא אגריה בעינן

אותיבו בתעניתא תלתא יומין ותלתא לילואתא מסרוהו ניהליהו נפק אתא כי גוריא דנורא מבית קדשי הקדשים

אמר להו נביא לישראל היינו יצרא <דעבודת כוכבים> בהדי דתפסוה ליה אשתמיט בנייתא ממוזיא ורמא קלא ואזל קליה ארבע מאה פרסי

אמרו היכי נעביד דילמא חס ושלוס מרחמי עליה מן שמיא אמר להו נביא שדיוהו בדודא דאברא וחפיוהו לפומיה באברא דאברא משאב שאיב קלא

אתא מנשה איתחזי ליה בחלמיה... אייל מאחר דחכימתו כולי האי מאי טעמא קא פלחיתו { לעבודה זרה } אייל אי הות התם הות נקיטנא בשיפולי גלימא ורהטת אבתראי

Between Avodat Hashem & Avoda Zara

The foundation of the idolatrous impulse is an eruption of the desire for faith, and its overcoming the principle of faith-based service, perfecting the faith and nurturing of faith. When the desire for faith grows in strength, **it does not distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate faith**. And the soul that is sick with the illness of this desire wishes to fill that emotional space that should be filled by the contents of faith with something that satisfies the desirous soul. Fundamentally, this is the source of all the desires that breach and destroy their limits, that express anger and desolation in the spiritual and practical world, in the individual and in the community. (Rabbi Abraham, Isaac Kook - Shemoneh Perakim)

Idolatry, says Rav Kook, has a certain passion and zeal that deserve to be purified and retained in the true worship. “in the contamination of idolatry, great is the spirit of faith in all its wildness and coarseness, in its boiling and horse-like power [to the point of] burning sons and daughters.” (Jerome Gellman in Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality)

Far easier for man is mysticism – which is another name for idolatry – for it **obfuscates the distinction** between the holy and the profane by maintaining that the link between man and God is a given, (Yeshayahu Leibowitz)

One down, one to go

They then said: Since it is now a time of Divine favor, let us also pray for the inclination for gilui arayot (sexual immorality) [to be subdued before us]. They prayed and it, too, was delivered into their hands. Whereupon he said to them: "See that if you kill it the world will become desolate." They imprisoned it for three days. During this time, they sought a freshly laid egg throughout Eretz Yisrael, and it was not found.

They said: "What shall we do? Shall we kill it? The world will become desolate.

Shall we pray that half [the Inclination be subdued]? Heaven does not grant a half." Therefore, they blinded its eyes and then released it, and henceforth, a man does not become aroused by it with his close relatives. (Yoma 69b)

אמרו הואיל ועת רצון הוא נבעי רחמי איצרא דעבירה

בעו רחמי ואמסר בידייהו

אמר להו חזו דאי קטליתו ליה לההוא כליא עלמא

חבשוהו תלתא יומי ובעו ביעתא בת יומא בכל ארץ ישראל

ולא אשתכח

אמרי היכי נעביד? נקטליה כליא עלמא ניבעי רחמי אפלגא?

פלגא ברקיעא לא יהבי

כחלינהו לעיניהו ושבקוהו ואהני דלא מיגרי ביה לאיניש

בקריבתה

The Beginning of a New Era...

R. Abdimi from Haifa said: Since the day when the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken from the prophets and given to the wise.

R. Johanan said: Since the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken from prophets and given to fools and children. (Baba Batra 12a-b)

אמר רבי אבדימי דמן חיפה מיום שחרב בית המקדש ניטלה
נבואה מן הנביאים וניתנה לחכמים.

א"ר יוחנן מיום שחרב בית המקדש ניטלה נבואה מן הנביאים
וניתנה לשוטים ולתינוקות

"For both Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, madness and the struggle for God overlapped. Nietzsche identified with God after he went mad, but he had understood madness to be part of the journey of divine struggle long before that...in one of Nietzsche's images the madman could appear to be the mask concealing the deity; in another the madman could be the announcer of the death of the deity; in another the suffering of humans and of gods is connected to madness, and all gods are said to be 'man-made and madness' in a variety of ways and his works in his letters and eventually in his own collapse, **Nietzsche connected the struggle with God to madness.**

It is understandable that these two men [Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky] who were so deeply concerned with God and with madness should have perceived these two realms to overlap. God represents order, especially in Western religious tradition. God gives shape, gives laws. Recall that in the Bible, creation is the divine imposition of order over chaos. Somehow madness involves, in some degree, a return to chaos. **Distinctions break down**, all is permitted. Those who can envision, truly envision, the death of God can imagine the release from order that this involves. (The Hidden Face of God, Richard Elliot Friedman)