

מסכת עבודה זרה / Avodah Zarah

General Introduction

Tractate *Avodah Zarah* – literally, “foreign worship” – deals, as its name implies, with the subject of idolatry. The laws and penalties pertaining to this most serious Biblical prohibition have already been discussed in the seventh chapter of Tractate *Sanhedrin*. Tractate *Avodah Zarah* focuses primarily on laws governing our treatment of idols and the prohibition against deriving any benefit from them, as well as our association with idol worshipers, the objects used by them in the practice of idolatry, and their foods. These regulations fall into several broad categories, with some originating in Biblical law and others Rabbinically ordained.

I: The Biblical Laws

The Ten Commandments begin with the declaration, *I am Hashem, your God . . .*, and continue with the prohibition, *You shall not recognize the gods of others in My presence (Exodus 20:2-3)*. This commandment and prohibition constitute the bedrock of Jewish faith – belief in One Omnipotent God – upon which observance of all the other precepts of the Torah is based. In the words of *Rambam*: *The commandment against idolatry is equal to all the other commandments combined . . . for anyone who accepts idolatry repudiates the entire Torah, all the prophets and everything that the prophets were commanded from Adam until the end of time . . . and anyone who rejects idolatry acknowledges the truth of the entire Torah, all the prophets and everything that the prophets were commanded from Adam until the end of time. This is the foundation of all the commandments (Rambam, Hil. Avodas Kochavim 2:4, from Horayos 8a and Kiddushin 40a)*.

Owing to the severity of the prohibition against idolatry, the Torah mentions it repeatedly, and adds many associated prohibitions and positive commandments. Remarkably, there are a total of fifty-one distinct Biblical commandments and prohibitions that bear on the worship of idols and the emulation of pagan ways! (*Rambam*, preface to *Hil. Avodas Kochavim*).

Another sign of the gravity of idol worship is that whereas the observance of almost every other commandment is set aside where one’s life is endangered, this is not the case with idolatry. A Jew is dutybound to sacrifice his life rather than worship a false god (*Sanhedrin 74a*).^[1]

§ The Scope of the Prohibition Against Idol Worship

The Torah’s prohibition regarding idolatry pertains not only to Jews, but also to gentiles. This prohibition was initially given to Adam, and constitutes one of the *שבע מצוות בני נח*, *Seven Noahide Commandments* (*Sanhedrin 56a-b*). However, the scope of the prohibition is far broader for Jews than it is for gentiles. Gentiles are restricted under Torah law only from specific forms of worship (*Sanhedrin* *ibid.*; *Rambam*, *Hil. Melachim 9:1-2*; *Minchas Chinuch* [Machon ed.] 26:18), whereas Jews are prohibited from exhibiting any obeisance to idols, and even from acknowledging in their hearts that idols have any power (*Rambam*, *Hil. Avodas Kochavim 2:1-6*). Jews are also subject to the many commandments and prohibitions related to idolatry, some of which are enumerated below.

NOTES

1. The only other mitzvos that must always be observed even at the cost of one’s life are the prohibitions against illicit cohabitation and murder (*Sanhedrin* *ibid.*; see also below, 27b).