



*Noahide Laws & Lifecycle Course*

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*Idolatry I: Introduction*



***Noahide Nations Nagid Clergy  
Certification Program***

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## **Table of Contents:**

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Origin of Idolatry**
- 3. Maimonides, *Hilchos Avodah Zarah* 1:1-2**
- 4. What is Idolatry?**
- 5. Maimonides**
- 6. Modes of Idolatrous Worship**
- 7. Belief Alone: Permitted or Prohibited?**
- 8. *Shituf***
- 9. *Shituf*, Christianity, & Other Religions**
- 10. Creating New Religions**
- 11. Summary**

## Introduction

### *Idolatry I: Introduction*

The term “idolatry” is used today, for the most part, in a metaphorical or homiletic sense. We use “idolatry” to refer to anything that receives undue or inappropriate human attention. This use of “idolatry” does not even come close to conveying the concept and actions the Torah prohibits or that *HaShem*, the One True God, finds so offensive.

True, absolute idolatry is virtually non-existent in our times. The influence of Abraham has touched almost all peoples and all corners of the world. Even faiths that we may think of as “idolatrous” are still not entirely comparable to the ancient forms and concepts of idolatry prohibited by the Torah. To understand the relevance of the prohibition of idolatry in our times requires a careful examination of the Torah’s intent.

## The Origins of Idolatry

The Torah makes a curious statement in Genesis 4:26:

*And for Seth, to him also a son was born and he named him Enosh.  
Then **hukhal** to call by the name of HaShem.*

The phrase ...*to call by the name of HaShem*... refers to prayer or worship of God. We see that something happened to worship and prayer in this era. However, the term used, **hukhal**, is an ambiguous, carrying two possible meanings:

- **Hukhal** - “it became common.” Used this way, the verse reads: *Then it became common to call by the Name of HaShem*. This would indicate that prayer and worship of God began in this generation.

- **Hukhal** – “it became profaned.” Used this way, the verse reads: *Then calling in the name of HaShem became profaned.* This reading would indicate that something went horribly wrong in that generation’s relationship with God.

Whenever the Torah uses a term that has two clear implications, it usually intends both meanings. Considering this fact, the intent of the verse should be:

*Then the prayer and worship of God [calling by the name of HaShem] became widely/commonly [hukhal] profaned.*

Rashi and all other commentaries apply this reading of the verse. A number of ancient Midrashim and other texts record what transpired in that generation. Maimonides summarizes their accounts follows:

## **Maimonides, *Hilchos Avodah Zarah* 1:1-2**

§1 *In the time of Enosh,<sup>1</sup> mankind made a great error. The wise men of that generation gave reckless counsel. Enosh himself was one of those who erred.<sup>2</sup> Their error 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 as servants who minister before Him. Accordingly, it is fitting to praise and glorify them and treat them with honor. [They perceived] this to be the will of God,<sup>3</sup> blessed be He, that they should exalt and honor those who He exalted and honored just as a king desires that the servants who stand before him be honored. Doing so is, in fact, an expression of honor to the king.*

*After formulating this idea, they began to build temples to the stars and to offer sacrifices to them. They would praise and glorify them with words and prostrate themselves before them. This is because, by doing so, they would - according to their false ideas - be fulfilling the will of God. This was the essence of the worship of false gods and the rationale of those who served them. They would not say that there is no other god except for this star. This message was conveyed by Jeremiah, who declared (10:7-8): "Who will not fear You, King of the nations, for to You it is fitting. Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is none like You. They have one foolish and senseless idea; a teaching as empty as wood;" i.e., all know that You alone are God. Their foolish error consists of conceiving of this "emptiness" as Your will.*

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<sup>1</sup> Adam’s grandson, Enosh lived from 3525 BCE to 2620 BCE.

<sup>2</sup> Shabbat 118b implies that Enosh did not take part in the idolatry. However it is evident from the Sheiltos of Rav Achai Gaon and others that there is a slightly different version of this gemora which may be the source of the Rambam’s statement.

<sup>3</sup> This is the “... it became common/profaned to call in the name of HaShem...”

§2 *After many years, there arose false prophets who claimed that God had commanded them to speak and say: Serve this star (or all stars), sacrifice to it, offer libations to it, build a temple for it, and make an image of it so that all people - including women, children, and the common people - may bow to it. He would inform them of an image he had conceived, and tell them that this is the form of the particular star, claiming that this was revealed to him in a prophetic vision.*

*In this manner, the people began to make images in temples, under trees, and on the tops of mountains and hills. People would gather together and bow to them and they would say: "This image is the source of benefit or harm. It is appropriate to serve it and fear it." Their priests would tell them: "This service will enable you to multiply and be successful. Do this and this, or do not do this or this." Subsequently, other deceivers arose and declared that a specific star, sphere, or angel had spoken to them and commanded them: "Serve me in this manner." He would then relate a method of service: "Do this, do not do this." Thus, these practices spread throughout the world. People would serve images with strange practices – each one more distorted than the other - offer sacrifices to them, and bow down to them. As the years passed, His glorious and awesome name was forgotten by the people of the world, in both their speech and thought, so that they no longer knew Him. Thus, all the people, the women, and the children would know 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 would make oaths. The wise men among them thought 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 some individuals, for example: Chanoch, Metushelach, Noach, Shem, and Ever. The world continued in this fashion until the pillar of the world - the Patriarch Abraham - was born.*

## **What is Idolatry?**

Idolatry is a severe prohibition and a concept whose rejection is a core tenet of the Torah. Torah scholars have devoted centuries of study and thought to defining idolatry. This is one of those areas to which we could devote an entire library of books. For the sake of this course, we are going to present an overview of the basic, practical issues you may encounter today

Broadly speaking, idolatry includes:

- The worship of any created thing as God or as embodying any part of God.
- Worshiping any created thing in the manner of Enosh and his generation; by believing in the One True God, yet honoring Him by worshipping one of His creations.

- Worshiping, praying to, or considering any created thing as an intermediary between man and God.
- Behaving in a worshipful manner toward any two or three dimensional representation of either *HaShem* or any other created thing.
- Ascribing to God the form of any of his creations.
- Ascribing to God multiplicity instead of oneness.

There are many variations of idolatry besides these. We will address them when they arise.

## **Modes of Worship**

When we say it is “prohibited to worship” idolatry, what do we mean? Simply put, one commits a sin by engaging in a specific act of idolatrous “worship.” However, acts of idolatrous “worship” are often very different from what we may consider “worship.”

The different types of idolatry described above each developed their own specific forms of worship. These methods express the unique, underlying beliefs specific to that form of idolatry. Therefore, one is only liable for transgressing idolatrous worship when he employs a mode appropriate to the particular idol he is worshipping.<sup>4</sup>

There are four actions, however, that are prohibited regardless of the type of idolatry:<sup>5</sup>

- **Bowing** before idolatry.
- **Slaughtering** to idolatry.
- **Burning an offering** before idolatry.
- **Offering a libation** to idolatry.

These four actions are reserved for the service of HaShem in the holy temple and may not be used in the service of any other entity.

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<sup>4</sup> For examples, see Maimonides, *Hilchos Avodas Kokhavim* 3.

<sup>5</sup> Maimonides, *Hilchos Avodas Kokhavim* *ibid*.

We should note that an object once worshipped or designated for idolatrous worship becomes prohibited for ownership or benefit. We will discuss this in greater detail in the next lesson.

## Is Belief Alone Prohibited or Permitted?

Acts of idolatrous worship may be prohibited, but what about the mere belief in another god in addition to HaShem? For Jews, belief in any other power or deity is clearly prohibited as idolatry. For Non-Jews, however, the status of belief in a secondary deity is not as clear.

- **Maimonides & Nachmanides** - In many, many places Maimonides asserts that belief in idolatry is the essence of the prohibition.<sup>6</sup> Nachmanides echoes this opinion in several places his own commentary to the Torah.<sup>7</sup> It goes without saying that acting upon this belief, via worship, is also prohibited.
- **Rashi** - Rashi, however, holds that the essence of idolatry is only the act of worshiping idolatry.<sup>8</sup> Belief alone, according to Rashi, is not prohibited to Noahides.

What would be the practical difference between these two views? According to Rashi, one can believe in another god besides God, however any act of worship for that false deity would be prohibited.

This idea that idolatrous belief is possibly permitted to Noahides (though practice is not), lays at the heart of the concept of *shituf*.

## ***Shituf***

*Shituf* is the belief in another divine entity besides HaShem, God. For Jews, this is an absolute prohibition and equal to outright idolatry. Its acceptability for Noahides however, has long been a topic of study. Though Maimonides and many others

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<sup>6</sup> See *Hilchos Avodas Kokhavim* 2:1-2; *Hilchos Teshuva* 3:7.

<sup>7</sup> To Exodus 20:3; 22:19; 23:25.

<sup>8</sup> See Rashi to Exodus 20:3.

consider *shituf* idolatry for Noahides as well, the majority of *poskim*, including the Shulchan Aruch (Rama<sup>9</sup>) permit *shituf*. However, it is subject to the following limitations:

- The Torah views non-Jewish belief in another god in addition to the true God to be mistaken. It is not a prohibition, but it is unrighteous and one who does so, though not viewed as a sinner, is not considered *MiChasidei Umos HaOlam* – of the Pious Nations of the World - and will not receive his full reward for observing the Noahide laws.<sup>10</sup>
- *Shituf* pertains only to **belief** in a secondary divine being, not to the **worship** of a secondary god. Any expression of worship for this secondary deity is prohibited as idolatrous practice.
- It is only the belief in another god in addition to the true God that is not punishable. Conflation of the true God with another entity or the assigning of corporeality to the true God may create issues of actual idolatry. The Torah definition of idolatry is not only limited to the worship of idols, but pertains to how we conceive and represent the nature of the one true God.

## ***Shituf*, Christianity, and Other Religions**

Many have tried to qualify Christianity as an acceptable belief for non-Jews using the concept of *shituf*. Though true that many authorities have suggested so, this opinion must be put in context.

The exact status of Christianity in the eyes of the Torah is difficult to determine. There have been thousands of pages written on this topic, and even a basic survey of the literature is far beyond the scope of this course. In short: Christianity has many elements that are clearly idolatrous from a Torah perspective (i.e. its various rituals and modes of worship), but some that are difficult to pin down (i.e. is it truly monotheistic or polytheistic?). Its difficult status makes its exact classification doubtful.

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<sup>9</sup> *Orach Chaim* 156.

<sup>10</sup> *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem* 1, *haarah* 7.



Historically, Sephardic Rabbis, living in Muslim-ruled lands, were free to rule stringently. They criticized Christian belief as outright idolatry. However, rabbis living in Christian lands had to be very clever and cautious in what they said and wrote. Given the shadow of the church and the constant threat of exile and death, they were not free to even intimate that Christianity may be outright idolatry. Given their precarious situation, they had to take a tempered position. In these Rabbis' theological writings they often declare Christian belief *shituf* and therefore acceptable for non-Jews. However, in their writings on *halakha*, Torah law, they held that Christian ritual and worship was to be treated as idolatry.<sup>11</sup> They were often able to get these views past censors because *halachic* (legal) writings were not so thoroughly vetted as the church censors usually lacked sufficient understanding of the material.

Were it not for the threat of the church, these Ashkenazi rabbis very well may have taken the stringent view of their Sephardi co-religionists and condemned Christianity as idolatry.

Nevertheless, even if Christian belief is *shituf*, the practice of Christianity would remain idolatrous. The practical conclusion, for a number of reasons, is that Christianity is to be treated as absolute idolatry.<sup>12</sup> Namely, it is not merely the worship of another secondary deity, but is an idolatrous conception of God Himself.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Christianity is treated as absolute idolatry for Noahides in both belief and practice.<sup>14</sup> As we will discuss in the live lesson, however, it is not “absolute idolatry” in the same sense as the ancient idolatries described in Tanakh and the Talmud.

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<sup>11</sup>See Rama YD 141:1 and 150 who rules that crosses to which a non-Jew has bowed are prohibited as idolatrous images. This is a subtle yet definitive statement since such a conclusion is only possible if, fundamentally, the Rama believes that the concept of the trinity is idolatry.

<sup>12</sup> See *Hilchos Avodas Kokhavim 9:4*, *Maachalos Assuros 11:7*, *Hilchos Melachim 11:4*. See also Rambam's *Perush HaMishnayos* to the beginning of tractate Avoda Zarah (note, however, that the modern editions are heavily censored). See also *Minchas Elazar* I: 53-3; *Yechaveh Da'as* IV: 45. An extensive list of opinions is brought in *Yayin Malchus*, pp. 234-237.

<sup>13</sup> See the *Viknuach* of Nachmanides. See also his commentary on the Torah to Deut. 16:22. The idea that God ever took on corporeal manifestation, had a mother, was born, or exists as a tripartite deity are all heretical concepts according to the Torah.

<sup>14</sup> It should be pointed out that believing Christians do not themselves have the status of full idolaters. See *Shulchan Aruch*, Y.D. 148:12; *Shut Yehudah Yaaleh* YD 170.

What about Islam? Islam is not idolatrous<sup>15</sup> and, rather, has a strong theological resonance with Torah thought and belief.<sup>16</sup> From the perspective of the prohibition of idolatry, it is 100% monotheistic and an acceptable belief system<sup>17</sup>,<sup>18</sup> However, Islam presents a different problem altogether.

## Creating New Religions

Both Jews and non-Jews are enjoined against the creation of new religions.<sup>19</sup> One who creates a new religion is, by default, rejecting belief in the truth of the Torah, Moses (the greatest prophet in history), and in God's authority. The Torah, containing both the Noahide and Jewish laws, were given to stand for all eternity. The Torah states this in no fewer than 24 places!<sup>20</sup>

New religions denying the eternal authority of the Torah are not to be given legitimacy. This principle would apply equally to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or

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<sup>15</sup> [Maachalos Assuros 11:7](#); [Tur](#) YD 124; [Beis Yosef](#) YD 146; [Rama](#) YD 146:5; YD 124:6; [Taz](#) YD 124:4; [Shach](#) YD 124:12; See [Ben Ish Chai](#) on Parshas Balak for a discussion of the issues. There are a few who hold that Islam is prohibited as idolatry. It seems that this is due to certain customs of the Haj. See note 24.

<sup>16</sup> For example, a Jew may not enter a Church for any reason because it is a place of idolatry (see [Ieros Moshe](#) YD 3:129-6 and many, many others), yet it is permissible to enter and even pray within a mosque ([Arnei Yashfei 1:153](#) quoting [Rav Elyashiv](#), זצ"ל; [Yabia Omer](#) VII YD 12:4; and others). In fact, a Muslim contemporary of Maimonides, the historian [Ibn al-Qifti](#), records that in Egypt the Maimonides would occasionally pray in a Mosque (see [al-Qifti's Tarikh al-Hukama](#)). Of course, this is not an ideal situation and may have been done only in special circumstances. One recent authority, Rabbi Boruch Efrati, has advised traveling Jews to pray in airport mosques (a common amenity overseas) rather than pray among the hustle and bustle of the terminal. This ruling, though, pertains only to praying in the physical space of the mosque. One may not take part in actual Islamic prayer services. It should be noted that another recent authority, the [Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer](#) XIV:91, cites the Ran (see note 26 below) and prohibits Jews, or for that matter Noahides, from entering mosques. Although his opinion is not agreed to by other authorities, all agree that one should not enter a mosque without a compelling need or reason.

<sup>17</sup> While the belief system of Islam is acceptable theologically, many customs of the Haj are problematic. This may be the reasons for the [Ran Sanhedrin 61b](#) and other dismissals of Islam. See [Meiri](#) to Avodah Zarah 57a.

<sup>18</sup> However, an interesting difference emerges with regard to teaching Torah. Maimonides writes in a responsum (ed. Blau #149) that because Christians accept the Torah as part of God's revelation (as the "old testament"), there are unique permits and leniencies with regard to Jews teaching them Torah. Yet, because Islam rejects the Torah's authenticity (substituting the Quran), Jews may not teach Torah to Moslems.

<sup>19</sup> [Hilchos Melachim Perakim](#) 8 & 10.

<sup>20</sup> Exodus 12:14, 12:17, 12:43, 27:21, 28:43, Leviticus 3:17, 7:36, 10:9, 16:29, 16:31, 16:34, 17:7, 23:14, 23:21, 23:31, 23:41, 24:3, Numbers 10:8, 15:15, 19:10, 19:21, 18:23, 35:29, Deuteronomy 29:28.

any religion coming after the Torah, regardless of whether or not these religions observe all or part of the Noahide laws.<sup>21</sup>

## Summary

1. Idolatry began in the third generation after Adam. It was originally conceived as a means of honoring HaShem, but quickly devolved.
2. Idolatry is not only the worship of statues or stars. It is the worship of any created thing as divine.
3. Idolatry includes the worship of any created thing as a means of honoring HaShem or as an intermediary between man and God.
4. Ascribing to God the form of any of His creations is considered idolatrous.
5. Idolatry includes ascribing to God any multiplicity.
6. One only transgresses the prohibition of idolatry by either serving the object in a mode appropriate to it or by 1) Bowing to it, 2) Slaughtering to it, 3) Bringing a burnt offering before it, 3) Offering a libation before it.
7. An object worshiped as or designated for idolatry becomes prohibited.
8. Belief in a secondary deity to HaShem is permitted for Noahides. However, it is unrighteous and they are not considered *Chasidei Umos HaOlam* for doing so.
9. Even though one may believe in *shituf*, one may not actually worship this other deity.
10. Christianity is treated as idolatry for all intents and purposes, but it is not 100% identical to ancient forms of idolatry.
11. All religions after the giving of the Torah are inherently false even if they are entirely monotheistic.

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<sup>21</sup> See *Igros Moshe* YD II: 7.