

Idolatry and False Gods - Jewish Texts

From Psalm 115

לֹא לָנוּ יְהוָה לֹא לָנוּ כִּי לְשִׁמְךָ יְתֹן כְּבוֹד עַל־חַסְדֶּךָ עַל־אֲמִתְּךָ: לָמָּה יֹאמְרוּ
הַגּוֹיִם אֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים: וְאֵלֵהֵינוּ בַשָּׁמַיִם כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־חָפֵץ עָשָׂה: עֲצִבֵיהֶם כֶּסֶף
וְזָהָב מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי אָדָם: פֶּה־לָהֶם וְלֹא יִדְבְּרוּ עֵינַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יִרְאוּ: אֲזִנַּיִם
לָהֶם וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אֵף לָהֶם וְלֹא יִרְיָחוּ: יְדֵיהֶם וְלֹא יִמִּישׁוּן רַגְלֵיהֶם וְלֹא
יִהְלְכוּ לֹא־יִהְגּוּ בְגִרוֹנָם: כְּמוֹהֶם יְהִיוּ עֲשִׂיהֶם כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־בִּטַח בָּהֶם: יִשְׂרָאֵל
בִּטַח בֵּיהוָה עֲזָרָם וּמְגִנָּם הוּא:

1. Not to us, Eternal One, not to us, but to your name give glory, for your loving kindness, and for your truth's sake.
2. Why should the nations say, Where is now their God?
3. But our God is in the heavens; all that God desires is done.
4. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands.
5. They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they can not see;
6. They have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses, but they can not smell;
7. They have hands, but they cannot feel; they have feet, but they can not walk; and through their throat they cannot speak.
8. May they who make them become like them, and every one who trusts in them!
9. O Israel, trust in the Eternal One; their help and their shield.

From Exodus 32

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּרְא אֶת־הָעֵגֹל וּמַחֲלַת וַיַּחַר־אַף מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁלֹךְ
מִיָּדוֹ אֶת־הַלְּחֹת וַיִּשְׂבֵּר אֹתָם תַּחַת הַהָר: וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָעֵגֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ וַיִּשְׂרֹף
בְּאֵשׁ וַיִּטְחֵן עַד אֲשֶׁר־דָּק וַיִּזֶר עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם וַיִּשָּׂק אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיֹּאמֶר
מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן מַה־עָשָׂה לָךְ הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־הִבְאֵתָ עָלָיו חַטָּאָה גְדוֹלָה: וַיֹּאמֶר
אַהֲרֹן אֶל־יַחֲרֹן אֵף אֲדֹנָי אַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ אֶת־הָעָם כִּי בָרַע הוּא: וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ
עֲשֵׂה־לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ כִּי־זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלָנוּ מִמִּצְרָיִם
מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מַה־הָיָה לוֹ: וַאֲמַר לָהֶם לְמִי זָהָב הַתְּפָרְקוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ־לוֹ
וַאֲשַׁלְכֵהוּ בְּאֵשׁ וַיֵּצֵא הָעֵגֹל הַזֶּה:

19. And it came to pass, as soon as he came near to the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing; and Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands, and broke them beneath the mount.
20. And he took the calf which they had made, and burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it upon the water, and made the people of Israel drink of it.
21. And Moses said to Aaron, What did this people do to you, that you have brought so great a sin upon them?
22. And Aaron said, Let not the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are set on evil.
23. For they said to me, Make us gods, which shall go before us; and as for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what became of him.
24. And I said to them, Whoever has any gold, let them break it off. So they gave it me; then I casted it into the fire, and there came out this calf.

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From Numbers 25

1. And Israel stayed in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab.
2. And they called the people to the sacrifices of their gods; and the people ate, and bowed down to their gods.
3. And Israel attached himself to Baal-Peor; and the anger of the Eternal One was kindled against Israel.
4. And the Eternal One said to Moses, Take all the chiefs of the people, and hang them up before the Eternal One in the sun, that the fierce anger of the Eternal One may be turned away from Israel.
5. And Moses said to the judges of Israel, Slay you every one his men who were attached to Baal-Peor.
6. And, behold, one of the people of Israel came and brought to his brothers a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses, and in the sight of all the congregation of the people of Israel, who were weeping before the door of the Tent of Meeting.
7. And when Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose up from among the congregation, and took a javelin in his hand;
8. And he went after the man of Israel into the tent, and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her belly. So the plague ceased from the people of Israel.
9. And those who died in the plague were twenty four thousand.
10. And the Eternal One spoke to Moses, saying,
11. Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned my anger away from the people of Israel, while he was zealous for my sake among them, that I consumed not the people of Israel in my jealousy.
12. Therefore say, Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace;
13. And he shall have it, and his seed after him, the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was zealous for his God, and made an atonement for the people of Israel.
14. And the name of the Israelite who was slain, who was slain with the Midianite woman, was Zimri, the son of Salu, a prince of a father's house among the Simeonites.
15. And the name of the Midianite woman who was slain was Cozbi, the daughter of Zur; he was chief over the people of a father's house in Midian.

Mishnah B'rachot 9:1

הַרוֹאֶה מְקוֹם שֶׁנִּעְשׂוּ בוֹ נִסִּים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, אוֹמֵר בְּרוּךְ שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ
בְּמְקוֹם הַזֶּה. מְקוֹם שֶׁנִּעְקְרָה מִמֶּנּוּ עֲבוֹדַת זָרָה, אוֹמֵר בְּרוּךְ שֶׁעָקַר עֲבוֹדַת
זָרָה מֵאַרְצֵנוּ:

One who sees a place in which miracles were performed for Israel recites, "Blessed is the One who performed miracles for our ancestors in this place." [One who sees] a place from which idolatry was uprooted recites, "Blessed in the One who uprooted idolatry from our land."

Commentary by Dr. D'vora Weisberg:

...The second blessing in our mishnah is a response to finding oneself in a place which once contained some type of idol. This blessing assumes that there were traditions as to where idol worship had existed and been removed. The wording of the blessing indicates that it was recited only in the land of Israel, the land that the Torah insisted must be rendered free of idolatrous practice because the land itself could not tolerate such things. Only in the land of Israel were Jews expected to eradicate idolatry; presumably in other lands, idolatry was to be avoided but not molested by Jews

The mention of this blessing is deeply ironic in light of the reality of Jewish life in the land of Israel in the first centuries of the Common Era. While the blessing refers to the land as "our land," during this period, the land was in fact ruled by the Romans; Jews lived there but did not enjoy sovereignty. Moreover, in this period, what the rabbis understood to be idolatry - that is, the worship of gods other than the God of Israel - flourished in the land of Israel. It is far more likely that Jews found themselves chancing upon places that in their memory, or the memory of their parents and grandparents, had been "idol-free" only to see the temples and altars of non-Jews. On some level, then, this blessing is an example of the rabbis' ability to imagine a very different landscape than the one they encountered in their everyday lives.