

Vayikra 25:55 -26:2

In the aftermath of a discussion of slavery, which can easily be seen as part of a sequence tracing simultaneous economic and spiritual decline beginning with failure to observe the Sabbatical year, the Torah reminds the Jews that they are His servants, that His claim on them precedes all others, concluding “I am Hashem your G-d”. This segues into a reminder not to worship idols, to observe the Shabbat, and to reverence the Temple – these three are sufficiently standard for various commentaries to treat them simply as representative of the entire Torah, included here to remind Jewish slaves that their dependent status does not remove their obligations to serve G-d, and G-d alone.

However, the prohibition against idolatry stated here includes one unique element, that of *even maskit*. For the Children of Israel are servants to Me – they are My servants, whom I removed from Egypt; I am Hashem your G-d.

Do not make yourselves false gods (*elilim*),

and do not erect for yourself sculpted idols (*pesel*) or pillars (*matzeivah*).

Do not place an *even maskit* in your land, so as to prostrate yourself upon it, for I am Hashem your G-d.

My Sabbath observe, and My Temple reverence;

I am Hashem.

Questions

- 1) Why the repetition of “I am Hashem”?
- 2) What is an *even maskit*? Why is it prohibited? Why is the prohibition introduced specifically in this context? Why is the prohibition formulated as “placement” rather than as “bowing”?

Commentaries

- 1) Rashi – *even maskit* means “stone that covers”, or paving stone
- 2) Almost all others – it means either a stone that attracts the eye, or else a stone with designs
- 3) Both Mekhiltas – One might have thought, absent this prohibition, that the ban on Divine images did not apply to ones made from stone.
- 4) Talmud – “in your land” – the prohibition applies only outside the Temple. Radbaz adds that it is “an obligation of the body”, and all such obligations apply outside Israel as well as within.
- 5) Rambam – This was prohibited because it was the practice of idolaters. However, the ban applies only outside the Temple.
- 6) Sefer Hachinukh – If it was banned because it resembled prior idolatrous practice, should it not especially have been banned in the Temple?
- 7) Others – It was banned for fear that others would suspect it of being idolatry, but in the Temple everyone understood that worship is only of Hashem. Alternatively, it was banned so as to make the Temple unique in Jewish worship.
- 8) Yeraim – the prohibition is transgressed as soon as one places the floor with intent to prostrate on it, for the rule is that with regard to idolatry Hashem treats thought as action.

My Comments

- 1) There is a tension throughout Halakhah between the recognition that idolatrous practices were psychologically effective and the desire to distinguish Divine worship from them. Most simply, the Torah recognizes the power of visual imagery, and of the sexual metaphor; the Talmud records Gentile incomprehension at finding the images of the *keruvim* embracing within the inner sanctum of Judaism. All laws restricting modes of worship, as opposed to objects of worship, involve sacrificing an effective mode of spirituality; most obviously, the erection of pillars by the forefathers is praised but we are banned from doing so.
 - 2) Rashi regularly makes the lonely claim that the term *even maskit* refers to plain marble floors. Note that while everyone rejects his etymological position, I believe the halakhic consensus bans prostration on all stone floors. I’m also unaware of any prominence given to imagery appearing on the floors of the Temple, if there was any such.
 - 3) Nothing above explain sufficiently the presence of Shabbat in this context. I suggest that the repetition of “I am Hashem” serves to unify these verses, with this result:
The statement that we are Hashem’s servants establishes His prior claim to our physicality;
The prohibition against idolatry establishes His prior claim to our spirituality;
The prohibitions against Shabbat and the requirement that the Temple be unique represent implementations of these claims by requiring us to withhold natural and otherwise constructive physical and spiritual expressions.
- Shabbat Shalom RK