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Idolatry as an Excuse..., at First

Rav Yehudah quoted Rav saying that the Jews knew that idols were powerless, but only served them as a conduit to abandoning the Torah’s rules on immorality.

The *Gemora* challenges this statement with the following statements that indicates that the Jews truly believed in the idols they worshipped:

1. Rabbi Elozar explains that the verse refers to the Jews emotional attachment to their idols as similar to one who sorely misses their son.
2. The verse says that Hashem will punish the Jews by putting their corpses on the corpses of their idols.

The *braisa* tells the story of the righteous Eliyahu, who discovered a severely malnourished child among the starving populace of Yerushalayim. The child explained that he was the lone survivor of his family. Eliyahu asked him if he wants to learn something that will give him life, and he said yes. Eliyahu then taught him to say *Shema* every day, but the child refused, since his parents never taught him *Shema*. He instead took his idol out of his pocket, hugging and kissing it until he died of hunger, falling on top of his idol, fulfilling the verse’s description.

3. The verse in Nechemiah states that when the Jews returned to *Eretz Yisroel* and rebuilt the Beis Hamikdosh, they cried out to Hashem. Rav Yehudah (*or Rabbi Yonasan*) explains that they were bemoaning the desire for idolatry, which had already caused the destruction of the first Beis Hamikdosh, a massacre of

the Jews, and exile. They called out to Heaven, saying that the reason for this desire was for people to overcome it, and thereby merit reward. At this point, they would prefer no desire and no reward.

The *Gemora* answers all of these by saying that once the Jews began serving idols, albeit for ulterior motives, they became attached to the idolatry itself, and then had an independent desire for it. (63b – 64a)

To Desire or not Desire?

The *Gemora* continues the story of the Jews rejection of the desire for idolatry. The Jews fasted three consecutive days and prayed for the desire to be nullified. A note fell from Heaven, with the word *emes* – *truth* written on it, indicating Hashem’s agreement.

Rabbi Chanina notes that this indicates that Truth is the signature of Hashem. They then saw a fire in the image of a cub depart for the Holy of Holies. Zechariah told them that this was the desire for idolatry, which they should now capture. While trapping it, one hair fell off, and the cub screamed in pain, loud enough to be heard 400 *parsaas* away. They were concerned that the cub’s cries would be heard in Heaven, engendering mercy for it. Zechariah told them to enclose the cub in a lead container, with a lead covering, since lead absorbs sound well. The Sages saw that this was an auspicious time, so they decided to pray for the nullification of the desire for immorality. It was given to them, and they enclosed it for three days, to decide whether to truly nullify it. However, once this was

subdued, there was no desire for any physical intimacy, to the point that no eggs were laid. This indicated to the Sages that the world needed this desire. The Sages reasoned that they could only make full requests from Heaven, so they could not ask to only nullify the desire for someone else's spouse. They therefore "blinded" the desire, blunting it enough to remove the desire for one's relatives. (64a)

Degrading Worship

Rav Yehudah quoted Rav saying that a non-Jewish woman once was very sick, and swore that if she recovered, she would worship all idolatry in the world. She recovered and traveled to all idolatry. When she arrived at *Pe'or*, she asked the priests how it is worshipped. When they explained that the worship was to defecate in front of it, she said that she'd prefer to be sick again than to worship it. However, Rav continued that verses describe that the Jews were *nitzmadim* – *tightly coupled* to *Pe'or*, while they were only *devaikim* – *adjacent* to Hashem, similar to adjacent dates, which are easily separated. The *braisa*, however, states that the verse refers to the Jews as *nitzmadim* to *Pe'or*, similar to a loose bracelet (*tzamid*), while they are *devaikim* – *tightly attached* to Hashem.

The *Gemora* discusses the degrading forms of idolatry in more detail. The *braisa* tells the story of wagon driver Sabta ben Alas, who was hired by a non-Jewish woman. She asked him to stop at *Pe'or* along the way, and wait for her to come out. When she emerged, he told her to wait for him. She challenged him, noting that he was Jewish, but he ignored her. He entered, defecated, and even wiped himself on the nose of the *Pe'or*. The priests were very impressed, and said that no one ever worshipped *Pe'or* so extensively.

The *Gemora* notes that the *Mishna* says that one who defecates in front of *Pe'or* is liable, even if he intends to disgrace it, and one who throws a stone to *Markulis* is liable, even if he intends to stone it.

Rav Menasheh went to Bei Torta, and they told him that they were passing a place of idolatry. He took a stone and threw it at the idol. They told him that it was *Markulis*, which is worshipped by stoning. He responded that the *Mishna* only prohibits one from throwing a stone **to** *Markulis*, not **at** *Markulis*. When he checked in the Beis Medrash, they told him that the *Mishna* prohibits even one who throws a stone **at** *Markulis*. He regretted his action, and asked if he should remove the stone. They told him not to, since one who removes a stone also is enabling worship, as he is clearing out space for others to worship it further. (64a)

Molech

The *Mishna* states that one is liable for *molech* only if he hands over his child to the priests of *molech*, and also passes him through the fire.

The *Mishna* lists idolatry and *molech* as separate sins punished by stoning, indicating that *molech* is not idolatry.

The *braisa* states that the Sages say that one is liable for passing his child in the fire for *molech* or for any idolatry, while Rabbi Elozar the son of Rabbi Shimon says that one is liable only for *molech*. The *Mishna* is the opinion of Rabbi Elozar the son of Rabbi Shimon, who considers *molech* not idolatry. Therefore, the Torah's prohibition of passing a child through the fire was only for *molech*, and not a general prohibition of idolatry.

Abaye says that Rabbi Elozar the son of Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Chanina ben Antigonus have equivalent opinions about the nature of *molech*. Rabbi Chanina ben Antigonus says that the verse uses the term *molech* (*from the root melech – king*) to indicate that anything that someone accepts as a ruler – even a stick or stone – is included in the prohibition of passing a child through the fire. Just as Rabbi Elozar the son of Rabbi Shimon says that *molech* is not

idolatry, so Rabbi Chanina ben Antignos dissociates *molech* from idolatry.

Rava says that they are not equivalent, since Rabbi Chanina ben Antignos includes anything that an individual accepts as a rule is included, while Rabbi Elozar the son of Rabbi Shimon only includes an established *molech*.

Rabbi Yannai says that one is only liable if he first hands over his child to the idol priests.

The *Gemora* cites a *braisa* to support this. The *braisa* states that one is only liable if the following conditions are met:

1. He hands over his child
2. His child is passed
3. It is done to *molech*
4. The child is passed through fire

The *braisa* learns these conditions from the verse:

Verse	Rule
<i>Lo sitain – do not give</i>	Father must give child
<i>L’ha’avir – to pass</i>	Child must be passed Through a fire – from the similar verse prohibiting <i>ma’avir bno uvito ba’aish – one who passes his child in the fire</i>
<i>Lamolech</i>	Only to <i>molech</i>

Rav Acha the son of Rava says that one who passes all of his children is not liable, since the verse punishes one who passes *mizaro – from his children*, imply some, but not all of them.

Rav Ashi asked whether one who passes a child who cannot go himself (e.g., *sleeping, blind*) is liable, and whether one is liable for a grandchild.

The *Gemora* resolves the second question from a *braisa*, which states that one is liable for passing any descendants in the fire, since the verse refers to *zaro – his descendant*. The *braisa* also quotes another verse that uses the term *zaro*, including all descendants, even those from illegitimate unions.

Rav Yehudah says that one is only liable when passing his child in the normal fashion.

Abaye says that there was a ledge of bricks in the middle of the fire, over which the child is passed, while Rava says that the child jumps over the fire, like they do on Purim.

The *Gemora* cites a *braisa* to support Rava. The *braisa* says that one is only liable for passing in the normal fashion, but not by walking through, indicating that the normal fashion was not walking. The *braisa* continues to say that one is only liable for passing his descendant in the fire, but not other relatives. The Sages say that one is not liable for passing oneself, while Rabbi Elozar the son of Rabbi Shimon says he is liable. The *braisa* concludes with the dispute cited earlier, with the Sages including any idolatry in the prohibition of *molech*, and Rabbi Elozar the son of Rabbi Shimon limiting it to *molech*.

Ulla explains that Rabbi Elozar the son of Rabbi Shimon applies the prohibition of *molech* to passing oneself, since the verse states that one passing through the fire *lo yimatzai becha – should not be found in you*. The word *becha – in you* indicates that *you* should not pass yourself through the fire.

The *Gemora* suggests that the Sages should also read the verse this way. Rav Yehudah says that one need not forgo his own lost item to retrieve someone else’s, since the verse says *efes ki lo yihye becha evyon – but there will not be a poor person among you*, mandating that one avoid poverty. The *Gemora* suggests that the verse’s word *becha – in you* is the element prohibiting one from descending to



poverty, and therefore the same word in *molech* should prohibit one from passing himself through *molech*.

The *Gemora* rejects this, and states that the element prohibiting impoverishment is the word *efes* – *absent*, mandating that poverty must be absent.

The *Gemora* discusses the various times the Torah punishes idolatry with *kares* – *excision from the nation*. Rabbi Yossi the son of Rabbi Chanina says there are three instances, one for worshipping idols in the normal fashion, one for worshipping in the objective forms enumerated in the *Mishna*, even if it is not the normal fashion, and one for *molech*.

The *Gemora* explains that according to the Sages, who consider *molech* idolatry, this third *kares* includes one who passes his child in a fire in front of any idolatry, even if that is not the normal form of worship. There is one more instance of *kares* mentioned by *megadef*, which the *Tannaim* identify either as a blasphemer or one who sings for idols, a form of idolatry. The *Gemora* explains that according to the *Tanna* who identifies *megadef* as idolatry, this extra instance is to extend *kares* to excision from the world to come as well. (64a – 64b)

INSIGHTS TO THE DAF

Molech

The *Gemora* defines a number of parameters for the crime of giving a child to *molech*.

The *braisa* states that to be liable for *molech*, a parent must hand over his child to the priests, and the child must be passed through the fire. Rashi explains that the father hands the child to the priests, but the priests actually pass the child through the fire, and then the father is liable. The Rambam rules that the father must be the one who passes the child through the fire in order to be liable.

The Rishonim differ on the nature of the actual passing through the fire, referred to as *ha'avarah* – *passing through*. Rashi (64b Sharga) writes that the child is only passed through two fires, but remains alive, as is evident from the discussion about the liability of one who passes himself through the fire. The Rambam (Avodas Kochavim 6:3) similarly writes that the child is led through the fire, but not consumed by it.

Rashi and the Rambam explain that other forms of idolatry *did* kill children by burning, as the *Gemora* described on 63b in relation to Chizkiyah, whose mother soaked him with fire repellent to save him from such a death. The Ramban and Rabbeinu Bechaye (Vayikra 18:21), however, say that the child is consumed and killed by the fire. The Ramban explains that the *Gemora* refers to the act of *molech* as *ha'avarah*, since the father does not wait for the child's body to turn to ashes, but removes the body while it is still intact.

Rav Acha berai Derava says that if one passes all of his children through the fire, he is not liable, as the verse condemns one who passes *mizaro* – *from his children* to the *molech*, but not all of them. Rabbeinu Bechaye (Vayikra 18:21) explains that the priests of *molech* would promise a father that if he passed his child in the fire, this would ensure success to him and his remaining children. Thus, the general custom of *molech* worship was to pass only some of the children, and the Torah therefore only punishes when done in the normal fashion.

Tosfos (64b He'evir) asks how this qualification applies, since as soon as he passes the first child, he is already liable. Tosfos offers two scenarios:

1. One who has only one child is not liable, since that one child is all of his children.
2. One is not liable if he passes all of his children simultaneously.



The Kesef Mishneh (A"Z 6:4) suggests that if one passes one of his children, his liability is pending. If he later passes all of his children, he is not liable, but otherwise he is executed.

The Minchas Chinuch (208:9) explains that it is only in the same assemblage of *molech* that he is pending, but once it is disbanded, he is definitely liable.

Later commentators question why passing his one child is not therefore a doubtful warning, which may exonerate the father.

The Minchas Chinuch (208:9) writes that we assume that a Jew will not commit another sin by passing another child in front of *molech*, and we therefore place him in a status quo of only passing one, thereby making his warning certain, just as we assume a *nazir* will not annul his *nezirus*, and we therefore consider his warning to be certain.

The Mishnas Chachamim states that if one does an action which makes him liable, the fact that he can later do another action which undoes his first action does not make the warning doubtful.

Disgrace or Worship?

The *Gemora* discusses the disgraceful worship of *Pe'or* and *Markulis*, and states that if one worshipped it in the normal way, even if he did so in order to disgrace it, he is liable.

Tosfos (64a Af al Gav) states that he is only liable when he meant his disgrace as service to the idol, but not if he purely meant it to disgrace the idol.

Rabbi Akiva Eiger notes that Tosfos earlier (61b Rava) cites an opinion that if an idol is normally worshipped by disgrace, one who disgraces it in this way, even if only done to disgrace and not to worship, is liable.

Vernacular?

When discussing the repeated enumerations of *kares* for idolatry, Rabbi Yishmael explains that one of the repetitions is not superfluous, since *dibra torah kilshon benai adam – the Torah speaks in the language of people*. The question of whether the Torah repeats simply to mimic vernacular is a matter of debate among *Tannaim*. Tosfos in a number of locations (Sota 24a vRabbi Yonasan, BK 64a Yomar, etc.) says that the *Tannaim* that accept this principle only do so when there is a compelling reason not to learn something from the repetition.

The Ran (Nedarim 3a Hanicha) says that these *Tannaim* accept this principle even when there may be something reasonable to learn from the repetition.

The Ritva says that there are actually three positions among the *Tannaim*:

1. We always learn something from a repetitive phrase.
2. We never learn something from a repetitive phrase.
3. We learn something from a repetitive phrase, unless there is a compelling reason not to, in which case we consider it simply to be vernacular.

DAILY MASHAL

A Special Idol

Our *Gemara* discusses a form of idolatry known as *Pe'or*, worshipped by disgracing it most disgustingly. If, though, the believers in *Pe'or* worshipped it as an idol, why did they disgrace it? Rav Ch. Shmuelevitz zt'l explained that everyone has some inclination (*yetzer*) to reject anything conventional and break all the norms and rules, wanting to sense that "everything is allowed". This idolatry thus came about, exhibiting that a person may do anything he wants! (*Sichos*, 5732-34).