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Avodah Zarah Daf 53

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How does he nullify it? If he cut off the tip of its ear, or the tip of its nose, or the end of its finger, or dented it (*on its face that it destroyed its features*) even without having cut anything off, he has nullified it. If he spat before it, or urinated before it, or dragged it, or threw excrement at it, it is not nullified. If he sold it or gave it as a pledge - Rebbe says: He has nullified it, but the *Chachamim* say: He has not nullified it. (53a)

The *Gemora* explains (based upon a Scriptural verse) that when the idolater spat before it, or urinated before it, he has not nullified it, for he is merely displaying a temporary anger towards it (*and he will eventually worship it again*).

The *Mishna* had stated: If he sold it or gave it as a pledge - Rebbe says: He has nullified it, but the *Chachamim* say: He has not nullified it.

Zeiri in the name of Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Abba in the name of Rav disagree: One said that the dispute in the *Mishna* is over a smelter who is an idol worshipper, but if it was sold to a Jewish smelter, all agree that the owner has nullified it. The other said that the dispute is over a Jewish smelter.

They inquired: Is the dispute regarding a Jewish smelter only, but with a smelter who is an idol worshipper, all agree that he has not nullified it, or perhaps in either case there is the dispute?

Come and hear: For Rebbe said: My view is the more probable when he sold it to be destroyed, and my colleagues’

view is the more probable when he sold it to be worshipped. What means ‘to be destroyed’ and ‘to be worshipped’? Am I to say that these terms are to be understood in their literal sense? [If that were so,] what is the reason of the one who says that he had nullified it, and the reason of the one who says that he had not nullified it? Must not, then, ‘to be destroyed’ mean [that he sold it] to someone who would destroy it, viz., an Israelite smelter, and ‘to be worshipped’ means [that he sold it] to someone who would worship it, viz., a smelter who is an idol worshiper; and are we not to conclude that in either case there is a difference of opinion? — No; this is the meaning — Rebbe said: My view is acceptable to my colleagues when he sold it to be destroyed, i.e., to an Israelite smelter, because even my colleagues do not differ from me except in the case where he sold it to be worshipped, but when it is sold to be destroyed they agree with me [that it had been nullified].

Against the above the following is quoted: If one brought scraps of silver from an idol worshiper and found an idol amongst it, should he have drawn it [into his possession] before paying over the purchase price he can return the idol; but should he have drawn it [into his possession] after paying over the purchase money, he casts it into the Dead Sea. This is quite right if you say that the above difference is over an Israelite smelter; then whose is this teaching? It is the Rabbis’. But if you say that the difference is over a smelter who is an idol worshiper and all agree that with an Israelite smelter he has nullified it, whose is this teaching?



The Gemora answers: It is otherwise in the present illustration because his intention was to sell scraps of silver and not an idol.

Our Rabbis taught: If [an idol worshiper] borrowed money on an idol, or ruins fell upon it, or robbers stole it, or the owners left it behind and journeyed to a distant land, if with the intention of returning [to claim it] as happened during the war waged by Joshua, it is not nullified.

The Gemora notes: It was necessary [to cite all these circumstances]. For if there had only been taught the case where he borrowed money on it, from the fact that he had not sold it [it follows that] he had not nullified it; but if ruins fell upon it, since he does not clear them away [to recover it], conclude that he had nullified it! Therefore it was necessary [to mention that in the latter circumstance the idol is not nullified]. If there had only been taught the case where ruins fell upon it, because he thought that [the idol] is lying there and whenever I want it I can take it [he did not nullify it]; but in the case where robbers stole it, from the fact that he does not go searching for it [it might be assumed] that he had nullified it! Therefore it was necessary [to mention that in the latter circumstance the idol is not nullified]. If there had only been taught the case where robbers stole it, because he thought that if an idol worshiper took it he would doubtless worship it and if an Israelite took it, it being an article of value, he would sell it to an idol worshiper who would worship it [therefore it is not nullified]; but in the case where the owners left it behind and journeyed to a distant land, since they did not take it with them [it might be assumed] that they had nullified it! Therefore it was necessary [to mention that in the latter circumstance the idol is not nullified].

The Gemora asks: 'If with the intention of returning [to claim the idol] as happened during the war waged by Joshua, it is not nullified!' But in the instance of the war waged by Joshua did [the Amorites] return?

The Gemora answers: This is the meaning: If [the owners] have the intention of returning, it is analogous to the war waged by Joshua and there can be no nullification.

Why, then, compare it to the war waged by Joshua? — He thereby informs us of something incidentally, and it is as Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: If an Israelite set up a brick to worship [but did not do so] and an idolater came and worshipped it, it is prohibited. From where have we learned that it is prohibited? — Rabbi Elozar said: It is the same as happened at the beginning of the settlement in the land of Israel; for the Merciful One declared: And burn their asheirah trees with fire. Now it was an inheritance to [the Israelites] from their ancestors and a man cannot render forbidden that does not belong to him! If [it is assumed that the reason was] on account of those [asheirah trees] which existed there originally, then just a nullification would have sufficed! But inasmuch as the Israelites worshipped the Golden Calf, they revealed their proneness for idolatry, so when the idolaters came [and worshipped asheirah trees] they acted according to [the Israelites'] bidding. Similarly when an Israelite set up a brick, he revealed his proneness for idolatry; therefore when an idol worshiper came and worshipped it he acted according to [the Israelite's] bidding.

The Gemora asks: But perhaps the proneness was only for the Golden Calf and for nothing else!

The Gemora answers: No; the Torah states: These be your gods, O Israel, which proves that they lusted for many gods.

Conclude, then, that all [the asheirah trees] which existed at the same time as the Golden Calf are prohibited, but those planted subsequently are permitted! — Who is able to distinguish between them?

MISHNAH. An idol which its worshippers abandoned in time of peace is permitted, in time of war is prohibited. Pedestals of kings are permitted because [the idol worshipers only] set them up at the time the kings pass by.

GEMARA. Rabbi Yirmiyah ben Abba said in the name of Rav: The Temple of Nimrod is to be regarded the same as an idol which its worshippers abandoned in time of peace and is permitted; for although, due to the fact that the Merciful One dispersed them, it was like a time of war, if they had wished to return [and claim the idols] they could have returned; but since they did not, they must have nullified them.

Pedestals of kings are permitted. Because [the idol worshipers only] set them up at the time the kings pass by they are permitted!? Rabbah bar Bar Chanah said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: The meaning is — because they only set them up at the time kings pass by and the kings may abandon that road and proceed by another road.

When Ulla came he seated himself on a damaged pedestal. Rav Yehudah said to him: Behold both Rav and Shmuel declared that a damaged pedestal is prohibited; and even according to the one who said that [idol worshipers] do not worship fragments [of idols], that applies only to an idol because it is an act of contempt to worship fragments but with this [pedestal] one does not care! — He replied to him: Who would give me some of the dust [from the bodies] of Rav and Shmuel that I might fill my eyes with it! [Nevertheless] both Rabbi Yochanan and Rish Lakish declared that a damaged pedestal is permitted; and even according to the one who said that [idol worshipers] do worship fragments, that applies only to an idol because from the fact that they worship it, they would regard it a desecration to nullify it; but as for these [pedestals] they throw them side [when damaged] and bring another.

There is a teaching in agreement with Rabbi Yochanan and Rish Lakish, viz.: A damaged pedestal is permitted — a damaged altar is prohibited until the greater part of it is demolished.

What constitutes a pedestal and what an altar? — Rabbi Yaakov ben Idi said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: A pedestal consists of a single stone, an altar of several stones.

Chizkiyah said: Which is the text? — When he makes all the stones of the altar as chalkstones that are beaten in sunder, so that the asheirah trees and the sun-images shall rise no more — i.e., if [the altar] becomes like ‘chalkstones that are beaten in sunder,’ then ‘the asheirah trees and the sun-images shall rise no more,’ otherwise they will rise again.