

Jews and Statues
Tuesdays with Torah, August 1 and August 8, 12pm-1pm
Rabbinic Intern Aaron Torop, Wise Temple, Cincinnati, OH

Core questions

- How do we navigate shared space between competing cultures?
- When is something in public offensive, and when do we not assign it meaning?

Key Takeaways

- A single piece of art can have multiple connotations and layers of symbolism
- As Jews in America, we often mediate between religious and cultural connotations of art

Session 1: Emma Lazarus and Aphrodite

0:00-0:05 Introduction of self and topic

0:05-0:20 Opening - Statue of Liberty

- (show image) What does the Statue of Liberty represent?
- Does anyone know the Jewish connection to the Statue of Liberty?
 - Share brief biography of Emma Lazarus and the poem
- Read The New Colossus
 - How does Emma Lazarus portray Lady Liberty?
 - “Mother of exiles...cries with silent lips”: What does this mean to you?

0:20-0:30 Framing the Problem

- Read Exodus 20:3-7 (the second commandment)
- Discuss:
 - Why is this one of the commandments? Why is idol worship a problem?
 - What do you think Torah, and later the rabbis, are worried about?
- Explain that the overarching thing to keep in mind is Judaism’s constant concern and worry about idolatry and polytheism. Any future relaxation is to be understood as radical. We should be asking, “Why was the reaction so strongly against at first? Why did it change? What does this mean for how we interact with statues today?”

0:30-0:45 Text #1 M. Avodah Zarah 3:4

- Explain that we are going to read a story from the Mishnah about another famous female statue – Aphrodite
 - Briefly define Mishnah, unusual for it to bring a story
- Show image of statue while reading story

- Read part one:
 - What is the challenge?
 - How do you understand Rabban Gamliel's initial response?
- Read part two:
 - What are the different answers Rabban Gamliel gives?
 - Why do you think he gives many answers?
 - Do you find any of them persuasive? Not persuasive?
- Discussion:
 - Rabban Gamliel distinguishes between a statue that is an idol from one that isn't but could be. Is this distinction meaningful for you?
 - How do you separate religious from cultural images? Does it change how you relate to them?

0:45-1:00 Conclusion

- Read Rabbi Avi Killip
- She posits the following challenge: fighting idolatry is non-negotiable *and* avoiding/eliminating it is also impossible.
 - We saw how Rabban Gamliel deals with this. How do you deal with it in your own life?

Session 2: Moses and Asherah

0:00-0:05 Introduction and Review

0:05-0:15 Moses' Horns

- Have you ever heard the stereotype of Jews having horns? Do you know where it comes from?
- Show Michaelangelo statue
 - Why did he put horns on it?
- Read Exodus verse
 - What's the impact of the mistranslation?

0:15-0:30 Uncomfortable statues

- Have you seen art or statues that makes you uncomfortable?
 - Show some images
 - What makes you uncomfortable?
 - How does location, artist's intent, and history come into play?
- What about different kinds of crosses or other sacred spaces of worship?

0:30-0:45 Church Responsa

- Read responsa
- Discuss: Is it different to enter a church to look at art and be present for a worship service?
- How do we determine our boundaries? Is there a category of statues that for you are “over the line,” uncomfortable, or offensive?

0:45-1:00 Asherah, Complicating our history

- One of the most common references in Torah is to Asherah, a Canaanite mother goddess; mentioned in relation to idolatry, BUT we see Adonai and Asherah worshipped as a pair
- How does this change our answer? Can the boundaries shift? What are we afraid of today?
- Visual imagery can also help us with worship – Noa Kushner

Perhaps this means the problem is different today? How can visuals help us? Inhibit us? Elevate us? Displace us?

Jews and Statues: Session 1 – Lady Liberty and Aphrodite
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The New Colossus, Emma Lazarus, 1883

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Exodus 20:3-7

לֹא־יְהִי־לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עִלְפָּנַי: לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה־לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר
בְּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ: לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
אֵל קַנָּא פֶקֶד עֹן אָבֹת עַל־בָּנִים עַל־שְׂלֵשִׁים וְעַל־רְבָעִים לְשָׁנָאֵי: וְעֵשָׂה חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים לְאֹהֲבֵי
וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי:

(3) You shall have no other gods besides Me. (4) You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. (5) You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I your God Adonai am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, (6) but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4

שאל פרוקלוס בן פלוספוס את רבן גמליאל בעכו, שהיה רוחץ במרחץ של אפרודיטי, אמר לו, כתוב בתורתכם, ולא ידבק בגידך מאומה מן החרם. מפני מה אתה רוחץ במרחץ של אפרודיטי. אמר לו, אין משיבין במרחץ. וכשיצא אמר לו, אני לא באתי בגבולה, היא באתה בגבולי, אין אומרים, נעשה מרחץ לאפרודיטי נוי, אלא אומרים, נעשה אפרודיטי נוי למרחץ. דבר אחר, אם נותנין לך ממון הרבה, אי אתה נכנס לעבודה זרה שלד ערום ובעל קרי ומשתין בפניה, וזו עומדת על פי הביב וכל העם משתינין לפניה. לא נאמר אלא אלהיהם. את שנוהג בו משום אלוה, אסור. ואת שאינו נוהג בו משום אלוה, מתיר:

Proclus ben Plosplus (a Roman philosopher), asked a question to Rabban Gamliel in Akko, while he was bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite. He said to him, “Isn’t it written in your Torah, ‘Let nothing that has been banned stick to your hand’ (Deuteronomy 13:18)? How can you bathe in the bathhouse of Aphrodite?” Rabban Gamliel relied, “It is forbidden to answer Torah queries in the bathhouse.”

When he got out, Rabban Gamliel said to him, “(1) I did not enter into her domain – she came into my domain. (2) People don’t say, ‘Let us make a bathhouse to beautify Aphrodite,’ but instead, ‘Let us make Aphrodite to beautify the bathhouse.’ (3) Alternatively, even if they gave you a lot of money, you would not go to your idol worship naked or impure due to seminal emissions, nor would you urinate in front of your idol. This statue stands on the sewage pipe and all the people urinate in front of it.

“The Torah says, ‘their gods’ (Deuteronomy 12:2, ‘You must destroy all sites at which the nations you are to dispossess worshiped their gods’). A statue at which people behave as if it were a god is forbidden, but a statue where people do not behave as if it were a god is permitted.

Selectins from Rabbi Avi Killip, “Anti-Idolatry”, Hadar, 2023

Fighting idolatry is non-negotiable—and yet the rabbis fill an entire tractate of Talmud literally negotiating what this mandate actually demands of us. Our rabbis grapple with the reality that no series of choices will allow them complete protection from idolatry. There is no simple, easy way out of an idol-filled culture...Rabban Gamliel does not take it as a given that he can use the bathhouse, but he also doesn’t assume a blanket ban. Instead, he raises questions about the role of the idol to help him better understand the implications of the specific situation. Is the idol an adornment of the bathhouse, or was the building built to valorize the idol? Is using this bathroom really showing respect to this idol, or maybe the mode of use in this case is actually denigrating the sacred status of the idol?

Jews and Statues: Session 2 – Uncomfortable Statues
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Exodus 34:29

וַיְהִי בְרִדְתָּ מֹשֶׁה מֵהַר סִינַי וְשָׁנִי לַחַת הָעֵדֻת בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה בְּרִדְתּוֹ מִרְהָר וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא־יָדַע
כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו בְּבִדְבְּרוֹ אֵתוֹ:

So Moses came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant (mistranslated “horned”), since he had spoken with God.

Jews in Church, My Jewish Learning.

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/ask-the-expert-jews-in-church/>

Because the Trinity is at the core of Christianity, and because it implies a god that is more than a single entity, there are those who consider Christianity equal to idolatry. Maimonides was one of the many rabbinic authorities to take this view. Much of the contemporary Orthodox community takes a hard line forbidding one from entering Christian churches under most circumstances, based on Maimonides and those who view Christianity the way he did.

However, the 13th-century Catalanian Rabbi Menachem haMeiri argued that Christianity is not a form of idolatry. Meiri viewed Christians as “people whose lives are governed by religion.” Since Christians are encouraged by their religion to exercise free will and live worthy lives, Meiri argued, most of the laws prohibiting idolatry and consorting with idol worshippers do not apply to Christians.

Today, the Conservative Movement uses the Meiri as the base text for allowing Jews to enter into churches in general....

Asherah, Susan Ackerman Jewish Women’s Archive

Yet despite these and other references associating Asherah with apostasy (for example, Exod 34:13; Deut 7:5; 12:3; Judg 3:7; 1 Kgs 18:19), and despite the fact that the Israelites are explicitly forbidden in Deut 16:21 to erect one of Asherah’s sacred poles beside an altar of YHWH, there are multiple indications in biblical tradition that many in ancient Israel did regard Asherah’s cult icon as an appropriate sacred

symbol within the religion of YHWH. For example, one of Asherah's sacred poles stood next to YHWH's altar at Bethel, one of the two great cult sites of the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kgs 23:15). Another of Asherah's sacred poles stood in that kingdom's capital city, Samaria. The sacred pole of Samaria, moreover, which was erected during the reign of King Ahab (reigned 873–852 B.C.E.), was allowed to remain standing by the reformer King Jehu (1 Kgs 16:33; 2 Kgs 13:6), even though Jehu was generally at pains to remove all non-Yahwistic cults and cult imagery from the land. This fact suggests that Jehu perceived the sacred pole as appropriate in the worship of YHWH...

The presence of Asherah's cult in Israel also raises questions about the nature of the monotheistic confession that is often assumed to be a core principle in Israelite faith. Generally speaking, biblical scholars assume that full-blown, radical, or philosophical monotheism came to Israel fairly late in its history, during the time of the exile in the sixth century b.c.e. Prior to this, we have abundant evidence that other gods and goddesses were worshipped in Israel in addition to (or sometimes instead of) YHWH. Yet even in these earlier materials, we sometimes see evidence of a phenomenon that comes to dominate in the exilic period: the impulse to assimilate the attributes of the many gods and goddesses of older polytheistic systems to the one god, YHWH. Language that speaks of God as mother, for example (as in Deut 32:18; Num 11:12–13; Isa 45:9–10, 49:15; 66:13), probably represents the assimilation of Asherah's maternal characteristics to YHWH.

Noa Kushner, Contemporary Reflection, P'kudei

An experience of God can exist within the visual and tangible realms. That is, the problem with worshipping the Golden Calf was not that the calf could be seen; it was that the Golden Calf was worshipped as if it contained God entirely, as if God was nowhere else. Here, the Israelites learn that an encounter with God does not have to be so abstract, so removed from their sensory experience that they are left without any means of comprehending or describing them. In other words, the divine experience can include things seen. ...Unfortunately, we may have been so afraid of making idols that we have limited ourselves to divine experiences that are abstract and often detached, expecting ourselves to develop a relationship with God without using our eyes.