

is nevertheless possible. The thinkers of the secular Enlightenment, among whom we include its later disciples, such as Marx and Freud, considered this move of the religious Enlightenment as even more deceptive than the transparent beliefs of the idolatry of the masses. In cases where projection is gross and direct it is easy to uncover its illusionary character. A person who prays anthropomorphically to his idol is relatively easy to convince that he is really praying to himself. It is much more difficult to convince someone whose belief is cloaked in the abstraction of an omnipotent, omniscient, absolutely simple force that he is praying to himself. By praying to himself Feuerbach means that the person is praying to the human essence of man, not that the individual person is unconsciously worshipping his own individual personality.

The peak of monotheistic abstraction is the theory of negative attributes. This is, in Feuerbach's view, also the peak of religious illusion. It expresses the believer's terror of existence, since every existence is limited and bounded, and uses reverse projection in the form of negative attributes to attribute to God a kind of existence without any limits or bounds.

## YITZHAK MELAMED

### "Idolatry and its Premature Rabbinic Obituary"

Holy is the Memory of this Flag

(Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook)<sup>1</sup>

And were you to say: 'We are a Nation! We have a land of our own! We have a state. We have soldiers. We have the IDF: we are strong!' – I would ask you: 'Were not your fathers and grandfathers – who lived before these idolatries – Jews?'

(Rabbi Eliezer Menachem Shach)<sup>2</sup>

### *Introduction*

The Babylonian Talmud narrates the following story regarding Ezra and the Judean exiles who returned to Jerusalem, after seventy years of captivity in Babylon. Upon their return to Jerusalem the exiles cried: "Woe, woe it is he who destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing among us!"<sup>3</sup> The entity responsible for all these miseries was the evil inclination toward idolatry. Anticipating the common Rabbinic theodicy which explains the creation of this evil inclination as aiming to bring reward to the righteous who are able to resist it, the exiles cried: "We want neither him, nor reward through him!" "Thereupon" – continues the Talmud – "a tablet fell down from heaven for them, whereupon the word 'truth' was inscribed ... They ordered a fast of three days and three nights, whereupon [the evil inclination toward idolatry] was surrendered to them. He came forth from the Holy of Holies like a young fiery lion. Thereupon the Prophet said to Israel: This is the evil desire of idolatry."<sup>4</sup>

There are several extraordinary elements in this Talmudic account of the historical moment at which the inclination toward idolatry had been eliminated by the "Men of the Great Assembly" (e.g., why did the fiery lion come from the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place in the Temple?). Yet, it is crucial that we not miss its significance as designating a radical break between Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism. While the Bible is replete with injunctions against, and condemnations of, idolatry (thus attesting to the frequency of this practice among contemporary Israelites), the Talmudists often seem to be at loss in trying to understand how the Biblical Israelites could engage in such an egregious cult. Thus, we read in another Talmudic tale of Rav Ashi (352–427 CE), a Babylonian talmudist who used to deliver sermons mocking the three Israelite kings that practiced idolatry: The night before Rav Ashi was about to deliver his sermon, Menashe, one of the three idolatrous kings, appeared in his dream, and asked him a simple question of rabbinic law (which required some modest reasoning). Embarrassed that he was unable to answer the question, Rav Ashi asked Menashe to resolve it, and Menashe did so with ease. "Since thou art so wise, why didst thou worship idols?" asked Rav Ashi. "Wert thou there, thou wouldst have caught up the skirt of thy garment and sped after me," Menashe replied.<sup>5</sup> The Talmudic narrator of this tale is keenly aware of the fact that he is living in a completely different epoch than the Biblical Israelites. Indeed, the main point of the last tale seems to be emphasizing the rupture between the two periods.

The topic of the current paper – idolatry – may be defined in various ways. In order to avoid prejudging this notion, I suggest the following, non-partisan, working definition: *having an attitude (or attitudes) toward an entity other than God which is (are) otherwise typical and unique to one's attitude toward God.*<sup>6</sup> People have various views as to the proper attitude a religious person has, or should have, toward God; whatever that attitude is, having *this* attitude towards anything other than God is idolatry.<sup>7</sup>

The current paper aims at merely charting a brief outline of Jewish philosophical attitudes toward idolatry. In its first part, I discuss some chief trends in the Rabbinic approach toward idolatry.<sup>8</sup> In the second part, I examine the role of idolatry in the philosophy of religion of Moses Maimonides and Benedict de Spinoza, two towering figures of medieval and early modern Jewish philosophy. In the third and last part, I address the relevance of the notion of idolatry to contemporary Jewish life, and argue that the early rabbinic announcement on the perishing of the inclination toward idolatry might have been premature.

### *Rabbinic Attitudes towards Idolatry*

The Rabbinic Hebrew term for idolatry, *Avoda Zarah*, means literally, "a foreign worship." The Talmud designates *Avoda Zarah* as one of the three most severe prohibitions which a person is not allowed to transgress even at the price of one's own life.<sup>9</sup> The severity of the issue of idolatry is reflected in a Midrash which relates the conversation between God and Moses before his death. According to

this Midrash, God explains to Moses that if Moses would not die, the Children of Israel “will err, confuse you for a God, and engage in your cult.”<sup>10</sup>

While the intricate details prohibiting idolatry were expounded in great specificity in post-Biblical, rabbinic, literature, it was quite rare for (post-Biblical) Jews to suspect other Jews of committing idolatry. Thus, when, David Nieto (1654–1728), an early eighteenth century rabbinic scholar, was suspected of pantheism due to his repeated announcements that God and Nature are one and the same, the senior rabbinic authority that was asked to arbitrate the issue insisted that it makes no sense to ascribe to an intelligent person a cult of inanimate objects. The arbitrator, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi (1656–1718) – commonly known as the “*Hakham Tzvi*” – writes: “If the accusers [of Nieto] sought to decipher his claim as insinuating that the heating or humid thing is divine, this is something one cannot suspect of even the most dumb and foolish heretic in the world.”<sup>11</sup>

For medieval rabbinic figures, the issue of idolatry was primarily present in the context of discussions of the status of Christianity. While there has been a wide rabbinic consensus on the monotheistic nature of Islam,<sup>12</sup> the crucial Christian doctrine of the trinity pushed the scales toward conceiving Christianity as full-fledged idolatry. Thus, Maimonides explicitly rules that Christianity is idolatry.<sup>13</sup> A crucial question in this context was the status of the belief in “communality” [*shituf*], i.e., a belief that recognizes other deities, *in addition* to the genuine God. The doctrine of the trinity has been commonly thought of as an instance of the belief in “communality.” There has been a rabbinic consensus that *for Jews* the prohibition on idolatry pertains also to the cult of “communality” and thus Jews who practiced Christianity were considered full-fledged idolaters. According to rabbinic teaching, gentiles too were prohibited to engage in idolatry as part of the seven universal commandments given to Noah and his descendants. However, it was not clear whether the cult of “communality” fell within this prohibition. Some medieval rabbinic authorities argued that the descendants of Noah (i.e., gentiles) were not warned to avoid the cult of “communality,” and thus a gentile who took part in Christian cult should not be considered an idolater.<sup>14</sup>

The charge of belief in “communality” has also been raised in internal Jewish contexts. Medieval critics of the Spanish Kabbalah argued that the belief in the ten *Sefirot* (divine emanations) is even worse than Christianity, since Christians believe merely in *three* divine beings while the Kabbalists believe in *ten*.<sup>15</sup> Similar charges of engaging in a variant of the worship of “communality” were brought by Ezekiel Landau (1713–1793) – the Chief Rabbi of Prague and one of the major rabbinic figures of early modernity – against certain Kabbalistic practices (primarily, against theurgic prayer), in a sermon that has been published only recently.<sup>16</sup>

So far we have very briefly surveyed some aspects of the rabbinic attitude toward idolatry. In the following section we will turn to philosophical inquiries about the nature of idolatry by Maimonides and Spinoza. It is noteworthy that in his legal code Maimonides begins his discussion of the prohibitions on idolatry with a lengthy genealogy of this practice. We will begin by studying carefully the first two paragraphs of Maimonides’ extraordinary theory about the origin of idolatry.

### *Maimonides and Spinoza on the Nature and Origins of Idolatry*

In the days of Enosh the children of mankind erred grievously... Their mistake was to say ‘because God made the stars and planets to rule the universe and placed them on high to share honor with them, for they are ministers who render service in His presence, they are worthy of praise, glory and honor.’ They also said that, ‘It is the will of God – blessed be He – to exalt and honor what He exalted and honored, just as a king desires to honor those who stand before him: such is the prerogative of the king.’ When this idea arose in their hearts, they began to build temples, to offer sacrifices, and to praise and glorify them in words. Because of a wrong belief they bowed down before the stars in order to reach the will of the Creator. *This is the basis of idolatry and was the verbal tradition of the worshipers who knew its origin.* They did not say there was no God except one special star.<sup>17</sup>

Why does Maimonides commence his discussion of the laws of idolatry with this genealogical explanation of the origin of idolatry? What is the point in including such a theory in a *legal* code? I suspect that the answer to both questions lies in the estrangement that many rabbinic figures felt from the practice of idolatry. We have seen that the talmudists stressed the existence of a rupture between their world and the epoch of the Israelites who frequently engaged in idolatry. Presumably, by providing this genealogy of idolatry, Maimonides attempts to explain how intelligent and mostly decent people could engage in the gross cult of idolatry. The key element in this explanation is that the deterioration of the original and natural *true* religion of humanity into idolatry happened through a *very long process*. Maimonides attempts to reconstruct the crucial stages of this process in order to show that apparently minor deviations from true religion are likely to lead later to the coarsest forms of idolatry.

If we look closely at the passage above we could see that *Maimonides is doing his best to diminish our feeling of estrangement from idolatry*. The people of the age of Enosh did not intend to engage in an idolatrous cult, but merely adored God’s servants – the stars and the planets – and shared God’s own appreciation for these servants; by serving God’s most powerful servants, they just intended *to serve God*, through his most powerful and visible creatures.

Cult and culture frequently become a second nature. Indeed, after a few generations the original reason for the cult of the planets and stars was forgotten, and the practice of the cult of stars became an end for itself.

After a long time [*ahar she-arkhu ha-yamim*] there arose among the children of men false prophets who said that God has commanded them to serve such and such a star, or all the stars. They brought offerings and libations to drink in certain quantities, built a temple and made an image for all the people, men, women, and children to bow down before it ... Then other deceivers arose who said that the star itself, or the planet or messenger had spoken with them and told them to serve the idol and to worship it by doing one

thing and not another. The service of images by different ceremonies with sacrifice and bowing down before them spread throughout the world. After a long time [*ve-keivan she-arkhu ha-yamim*] the great and awesome Name was forgotten, and the people, men, women, and children, only recognized an image of wood or stone which they had been brought up from infancy to serve by bowing down, and by swearing by its name. The wise men among them, the priests and such like, thought that there was no god except the stars and planets whose images were made in their likenesses.<sup>18</sup>

It seems that the penultimate stage in this process was the cult of “communality”: the people engaged in a cult of both God and the stars. Only in the final stage of this very long process the name of the true God was forgotten, and that cult was dedicated squarely to the stars and planets.

Before we turn to examine the crucial role of idolatry in Maimonides’ explanation of the Commandments of the Torah, let me stress two more points about the genealogy constructed by Maimonides. First, we should note that at some point the new cult of the stars became a full-blown religion with its own commandments and prohibitions (“and told them to serve the idol and to worship it by doing one thing and not another”). Secondly, notice how each link in this process leads to another in an almost deterministic chain. This might have been a mirror image of the rabbinic justification for the injunction against social contact with idolaters: “[The rabbis] decreed against [consuming the idolaters’] bread and oil on account of their wine, and against their wine on account of their daughters, and against their daughters on account of idolatry.”<sup>19</sup>

Chapters 35 to 49 of the third part of Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* are dedicated to the issue of the reasons for the commandments. In this context Maimonides argues: “the first purpose of the law is to remove idolatry and to wipe out its traces and all that belongs to it, even its memory, and everything that leads to carrying out some action connected with it.”<sup>20</sup> Maimonides notes that he gained a genuine insight into the reasons of many of the commandment by studying ancient books describing the cult of the Sabians, an ancient pagan religion, associated mostly with the geographic area of Haran (Syria).

I say that the meaning and the causes of many laws became fully clear to me only when I studied the beliefs, views, actions, and methods of worship of the Sabians, as you will see when I come to explain the motives of those commandments which are wrongly assumed to have no reason.<sup>21</sup>

I will not address here the question of the historicity of this alleged cult; it is clear that Maimonides, many of his Arab contemporaries, and quite a few modern scholars took the Sabians as a genuine, specific, historical religion.<sup>22</sup> The Sabians, according to Maimonides, engaged in the cult of the stars as deities, and considered the sun as the supreme god.<sup>23</sup> Maimonides explains many of the commandments of the Torah as intending to eradicate specific common practices of the Sabian religion.<sup>24</sup> Probably the boldest of these explanations is Maimonides’ claim that it

was God’s cunningness [*talattuf*] that stood behind the Torah commandments to bring sacrifices and the intricate laws of the temple rituals.

At the time the generally accepted custom all the world over, and the common method of worship ... was to offer sacrifices of various animals in those temples in which the statues has been placed, to prostrate oneself before them, and to burn incense before them ... This being so, God’s wisdom and subtlety, evident in all his creatures, did not decree that He should proclaim in His law a complete ban on all these kinds of worship, and their abolition. It would in those days have been quite inconceivable that such a thing should have been accepted ... For this reason God permitted those methods of worship to continue, but instead of their being directed at created beings and figments of the imagination devoid of any reality, He caused them to be directed to Himself and enjoined us to carry them on in His name.<sup>25</sup>

According to Maimonides the intricate laws of the service in the temple had one aim: to gradually educate the Hebrews by severely restricting and transforming the practice of sacrifices.<sup>26</sup> This divine plot, says Maimonides, was so successful that “the very memory of idolatry was in course of time wiped off the earth. The essential and real principle of our faith, the existence and Unity of God, was thus established without people being shocked and dismayed.”<sup>27</sup> It is thus not a historical accident that the Talmudist could not fathom how their ancestors could engage in the cult of idolatry. The decisive anti-Pagan consciousness of the Talmudists was the result of a lengthy educational process devised by a cunning God.<sup>28</sup>

Whether or not it was God’s aim in decreeing the commandment, it is clear that the eradication of idolatry and the practices which lead to idolatry was one of the chief aims of Maimonides’ writing. The *Guide* opens with the elucidation of the Biblical verse that asserts that man was created in God’s image (Gen 1:27), a verse that may provide crucial support for an anthropomorphic conception of God. For Maimonides, there is a clear path from anthropomorphic religion to full-fledged idolatry. Therefore, the refutation of anthropomorphic religion has a crucial religious significance in Maimonides’ philosophy.

Like Maimonides, Spinoza considered anthropomorphism (and anthropocentrism) as one of the greatest errors and impediments for true knowledge of God.<sup>29</sup> Spinoza dedicates a considerable share of his *Theological Political Treatise* (1670. Henceforth: *TTP*) to the issue of superstition [*superstitio*]. While this issue has some affinity to idolatry – both address erroneous forms of religion – the two are distinct, since Spinoza clearly allows for a superstitious worship of the true God.<sup>30</sup> Like many of his medieval predecessors, Spinoza reserved the notion of idolatry to *the conception of a created being as divine*. The discussion of idolatry in the *TTP* is far more specific and punctual. The context of this discussion is the question of the nature of God’s revelation on Mt. Sinai. Spinoza rejects the view that at Sinai the Hebrews heard merely an inarticulate noise,<sup>31</sup> and insists that we should not digress from the testimony of scripture according to which God spoke

with the Hebrews “face to face” (Deut. 5:4), that is, in the manner in which two people normally communicate their thoughts through the mediation of speech. Then, Spinoza notes:

However, this does not remove every difficulty. For it seems quite unreasonable to maintain that a created thing, dependent on God in the same way as any other, could express, in reality or in words, or explain through his own person, the essence or existence of God, by saying in the first person, “I am the Lord your God, etc.” Of course, when someone says orally “I have understood,” no one thinks that the mouth of the man saying this has understood, but only that his mind has. Nevertheless, because the mouth is related to the nature of the man saying this, and also because he to whom it is said has previously perceived the nature of the intellect, he easily understands the thought of the man speaking by comparison with his own. But since these people knew nothing of God but his name, and wanted to speak to him to become certain of his Existence, I do not see how their request would be fulfilled by a creature who was no more related to God than any other creature, and who did not pertain to God’s nature, saying “I am God.” What if God had twisted Moses’ lips to pronounce and say the same words, “I am God”? Would they have understood from that that God exists? What if they were the lips, not of Moses, but of some beast [*alicuius bestiae*]?<sup>32</sup>

The danger of idolizing a creature as a result of divine revelation by means of a creature was not merely speculative, since shortly after the revelation in Sinai the Hebrews engaged in the cult of the golden calf. Spinoza might have been alluding to this possibility in the very last sentence of the quote above. Indeed, one of the major medieval rabbinic commentators on the Bible suggested that the golden calf spoke.<sup>33</sup>

Why then was God revealed to the Hebrews through speech? As if answering this question, Spinoza adopts the style of Ibn Ezra and notes: “I do not doubt that there is some mystery concealed here” (III/19).

The threat of idolatry is employed by Spinoza for polemical purposes later in the *TTP* when he criticizes his adversaries that refuse to entertain the possibility of any corruption in the biblical text. Spinoza accuses these adversaries of excessive zeal that leads them to “begin to worship [*adorare incipient*] likenesses and images, i.e., paper and ink, in place of the Word of God.”<sup>34</sup> By ascribing to a created entity – the text of the Bible – infallibility which properly belongs only to God, Spinoza’s (Calvinist) opponents engage in an idolatrous cult. This striking charge seems to be a radical, if not absurd, culmination of the rather common understanding of idolatry in Jewish literature as the cult of a created being.

### *Idolatry and the Modern Jew*

Modernity is commonly conceived as the age of secularization, and as such one could expect that the issue of idolatry would simply disappear from the discourse of the period. The very opposite, however, seemed to be the case.

In 1938, on the verge of the Second World War, Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman (1874–1941), one of the prominent rabbinic figures of the inter-war period, published a collection of essays titled, “*Ikveta de-Meshikha*” [*In the Footsteps of the Messiah*]. The collection is imbued with the feeling of an approaching catastrophe and messianic times. One of Wasserman’s most striking claims in the book is his description of nationalism, including Jewish nationalism, as genuine idolatry, i.e., cult of the Jewish nation as idol.<sup>35</sup> Wasserman stresses that this grave charge is not pressed merely against the secular Zionists; even religious Zionist Jews who take part in the cult of the nation commit the severe sin of idolatry insofar as they practice “communality,” an adoration of both God and the Jewish nation.<sup>36</sup> Wasserman was not alone in making such charges,<sup>37</sup> and in order to better understand them it would be useful to look briefly at the connection between modern secularism and cult.

Whatever account of the emergence of modernity one may adopt, the French Revolution is one of its major landmarks. Anti-clericalism was an integral part of the ideology of the revolution, but the revolutionaries were not satisfied with the mere de-Christianization of France, and attempted to cultivate instead a variety of *civil* religions. Of such a kind was the *Culte de la Raison* of the early 1790s, which developed its own ceremonies, rituals and festivals.<sup>38</sup> Thomas Carlyle quotes Anacharsis Cloots – a Prussian nobleman who became one of the Jacobin disseminators of the new religion – as openly proclaiming: “There is one God only: *the people*.”<sup>39</sup> Forty years later, Jules Michelet, the great historian of the French Revolution would write retrospectively: “My noble country, you must take the place of God who escapes us, that you may fill within us the immeasurable abyss which extinct Christianity left over.”<sup>40</sup>

In various ways, modern nationalism at once continued and replaced Christianity as the cult of modern Europe.<sup>41</sup> Jewish nationalism followed a similar path. The adoration of pagan culture was a vital topos in early Zionist literature.<sup>42</sup> More importantly, the cultural mainstream of Zionism aimed at a “transvaluation of values” in which the nation, the homeland, and the national hero, took the place of the old Jewish God. One striking example of this process is the still widely popular Hanukkah children’s song, “*Mi Yemalel Gvurot Israel*” [*Who can verbalize the Glory of Israel*]. The title of the song is a paraphrase of a stanza from the famous liturgy of “*Shir ha-Kavod*” [*Song of Glory*] – “Who can verbalize the Glory of the Lord” – which, in its turn, refers to Psalms 106:2. Just as the above verse in the Song of Glory refers to God as *ineffable*, so does the Zionist Hanukkah song turn *the nation into an ineffable Being*, one whose sublimity transcends the capacities of language. The result is a negative theology whose cult-object is the Jewish nation. Every single stanza in this common Hanukkah

song engages systematically in transferring divine qualities to the nation and the national hero.

To this striking example one can adduce innumerable other key texts of Zionist culture and literature that engage in the transformation of Judaism from the cult of the Jewish God to the cult of the Jewish Nation.<sup>43</sup>

Let me conclude by briefly discussing a *halakhic* question which was brought before Rabbi Moishe Feinstein (1895–1986), the towering rabbinic authority of the second half of the twentieth century. Rabbi Feinstein was asked whether one is allowed to pray in a synagogue in which national flags are staged next to the Holy Ark. In his typical, mild-mannered, response Rabbi Feinstein notes that though it is plainly improper to put flags, which are “objects of vanity” [*inyan shel hevel ve-shitul*] in a synagogue, it is not clear what kind of prohibition could be at stake. The most relevant injunction, says Rabbi Feinstein, is the prohibition against idolatry. But since those who employ the flag as their symbol did not consider it a *sacred* object, he does not think there is a genuine prohibition at stake. Therefore he advised the inquirer to try to peacefully convince the members of the synagogue to remove the flags, but not to engage in sectarian fight over this issue.<sup>44</sup> Rabbi Feinstein’s responsum seems to imply that if the national flag is considered as a sacred object, the severe injunctions against idolatry may well be pertinent.

## Notes

- 1 Levin 2000, 58. I would like to thank Clare Carlisle, Sam Fleischacker, Yoni Garb, Michah Gottlieb, Zev Harvey, Aaron Segal and Jason Yonover for their most helpful comments and criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper.
- 2 Shach 1988, 30.
- 3 *BT Yoma* 69b.
- 4 *BT Yoma* 69b. Cf. *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, VII 8.
- 5 *BT Sanhedrin* 102b.
- 6 Cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Avodat Kokhavim*, 2:1. It is an interesting question whether the mere performance of a worshipping *act* toward an idol without considering the idol as divinity (for example, when one is forced by threats to bow before an idol) constitutes a bona fide idolatry. For the Talmudic debate about this issue, see *BT Sanhedrin* 61b–62a. I am indebted to Aaron Segal for drawing my attention to this issue.
- 7 Thus, for example, the early modern French philosopher, Nicole Malebranche argued that ascribing genuine causal powers to finite things is idolatry, since God is the only genuine cause of all things; see Malebranche 1997, 682–5. Notice that the definition above excludes from the scope of idolatry improper religious practice toward God. Indeed, within rabbinic law, improper cult of God (e.g., bringing sacrifices outside of the temple, or any other violation of the laws of sacrifices) is a severe transgression, yet it is not considered idolatrous.
- 8 Though the focus of this volume is Jewish *philosophy*, a proper understanding of the rabbinic attitude toward idolatry is essential since throughout the vast majority of Jewish history, its most important, if not sole, literary, normative, corpus has been rabbinic literature.
- 9 *BT Sanhedrin* 74a. The other two prohibitions are on murder and incest (which includes adultery).
- 10 Eisenstein 1915, II:363.
- 11 Ashkenazi 1981, Question 18. On Nieto and the controversy, see Petuchowski 1970 and Melamed n.d.. The Nieto affair is one of the very rare cases in which pantheism was suspected as heresy in the Jewish context.
- 12 See, for example, Maimonides *Epistles*, 42. See, however, Fenton 1983, 89, for discussion of RADBAZ’s of Islam as “tantamount to Idolatry” in spite of its monotheistic nature.
- 13 *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Avodat Kokhavim*, 9:4, *Hilkhoh Ma’akhalot Asurot*, 11:7, and *Commentary on the Mishnah, Avodah Zarah*, 1:3. In spite of his unequivocal classification of Christianity as idolatry, Maimonides considers it a step forward from paganism toward genuine monotheism. See *Hilkhoh Melakhim*, 11:4–5 (notice that this passage has been censored in many editions due to its explicit denunciation of Jesus).
- 14 See the claims of Rabbeinu Tam (1100–1171) in the Tosafot’s commentary on *Sanhedrin* 63b. Rabbeinu Tam’s view was accepted by many rabbinic authorities. See, for example, Rabbi Moshe Isserlis’s (1530–1572) gloss on *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayim*, 156:1, and Rabbi Shabbtai Kohen’s (1622–1663) commentary on *Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah*, 151:7. For recent endorsement of that view, see Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum 1982, 110. For a scholarly study of this issue, see Katz 1961, 35, 164–8.
- 15 See the claims of “one of the philosophers” in *Shut ha-Ribash* [The responsa of Rabbi Yitzhak ben Sheshet (1326–1408)], 157. The same critique also appears in an epistle by Avraham Abulafia (1240–1291?). See Idel 1993, 109.
- 16 See Kahana and Silver 2010, 358–359. Notice that Landau does not reject the kabbalah tout court, but rather the practices he considers to be bordering on communality.
- 17 *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Avodat Kokhavim*, 1:1. Italics added. Unless otherwise marked, I use here the translation of Russell and Weinberg (1983).
- 18 *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Avodat Kokhavim*, 1:2.
- 19 *BT Shabbat* 17b.
- 20 *Guide*, 3:29; 1995, 178 (cf. p. 180). See also Halbertal and Margalit 1992, 128.
- 21 *Guide*, *ibid.*; 179. Cf. Stroumsa 2009, 101.
- 22 See *Guide*, *ibid.* For a fascinating discussion of perception of the Sabians in the early Islamic world and of the “modern Sabian myth” of twentieth century scholarship, see Stroumsa *ibid.*, 84–102.
- 23 *Guide*, *ibid.*; 175.
- 24 See Stroumsa 2009, 101–2, notes 88–89 for a (partial) list of such explanations.
- 25 *Guide*, 3:32; 1995, 181–2.
- 26 “All those laws concerning sacrifices and pilgrimages to the Temple were merely in order to achieve that principle. For its sake I have transferred those acts of worship to Myself, until the traces of idolatry should be extinguished and the principle of My unity established.” *Guide*, *ibid.*; 183–4.
- 27 *Guide*, *ibid.*; 182.
- 28 Maimonides was sharply criticized for his views on the issue of temple sacrifices. For Nachmanides’ vigorous attack on these views, see Nachmanides’ *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, Leviticus 1:9.
- 29 See Melamed 2010. For Spinoza too there is a clear path leading from anthropomorphism to idolatry. Paraphrasing Xenophanes, Spinoza writes: “a triangle, if it could speak, would likewise say that God is eminently triangular, and a circle that God is eminently circular. In this way each would ascribe to God its own attributes, assuming itself to be like God and regarding all else as ill-formed” (Letter 56; Spinoza 2002, 904, italics added).
- 30 See, for example, Spinoza’s ascription of superstition to “the Pharisees” whom he never charges with idolatry (*TTP*, Ch. 3; III/53).
- 31 See *Guide*, 3:32–33.
- 32 Spinoza, *TTP*, Ch. 1; III/18–19. I am indebted to Edwin Curley for granting me permission to use his forthcoming translation of *TTP*, from which all quotes in this

- paper are cited. Cf. Spinoza, *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well Being*, II 24 (I/107/13): "To make himself known to man, God *neither can, nor need, use words, miracles, or any other created thing, but only himself.*" (Spinoza 1985, 145, italics added).
- 33 See Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, ~1080--~1160) on Exodus 32:4.
- 34 Spinoza, *TTP*, Ch. 12 (III/159).
- 35 Wasserman 2002, 43 and 141–2.
- 36 Wasserman 2002, 43 and 141–2. Indeed, it is customary in current Israeli official ceremonies to speak about "the Holiness of God, the Nation, and the Land" [*Kedushat ha-Shem, ha-Am ve-Ha'aretz*]. I am indebted to Zev Harvey for pointing this out to me. For the very same critique of "religious nationalism" as idolatrous 'communalism', see Rabbi Eliezer Menachem Shach 1988, 45–46.
- 37 The group of twentieth century Jewish thinkers who considered nationalism as idolatry is rather wide and includes figures from very different backgrounds and ideologies. Some notable figures in this group are Rabbi Aharon Shmuel Tamres (1920, 15–16), Yesha'yau Leibowitz (1984), Franz Rosenzweig (1927, 185), Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum (1982, 119), and Rabbi Eliezer Menachem Shach (1988, 30–2, 37, 45–6).
- 38 Citing the work of Mona Ozouf, David Bell (2001, 167) writes: "The formal content of the festivals overwhelmingly referred not to Christianity, but to pagan antiquity ... The festivals amounted to an attempt to 'transfer sacrality' to the human world, the Revolution itself, and the *patrie*."
- 39 Carlyle 1903, 225.
- 40 Michelet 1959, I:83. Quoted in O'Brien 1988, 17.
- 41 See Bell 2001, Ch. 1, for a nuanced discussion of the issue.
- 42 See, for example, Tschernichovsky's important 1899 poem, "*Lenokhah Pessel Apollo*" [*Before Apollo's Statue*], and Avraham Shlonsky's 1924 essay "*Zelem*" [*Idol*]. For a discerning discussion of these texts, see Stahl (forthcoming), Ch. 1–2.
- 43 Consider, for example, Naomi Shemer's popular song from the early 1970s, "*Shivhei Maoz*" in which the reference of the phrase "*Maoz zur Yeshuat*" is transferred from God, to the IDF bunkers [*maozim*] on the Suez Canal. Yoni Garb helpfully pointed to a stanza from another famous Israeli Hanukkah song ("*Yemei ha-Hanukkah*" [*The Day of Hanukkah*] which asserts that these were the Maccabees, rather than God, who made miracles ("*al ha-nisim ve-al haniflaot asher holelu ha-makabbim*").
- 44 Feinstein 1982, 105–6.

### Further Reading on Idolatry

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# **Jewish Philosophy Past and Present**

Contemporary Responses to Classical Sources

**Edited by  
Daniel Frank and Aaron Segal**