

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XLVII: Re'eh (Deut. 11:26–16:17)

Essay 2. Don't follow the way of the idol worshipers

פסוק "וּפְנֵי-תִדְרֹשׁ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם לֵאמֹר אֵיכָה יַעֲבֹדוּ הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה אֶת-אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה-כֵן גַּם-אֲנִי, לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כֵן לֵה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי כָל-תּוֹעֵבֹת ה' אֲשֶׁר שָׁנֵא" וכו'. קִשָּׁה דְהִנֵּה לֹא לֹדֵםר "אֵיכָה עֲבָדוּ" לְשׁוֹן עֲבַר שְׁהָרִי כָבֵר אָמַר "אֲחֵרֵי הַשְּׁמַדִּים מִפְּנֵיךָ". וְעוֹד מֵהוּ "לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כֵן לֵה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ" וכו', וְהֵלֵא כָבֵר הַזֶּה הִזְהִיר וְעָנַשׁ עַל זֶה בְּמִקּוֹם אַחֵר "לֹא-יִהְיֶה-לְךָ" וְ"לֹא-תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה?" וּמִכָּאֵן נִרְאֶה שְׂאִין שׁוֹם עוֹנֵשׁ רַק מִשׁוֹם כִּי אֵת "כָּל-תּוֹעֵבֹת ה' אֲשֶׁר שָׁנֵא עָשׂוּ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם" וְלֹא מִשׁוֹם אִיסוּר עֲבוּדָה זָרָה, וְאִיךָ תִּסַּק אֲדַעֲתִין לְעֲבוֹד עֲבוּדָה זָרָה דְקֹאֲמַר "וְאֶעֱשֶׂה-כֵן גַּם-אֲנִי".

There are **verse[s]**: “When the L-rd your G-d has cut down before you the nations that you are about to enter and dispossess, and you have dispossessed them and settled in their land; you should be careful, lest you be lured into their ways after they’ve been wiped out before you! **Do not inquire about their gods, saying, ‘How will [יַעֲבֹדוּ] [ya’avdu] those nations worship their gods? I will also do this.’ You shall not act thus toward the L-rd your G-d, for every abhorrent act that the L-rd detests they perform** for their gods; they even offer up their sons and daughters in fire to their gods.” (Deut. 12:29-31). **There is a difficulty, for [Moses] should have said, “how did [עֲבָדוּ] [avdu] those nations worship their gods,” in the past tense, for he already said, “after they’ve been wiped out before you.” Also, what is this, “you shall not act thus toward the L-rd your G-d,” for didn’t [Moses] already prohibit and prescribe this behavior in another place, viz, in the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods besides Me” (Ex. 20:3) and “You shall not bow down to them or serve them” (Ex. 20:5)? From here in Deut. 12:29-31, it appears that the only punishment that would occur in the event of a violation is because “every abhorrent act that the L-rd detests they perform for their gods”, and there would not be any punishment because of the prohibition against idol worship.** That is, if the verses were meant as a warning against idol worship, they would have explicitly said that. Rather, something else is intended by the verses. **For how would it enter their minds to worship idols, when it says, “I will also do this”?** In other words, they knew from past experiences that idol worship was a grave sin, so they couldn’t have meant idol worship when they said, “I will also do this.”

* English translation: Copyright © 2021 by Charles S. Stein. More essays are at <https://www.zstorah.com>

ואף אם נפרש הפסוק כדעת הרמב"ן ש"וּאֶעֱשֶׂה־כֶּן גַּם־אֲנִי" רצה לומר בעבודת ה' יתברך, גם זה אין סביר לעבד ה' בעבודה נכריה, וכמו שהקשה הרב אלשיך ועיי"ש.

We can interpret the verse according to the opinion of the Ramban,¹ that “I will also do this” does not mean “I will also worship idols,” but rather means to say, I will follow the same practices but do so “in the service of G-d, may He be blessed.” But even so, if we interpret according to the Ramban’s view, it doesn’t make sense to serve G-d in a foreign manner, as Rabbi Alshich² questioned, and see there.

ולדין נראה לומר לפי שבאותם הזמנים היו "ערכים לגד שלחן" שהיו סבורים להמשיך עליהם המזל טוב וכמו שכתב הבית יוסף, יורה דעה, בשם ר' ירוחם, שמיהה באותם אנשים שהיו עורכים שלחן במיני מאכל בליל שלפני המילה למזל טוב של התינוק הנמול משום דהיגו ממש "ערכים לגד שלחן". וזה הנה דרכו של בלעם לקסום קסמים, כדאיתא בזוהר (ח"ג פרשת בלק דף קצ"ב) ששם עירו נקרא פתורה שרצה לומר פתורא דהיגו שלחן ועיי"ש

As for us, it appears to say that in those times, they were “arranging a table for Fortune” (Isaiah 65:11),³ for they believed it would bring upon themselves good fortune, as the Beit Yosef⁴ wrote, in Yoreh De’ah, in the name of Rabbeinu Yerucham⁵ (siman 179:26). That is, the non-Jews would set up a table with delicacies, not necessarily to eat, but as a form of sympathetic magic that they should be rewarded by Fortune with wealth to continue to be able to afford such delicacies. [Rabbeinu Yerucham and the Beit Yosef] criticized those Jewish people who similarly arranged a table with types of food on the night before a circumcision, for good luck of the infant being circumcised, because this was precisely “arranging a table for Fortune,” as the non-Jews had practiced. This was the path of Balaam, who made divinations, as is brought in the Zohar (vol. III, parshat Balak, page 192), for there his city was called Petora [פתורה]⁶ which means to say Petura [פתורא], an Aramaic word which means “table,” and see there.

¹ Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (1194–1270) (“Nachmanides,” also “Ramban”), a leading medieval Jewish scholar, Sephardic rabbi, philosopher, physician, kabbalist, and biblical commentator.

² Rabbi Moshe Alshich (1508–1593), prominent rabbi, preacher, and biblical commentator. Born in 1508 in the Ottoman Empire, he later moved to Safed where he became a student of Rabbi Joseph Caro.

³ The embodiment of Fortune, the term *gad* [גַּד] is understood by Rashi as one of the planets followed by the gentiles. Ibn Ezra cites Rabbi Moshe [ben Samuel] haKohen [ibn Gikatilla] as identifying *gad* as the planet Jupiter.

⁴ The Beit Yosef, by Rabbi Joseph Karo (1488-1575), is a long and detailed commentary on Rabbi Jacob ben Asher’s Arba’ah Turim (“Tur”). It served as a precursor to the Shulchan Aruch, which Rabbi Karo wrote later in his life.

⁵ Rabbi Yerucham ben Meshullam (1290–1350), prominent rabi and posek. Born in Provence, after Jews were expelled from France, he moved to Toledo, Spain. He greatly influenced Rabbi Yosef Karo, and is quoted extensively in both the Shulchan Aruch and Beit Yosef.

⁶ Num. 22:4-5: “Balak, son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, sent messengers to Balaam, son of Beor, in Petora [פתורה], which is by the Euphrates, in the land of his kinsfolk.”

ומעתה הגוים שנקרתו מן הארץ, וישקראל ירשו את ארצם, והורע מזלם בנדאי שאותם המעט שנשתירו מהם שברחו ונמלטו בנדאי שיעשו כל מאמצי כחם להגביר עליהם מחדש המזל טוב ונערכו שלחנם לגד כדי שיתזיר להם הממשלה. וכן יאמרו ישקראל אף אנו נעשה כן לשם שמים כדי להוסיף כח על מזלנו הטוב, משום הכי בא והזהיר לא תעשה כן וכו'. והשטא דניק שפיר "איכה יעבדו" בלשון עתיד ומתורצות כל הקושיות.

Now, the Gentiles were cut off from the land, and Israel inherited their land, and their luck worsened. The few who were left of them, who fled and escaped, would surely make every powerful effort to strengthen their good fortune again and to arrange their table for Fortune, in order that the sovereignty should return to them. Lest Israel say, "We will also do this, for the sake of Heaven, in order to add force to our good fortune," because of this concern, [Moses] came and warned [Israel] not to do so. Now, the use of the future tense, "How will [יעבדו] [ya'avdu] those nations worship their gods," is nicely precise, in the future tense, for it refers to the surviving idolators, and all the difficulties are solved.

* * *