

***Many Paths to G\*d***  
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*Parshat Devarim*

**There shall you serve man-made gods of wood or stone that cannot see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. And from there shall you seek thine Eternal G\*d; if you truly seek G\*d with all thine heart and with all thy soul, thou shalt find G\*d. (Deuteronomy 4:28-29)**

The Hebrew text shifts back and forth between singular and plural (hence the English shift between the plural “you” and the singular “thou”), and that shift carries a lesson for us. The serving of man-made gods is phrased in the plural, the finding of G\*d in the singular.

When we are disunited, when we are dis-integrated, then the gods we serve are of wood or stone and have no power; when we are united and unified – even though we differ – then we can find G\*d. But there is another meaning as well.

When the gods we serve are false, when they are merely artificial constructs, then we become scattered, separated from ourselves. It is only by seeking G\*d with all our heart and with all our soul that we can become one – again, even through our differences.

The Vilna Gaon had a rather disturbing interpretation of these verses. The gods of wood and stone, he said, represent Christianity (the wood of the Cross) and Islam (the foundation stone of the Mosque of Omar, the Dome of the Rock,

from which Mohammed ascended to Heaven). And, of course, the Vilna Gaon views these as false and powerless faiths. This despite the very clear statements of Rashi (concerning Christianity) and Maimonides (concerning Islam) that those faiths are not idolatrous but are, indeed, paths to G\*d, even if paths forbidden to Jews.

Rather than dismiss the Vilna Gaon entirely, however, we can learn from him, even while reinterpreting what he says. G\*d, the previous verse tells us, will scatter us among the nations, and, by our presence among the nations (being a “light unto the nations”), we will inspire them, through wood (the Cross) and stone (the Rock), to understand that It is G\*d Whom they truly serve.

We may also learn that from the wood (of the Cross) and the rock (of the Mosque) we are commanded to seek G\*d, to recognize that other faith traditions, just as our own, are ways of seeking G\*d.

So long as we believe that others’ ways of worship are idolatrous, we will remain in a state of dissociation, from others and from ourselves. When we come to understand the beauty, the sanctity, the holiness of other faith traditions – when we cease trying to limit G\*d – then we can integrate ourselves. Then we will have a whole heart and a whole soul with which to serve G\*d. Only by recognizing others’ experiences of G\*d as true and valid will we be able to attain our own true and valid experience of G\*d.

Shabbat Shalom.