

Making G*d in Our Image **Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer**

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Parshat Behukotai

Can a person make gods for oneself? They are not gods! (Jeremiah 16:20)

Thus does Jeremiah, in this week's Haftarah (Prophetic) reading, rage against idolatry, and we have traditionally understood his diatribe to be against idols of wood and stone, echoing the theme of the Torah reading.

But some detailed analysis will reveal another level of meaning to Jeremiah's exclamation, one which – unlike the traditional reading, for there seems to be little if any danger today of our turning to the worship of idols of wood or stone – has great significance for us today.

What does it mean for us to make gods for ourselves? Obviously, it means the worship of idols, but we are no longer tempted to worship idols of wood and stone; we worship G*d. And we follow G*d's instructions to us, however we understand those instructions. But exactly how do we understand G*d's instructions?

There are those, traditional in their observance, who follow the traditional Mitzvot, observing the dietary laws, the rules of Shabbat and Festivals, the avoidance of speaking ill of another, dealing fairly with one another, and all the other Commandments, to a greater or lesser degree, as they have been traditionally interpreted.

And there are those whose emphasis is on how we treat the planet, on *tikkun olam*, a restoration of the earth's ecological integrity.

And there are those whose idea of *tikkun olam* is to bring greater caring and compassion to the structure of society.

And there are innumerable other ways of engaging in following G*d's direction.

And let it be noted that these categories are not mutually exclusive; there is great overlap among them.

What, then, is the issue? Is there a way in which all we well-meaning and decent people are – G*d forbid! – engaged in a form of idolatry? I suggest that there may be, not in our actions, but in the route through which we have come to our actions.

I offer a question – to myself as much as to anyone else. When was the last time that we did something in response to G*d's Command *which we would not otherwise have*

done? When was the last time that we refrained from something which we wanted to do *just because G*d's Command forbade it?* This is the message of the Prophet Micah when he declares (6:8) **It has been told to thee, O mortal, what the Eternal requires of thee.** The essence is not in Micah's answer, essential as his answer is – **Only to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy G*d** – but in the question itself. What does G*d (as each of us understands G*d's Commandments) require of us? That is, what is it that we do solely because G*d requires it of us, not – no matter how important it may be – because, even without G*d's commanding us, we know it is right to do and would do it?

Working for justice and peace is important. It is important – it is vital – to our very survival, as a nation and as a species. But I would work for peace and justice even without G*d's commanding me to do so.

Working for the preservation and restoration of the ecology of the earth is important. It, too, is a survival issue. But I would support environmental causes even without G*d's commanding me to do so.

Restricting the diet to foods which Scripture permits certainly is obedience to G*d's Command, but how many who observe the dietary laws can honestly say that they would want to eat forbidden foods, if they were not forbidden?

Even attending synagogue (or church or mosque or temple; the principle is applicable in every faith tradition) may be in order to appear there, rather than in order simply to obey G*d's wish that we do so.

So long as we understand G*d's Commandments as simply requiring us to do that which we would do anyway, we are making gods for ourselves. As the great American cynic Ambrose Bierce commented, "G*d created man [we will forgive him his gendered language, in view of the fact that he lived in a time – 1842-1914 – long before an awareness of the need for inclusive language] in His image, and man, being a gentleman, returned the favor."

Can a person make gods for oneself? They are not gods! (Jeremiah 16:20)

We have traditionally understood the "they" in the second stich of Jeremiah's verse as referring to the idols, but now we can look more deeply and re-translate Jeremiah:

Can people make gods of themselves? They are not gods!

When we conceive of G*d commanding only what we would be doing anyway, we are trying not so much to make gods *for* ourselves as to make gods *of* ourselves, and, as Jeremiah warns those who would try to do so, they/we are not gods.

Shabbat Shalom.