

**Zionism and *Tikkun Olam*: Risking Idolatry**  
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This week's Torah portion is replete with blessings and curses, the latter vastly outnumbering the former. Sixteen verses this week begin, "Cursed be the one who . . ." <sup>i</sup> A scant four open with the phrase "Blessed be." <sup>ii</sup> The very first of the execrations clarifies the cause of them all: "Cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured or molten image abhorred by the Eternal . . . and sets it up in secret. – And all the people shall respond, Amen." <sup>iii</sup>

Idolatry is the scourge of Ancient Israel, repeatedly distancing our ancestors from God.

To us, that focus on idolatry seems outdated. These days, people don't abandon Judaism by bowing before statues.

Properly defined, though, idolatry continues to imperil Judaism and the Jewish people. We commit idolatry when we place anything above God and Torah. We are all well practiced in decrying the false gods of materialism and power, popularity and influence. Tonight, though, I would suggest that even the noblest pursuits may be idolatrous, if we put them above all that is holy and divine. Even Zionism, the pursuit of a land of our own, can be idolatrous. Even *Tikkun Olam*, the imperative to be God's partners in repairing the world, can become a false god.

Donniel Hartman, an American-born Israeli Orthodox rabbi and head of Jerusalem's Shalom Hartman Institute, spoke on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Six-Day War this summer. He argued that 1967 established a new trinity in Jewish life: Power, Land, and God. A trinity? In Judaism?

For 2000 years, Hartman reminds us, one could not associate the words "Jews" and "power." When our sages ask, "Who is wise," they do not answer: "One who conquers territory" or "The guy who can knock his neighbor's block off!" Instead, they teach us that the strongest person is one who "vanquishes impulses." <sup>iv</sup> Physical weakness could be seen as a virtue, when compared with spiritual fortitude. For an illustration, shake hands with an ultra-Orthodox man. My grandmother would call it a "cold fish" handshake, failing to convey confidence. The intention, though, is entirely different: Jews communicate power by teaching and living Torah, not by demonstrating physical potency.

In the modern world, though, military might may be a necessity. Before 1967, Hartman argues, Jews had a state in Israel, but little more. Another Holocaust was possible, and was exactly what Israelis and Jews worldwide feared as numerous Arab states threatened Israel's annihilation in May of 1967.

With victory in six days, and substantial territorial conquest, Israel suddenly becomes the Middle East superpower. Donniel Hartman affirms that a Zionist dream was fulfilled in 1967. Israel's founders and forbears envisioned a Jewish people who could take care of themselves. In Six Days, Israel's military proved that hope fulfilled. Jews around the world basked in reflected glory, delighted to be connected to a victorious Israel. "Jews begin to strut," Hartman says. Having seen ourselves as David, defeating the Goliath of a mighty Arab world, we come to rejoice in being the new Goliath.<sup>v</sup>

The challenge becomes: How can we be a powerful people who do not let our might override Torah?<sup>vi</sup> How to reconcile celebration of military victory with rabbinic teaching that authentic Jewish strength is spiritual? If the Israel Defense Force is "God's Army,"<sup>vii</sup> then Zionism is idolatry.

Power isn't the only Zionist threat to our ancestral faith. After 1967, Hartman teaches, the "People of the Book become also the People of Land."<sup>viii</sup> Yes, Jewish people have always lived in sacred covenant with the Land promised by God. And yet, the early State was ironic. The United Nations 1947 partition plan and Israel's Declaration of Independence created a state on territory merely adjacent to most of biblical Land of Israel, devoid of classical Jewish holy sites.<sup>ix</sup> Post-'67, though, Israel controls ancient Judea and Samaria. Many Jews, in Israel and around the world, embraced land as the new Torah of Israel.<sup>x</sup> The highest commandment for many seems to be to hold on to that land, by whatever means necessary.

If remaining in control of the Greater Land of Israel requires oppressing others, then Torah is redefined as requiring nothing higher than Jewish sovereignty. And that my friends, is idolatry.

But I promised you twin threats of idolatry tonight. Some are doubtless ill at ease with the notion that Zionism could be a violation of Judaism's most cherished ideals. Now, it's time for others here to be discomforted.

The founders of American Reform Judaism eschewed Zionism, declaring in 1885's Pittsburgh Platform: "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a

religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine . . . nor the restoration of any laws concerning the Jewish state.”<sup>xi</sup>

For early American Reform rabbis, even a notion of a Jewish people was tribal and objectionable. Believing the “promised land” not to be a physical place but a state of being, they imagined that modernity would deliver on its promise of justice and righteousness for all, including an end to anti-Semitism: Our Reform founders’ 1885 principles don’t even mention responsibility to care specifically for our own people.

Instead, they define a clear purpose for being Jewish: “We recognize, in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of Israel’s great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men [sic] . . . In full accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relations between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.”<sup>xii</sup>

Our Reform founders did not pretend to be inventing a universal mission for the Jewish people. Instead, they agreed with their second century predecessor, Rabbi Akiva, who taught that “the fundamental principle of Torah” is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>xiii</sup> Ben Azzai, a contemporary of Akiva’s, exalted a “principle [even] more fundamental,” that all human beings are of one family.<sup>xiv</sup> More recently, as Reform Jews connected with more tradition, we gave a Hebrew name to the imperative outlined by our Reform founders: *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world. The whole world.

Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, an historian and President of the Shalom Hartman Institute North America, speaks of “Jews of being” and “Jews of becoming.” “Jews of being” are those who identify most strongly with Jewish peoplehood. “Jews of being” are urgently concerned about the survival and the well-being of the Jewish people. “Jews of being” are Zionists. “Jews of becoming,” by contrast, are those who seek to grow in service to God. “Jews of becoming” may be laser-focused on the fulfillment of ritual. Other “Jews of becoming” serve God by repairing their own souls and the world in which we live.<sup>xv</sup>

“Jews of becoming” risk idolatry just like Zionist extremists. Our biblical prophets identified idolatry in the slavish adherence to ritual by Israelites guilty of social injustice.<sup>xvi</sup>

Other “Jews of becoming,” including many Reform Jews, have mistaken *Tikkun Olam* for Judaism itself. Proud of a Jewish heritage that remembers the stranger, they may forget or ignore that the commandment comes from God. Embracing a tradition that cares for the welfare of all God’s children, they may forsake our own people, forgetting or ignoring that God has called us into covenant among the Children of Israel. If we negate our people or our God in pursuit of a better world, then *Tikkun Olam* has become idolatry.

At this season of preparation for our High Holy Days, let us each reexamine our own Judaism. Do we worship Jewish power and the Land of Israel, to the exclusion of performing *mitzvot* that bring us closer to God and all humanity? Do we forsake our own people, or perhaps even God, as we pursue good deeds? Let us instead celebrate a world where Jews at last live with peace and security. Let us lovingly serve the one God who invites us into partnership on behalf of all the world. Let us proudly proclaim our Zionism, as an expression of divine covenant with our people and our land. Let us affirm *Tikkun Olam* as our obligation to God and humanity. Then, may none of our verses begin, “cursed be.” Then, may we all be blessed.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Deuteronomy 27:15-26, 28:16-19.

<sup>ii</sup> Deuteronomy 28:3-6.

<sup>iii</sup> Deuteronomy 27:15.

<sup>iv</sup> Pirkei Avot 4:1.

<sup>v</sup> Donniel Hartman, lecture, The Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 4, 2017.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Central Conference of American Rabbis, Pittsburgh Platform, 1985.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sifra 2:16:11. Text provide by Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer. (The quoted biblical text is Leviticus 19:18.)

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid. Ben Azzai’s proof-text is Genesis 5:1.

<sup>xv</sup> Yehuda Kurtzer, “1917: The Idea of Homeland for the Jewish People,” lecture, Shalom Hartman institute, Jerusalem, July 4, 2017.

<sup>xvi</sup> E.g., Isaiah 58:1-14.