



Hilkhot Avodah Zara
Laws Concerning Idolatry and the
Ordinances of the Heathens

Chapter 1:1-2

1 In the days of Enosh, the people fell into gross error, and the counsel of the wise men of the generation became foolish. Enosh himself was among those who erred. Their error was as follows: “since God,” they said, “created these stars and spheres to guide the world, set them on high and allotted to them honor, and since they are ministers who minister before Him, they deserve to be praised and glorified, and honor should be rendered them; and it is the will of God, blessed be He, that men should aggrandize and honor those whom He aggrandized and honored just as a king desires that respect should be shown to the officers who stand before him, and thus honor is shown to the king.” When this idea arose in their minds, they began to erect temples to the stars, offered up sacrifices to them, praised and glorified them in speech, and prostrated themselves before them—their purpose, according to their perverse notions, being to obtain the Creator’s favor. This was the root of idolatry and this was what the idolaters who knew its fundamentals said. They did not, however, maintain that there was no God except the particular star (which was the object of their worship). Thus Jeremiah said, “Who would not fear You, O King of nations? For it befits You; for as much as among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdom, there is none like You. But in one thing they are brutish and foolish. The vanities by which they are instructed are but a stock” (Jer. 10:7-8). This means that all know that You alone are God; their error and folly consists in imagining that this vain worship is Your desire

2 In course of time, there arose among men false prophets who asserted that God had commanded and expressly told them, “Worship that particular star, or worship all the stars. Offer up to it such and such sacrifices. Pour out to it such and such libations. Erect a temple to it. Make a figure of it, to which all the people—the women, children, and the rest of the folk—shall bow down.” The false prophet pointed out to them the figure which he had invented out of his own mind and asserted that it was the figure of that particular star which had been shown him in his prophetic vision. And then they began to make figures in temples, under the trees, on the mountain-tops, and the hills. There they would assemble, bow down to the figures, and tell all the people that this particular figure conferred benefits and inflicted injuries and that it was proper to worship and fear it. Their priests would say to them, “through this worship, shall you increase and prosper. Do this and do not do that.” Other imposters then sprang up who declared that the star, celestial sphere, or angel, had communed with them, and said to them, “worship me in such and such fashion,” had taught them a definite ritual, and said to them, “Do this, and do not do that.” So gradually the custom spread throughout the world of worshipping

figures with various modes of worship, such as offering up sacrifices to them, and bowing down to them.

As time gradually passed, the honored and revered Name of God was forgotten by mankind, vanished from their lips and hearts, and was no longer known to them. All the common people and the women and children knew only the figure of wood and stone and the temple edifice in which they had, from their childhood, been trained to prostrate themselves to the figure, worship it, and swear by its name. Even their wise men, such as priests and men of similar standing, also fancied that there was no other god but the stars and spheres, for whose sake and in whose similitude these figures had been made. But the Creator of the universe was known to none, and recognized by none save a few solitary individuals, such as Enosh, Methuselah, Noah, Shem, and Eber. The world moved on in this fashion until that pillar of the world, the patriarch Abraham, was born.

After Abraham was weaned, while still an infant, his mind began to reflect. By day and night he was thinking and wondering: "How is it possible that this [celestial] sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn round; for it cannot be that it turns round of itself." He had no teacher, no one to instruct him in aught. He was submerged in Ur of the Chaldees, among silly idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshipped idols, and he worshiped with them. But his mind was busily working and reflecting until he had attained the way of truth, apprehended the correct line of thought, and knew that there is one God, that He guides the celestial sphere and created everything, and that among all that exist, there is no god besides Him. He realized that men everywhere were in error, and that what had occasioned their error was that they worshiped the stars and the images, so that the truth perished from their minds. Abraham was forty years old when he recognized his Creator. Having attained this knowledge, he began to refute the inhabitants of Ur of the Chaldees, arguing with them and saying to them, "The course you are following is not the way of truth." He broke the images and commenced to instruct the people that it was not right to serve any one but the God of the universe, to whom alone it was proper to bow down, offer up sacrifices and make libations, so that all human creatures might, in the future, know Him; and that it was proper to destroy and shatter all the images, so that the people might not err like these who thought that there was no god but these images. When he had prevailed over them with his arguments, the king (of the country) sought to slay him. He was miraculously saved and emigrated to Haran. He then began to proclaim to the whole world with great power and to instruct the people that the entire universe had but one Creator and that Him it was right to worship. He went from city to city and from kingdom to kingdom, calling and gathering together the inhabitants till he arrived in the land of Canaan. There, too, he proclaimed his message, as it is said, "And he called there on the name of the Lord, God of the universe" (Gen. 21:33). When the people flocked to him and questioned him regarding his assertions, he would instruct each one according to his capacity till he had brought him to the way of truth, and thus thousands and tens of thousands joined him. These were the persons referred to in the phrase, "men of the house of Abraham."

Abraham implanted in their hearts this great doctrine, composed books on it, and taught it to Isaac, his son. Isaac settled down, instructing and exhorting. He imparted the doctrine to Jacob and ordained him to teach it. He, too, settled down, taught and morally strengthened all who joined him. The patriarch Jacob instructed all his sons, set apart

Levi, appointed him head (teacher) and placed him in a college to teach the way of God and keep the charge of Abraham. He charged his sons to appoint, from the tribe of Levi, one instructor after another, in uninterrupted succession, so that the doctrine might never be forgotten. And so it went on with ever increasing vigor among Jacob's children and their adherents till they became a people that knew God. When the Israelites had stayed a long while in Egypt, they relapsed, learned the practices of their neighbors, and, like them, worshiped idols, with the exception of the tribe of Levi, that steadfastly kept the charge of the patriarch. This tribe of Levi never practiced idolatry. The doctrine implanted by Abraham would, in a very short time, have been uprooted, and Jacob's descendants would have lapsed into the error and perversities universally prevalent.

But because of God's love for us and because He kept the oath made to our ancestor Abraham, He appointed Moses to be our teacher and the teacher of all the prophets and charged him with his mission. After Moses had begun to exercise his prophetic functions and Israel had been chosen by the Almighty as His heritage, crowned them with precepts, and showed them the way to worship Him and how to deal with idolatry and with those who go astray after it.

Chapter 11:1;12;16

1 We should not follow the customs of the Gentiles, nor imitate them in dress or in their way of trimming the hair, as it is said, “And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation which I have cast out before you” (Lev. 20:23); “Neither shall you walk in their statutes” (ibid. 18:3); “Take heed to yourself that you be not ensnared to follow them” (Deut. 12:30). These texts all refer to one theme and warn against imitating them. The Israelite shall, on the contrary, be distinguished from them and be recognizable by the way he dresses and in his other activities, just as he is distinguished from them by his knowledge and his principles. And this it is said, “and I have set you apart from the peoples” (Lev. 20:26). He shall not put on a garment like that specially worn by them nor let the lock of his hair grow in the way they do. Thus, he shall not cut the hair of the head at the sides, leaving the hair in the center untouched as they do—this is called “growing the forelock.” Nor shall he cut the hair in front from ear to ear, leaving the hair at the back to grow, as they do. He shall not rear edifices resembling idolatrous temples for the gathering of multitudes, as they do. Whoever does any of these or similar things is punished with stripes.

12 One who whispers a spell over a wound, at the same time reciting a verse from the Torah, one who recites a verse over a child to save it from terrors, and one who places a scroll or phylacteries on an infant to induce it to sleep, are not in the category of sorcerers and soothsayers, but they are included among those who repudiate the Torah; for they use its words to cure the body whereas these are only medicine for the soul, as it is said, “They shall be life to your soul” (Prov. 3:22).^{*} On the other hand, anyone in the enjoyment of good health is permitted to recite verses from the Scriptures or a psalm, so that he may be shielded by the merit of the recital and saved from trouble and hurt.

16 These practices are all false and deceptive and were means employed by the ancient idolaters to deceive the peoples of various countries and induce them to become their followers. It is not proper for Israelites who are highly intelligent to suffer themselves to be deluded by such inanities or imagine that there is anything in them, as it is said, “For there is no enchantment with Jacob, neither is there any divination with Israel” (Num. 23:23); and further. “For these nations that you are to dispossess hearken to soothsayers and diviners; but as for you, the Lord your God, has not suffered you so to do” (Deut. 18:14). Whoever believes in these and similar things and, in his heart, holds them to be true and scientific and only forbidden by the Torah, is nothing but a fool, deficient in understanding, who belongs to the same class with women and children whose intellects are immature. Sensible people, however, who possess sound mental faculties, know by clear proofs that all these practices which the Torah prohibited have no scientific basis but are chimerical and inane; and that only those deficient in knowledge are attracted by these follies and, for their sake, leave the ways of truth. The Torah, therefore, in forbidding all these follies, exhorts us, “You shall be wholehearted with the Lord your God” (ibid. 18:13).