The Truth and Nothing but the Truth: Thoughts on Parashat Nitzavim, September 12, 2009

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The first section of this Shabbat's Torah reading expresses God's concern lest the Israelites revert to idolatry. As in so many other sections of the Torah, we are warned not to worship false gods. This is a grievous sin with terrible consequences.

But why would the Israelites--or anyone else--worship idols of wood or stone, silver or gold? What could be more foolish? Why was it necessary for the Torah to make so many strong statements against idolatry and its evils? Shouldn't we be intelligent enough to see the nonsense of idolatry on our own? What exactly is the temptation that would draw us in this wrong direction?

The Torah understands that people are gullible. When they are fearful or confused, they will believe almost anything. In desperation, people may turn to a physical entity that they think is "good luck" or to which they attribute magical powers--even divinity. They worship objects of wood and stones, silver and gold. The line between true faith and idolatry isn't always easy to distinguish.

What is the essence of idolatry? It is the attribution of false value to an object. Idolaters think that if they worship an idol, bow to it, bring it offerings--then it must be god! They convince themselves that a falsehood is actually true. Since others also foster the falsehood, this gives it the appearance of being true. The evil of idolatry is: believing in falsehood, abandoning truth. The Torah warns us not to fall into this trap. This applies not only to idols, but to everything and everyone. Demagogues and p.r. experts try to make us believe things we know to be wrong or unnecessary; a great many people succumb to these falsehoods. The Torah commands us to cling to truth, to reject lies.

In our society, there are many pressures on us to believe we simply must have this or that material thing in order to be successful and happy. There are many pressures on us to believe that this person or that person is wise or great, because of titles and honors that are bestowed on him/her. It is easy to fall into line with the crowd, and suspend our own clear judgment. The Torah warns us: do not be an idolater, do not veer from truth, do not falsely evaluate things or people.

The Talmud (Hagigah 14b) tells of four great sages who entered the "pardes" i.e. the world of profound speculation. Rabbi Akiva, one of the four, warned the others: "when you reach the domain of pure marble, don't call out 'water, water'; as it is written (Psalms 101:7), one who speaks falsehoods will not be established before My eyes." Rabbi Akiva knew how easy it is to mistake clear marble for water, a metaphor for how easy it is to succumb to falsehood instead of clinging to truth. The marble looks so much like water: but it is not water, it is cold stone. If you wish to pursue truth, you need to evaluate people and things as they really are--not as they appear to be.

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