

Siyum on Masechet Avodah Zara
Shabbat Ki Tzetzei
Maimonides Kehillah
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There are three main topics discussed in Masechet Avodah Zara:

- 1) The Lo Taaseh of idol worship that includes both forbidden items and images
- 2) Laws on interactions with idol worshippers that include commercial activities and food, and drink
- 3) The preservation of Jewish identity – meaning that the Gemara helps to define how we can create and maintain a clear boundary between the Jewish people and surrounding cultures.

As a minority entity within world cultures, the Torah understands that, to survive as a distinct group, we need to place limits on the extent to which we intersect with the non-Jewish world. In the days of the Talmud, this focus was almost exclusively on surrounding pagan cultures, which consisted of two main faith systems: the Greco-Roman religion and Zoroastrianism.

The Gemara chronicles how Chazal developed a complex set of rules to separate us from the influence of these two religions.

Economic interactions in a multicultural society serve as a crucial contact point for cultures, much as they do in our world today. Chazal, understanding this, created specific rules to limit such interactions. Several examples from Avodah Zara are:

- 1) Engaging in commerce with pagans as their festivals approached. The idea was that a Jew might be seen as having contributed to the idolater's celebration, and this could be perceived as creating a forbidden connection to idolatry.
- 2) The Gemara prohibits selling or leasing certain items to pagans that could be used for their worship.
- 3) Prohibitions on food and drink: The opportunities for social gatherings that might provide a ripe environment for intercultural mixing were recognized by Chazal, and Gezeros were established to limit these interactions. The Gemara devotes considerable time to Yayn Nesech (poured or libation wine). All other raw wine, handled by a non-Jew, is known as Stam Yeinam (their wine) and also prohibited. Further, food cooked by a non-Jew (bishul akum) and, under certain circumstances, bread baked by a non-Jew (pas akum) were also prohibited. The Rabbis saw intimate

social gatherings with pagans as potential legitimizers for closer connections and, in its most drastic form, potential intermarriage or absorption of non-Jewish cultic practices.

How do we address these challenges in our modern world? In 1964, the Rav published his famous essay “Confrontation,” in which he distinguishes two types of interactions with the non-Jewish world. The first relates to theological matters and the second concerns humanitarian issues. The Rav was opposed to any formal theological dialogue with other faith communities. He rejected the attempt to discover a common denominator between religious faith systems and argued that the exclusive truth of Judaism can never be sacrificed, compromised, or diluted.

Yet, the Rav advocated for dialogue and cooperation with the greater global community on issues of shared humanitarian concern. Am Yisrael has a Chiyuv, a responsibility, to contribute to the moral and physical welfare of humanity. Our global community must work together on issues including war and peace, as well as civil rights. The result of cooperative efforts can lead to improved mutual understanding and improvements in our world.

Each of us stands as an ambassador of Torah im Derekh Eretz. We are each committed to a life informed by the Amitah Shel Torah, which includes not only a connection to the outside world but also a whole-hearted acceptance of the beauties and opportunities our world has to offer us. Torah im Derekh Eretz Jews have a finely calibrated moral compass whose “North” always points back to the Torah and the Masorah.

Avodah Zara concludes with a story about the Persian King Shapur, who recognized the value of Jewish law and purity, as illustrated in a vignette about the kashering of a knife used for slicing food. The Halakha gets down “into the weeds”, not only the food we eat, but the utensils we employ to prepare such food. Further, the respect shown by Shapur for this Jewish practice demonstrates that the “seyag/fence” created by Chazal to separate us from other cultures can, paradoxically, earn us respect from other cultures and solidify our identity in the eyes of others.

May our Avodas HaShem continue to help us refine our awareness of HaShem and may we merit to “laChazos b’Noam HaShem u’Levaker B’Heichalo” – to perceive the sweetness of HaShem’s closeness to us and to feel as if we are in HaShem’s home wherever we are.

Shabbat Shalom and Mazel Tov to all those commemorating the completion of Avodah Zara.