

What The Torah/Prophets/Sages Say About Worshipers Of Other Religions

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Preliminary Word

Let me begin here by saying that after years of being involved in religious polemics, I now have come to the conclusion that such polemics and religious debates are a complete waste of time. I believe that faith is a matter of heart, and that while faith will forever be debated, it will never be proven to the unbeliever.

Faith can only be embraced, or rejected. Faith is always justified in the mind of the believer. In the mind of the believer, one's faith makes total sense and is clear for all to see. Nevertheless, there will always be the vast majority who believe differently, and who, just do not, and will not, see what any other particular believer sees.

I do not believe that faith can be proven, so, I do not believe that one should ever try to prove it. I believe that this includes my faith as well. In my opinion, among the religious faiths that cannot be proven include modern-day secularism and atheism. Belief in no God is as much a statement of faith as belief in God.

Rather than argue, debate and come to blows over which faith is the correct one, I believe that it is the duty of every human being to focus on moral and righteous human behavior, regardless of our different faiths. Torah teaches that God looks to our behaviors, not at our beliefs. *“Yet, I will look to this, to the man who is humble and contrite in spirit, who fears My Word”* (Isaiah 66:2) Therefore, it is in this light that I address this topic, with the hope to document how Torah views worshipers of other religions.

Everyone wants to fight for his god, and for his religion. Everyone wants to prove that his religion is the right one and that his god is the true God. In spite of everyone saying that God is one, no one really believes that the god of others is, in fact, the one true God.

So, are we destined to shoot it out til the end, with the last man standing being the winner, and thus being the only one left, to proclaim his faith as the true faith? After all, it's not like this hasn't happened before in the past. In the fights over religion, might definitely makes right. This is the history of Christian and Muslim growth. And yet the fights continue.

What will it take for people to stop fighting over religion? I confess, I have no idea. Catholics fight Protestants, Sunni fight Shia, and in Judaism, the so-called Haredim (ultra-orthodox) fight everyone. Granted the Haredi are not as violent as Christians and Muslims have been historically, but with regards to religious fundamentalism and fanaticism, they are psychologically no different from the most radical sects found in the other religions.

Judaism's Haredim are today so out-of-control that they have hijacked authentic Torah Judaism, and their influence and revision of classical Torah is growing like a deadly virus. There is no telling what insanity the Haredim of the not-to-distant future will do, if and when given the chance. Judging from present circumstances, the future indeed looks bleak.

I know that many of my readers are offended by what I say about the Haredim, but deep down, almost everyone of my readers know that I am right! But, I am not here to write about the Haredim. I do not care about them. They are God's problem, not mine. My concern, as a rabbi, is to make sure that the classical Torah of our Sages throughout the centuries is not lost under a tidal wave of bizarre extremism under the guise and name of Torah. I mention here the Haredim to juxtapose them in opposition to righteous Gentiles.

Religious extremists of all kinds embrace a very monolithic black-and-white skewed view of reality. For the extremist, there is only one right way, and that those who do not walk it, are cut off from God, both in this world and in the world to come. While the scriptures of other faiths may proclaim these views verbatim, we do not find such sentiments within Torah scriptures.

Unlike the religions that have grown out of Torah, the mother faith, the Torah, Prophets and Writings do not express absolutes about the after-life. Torah contains no threats about eternal damnation for those who do not believe the proper doctrines. Torah does not speak much, if at all, about anything in the after-life. The emphasis and concern of Torah is how we live in this world, not how we worry about the world-to-come.

Idolatry is the worship of foreign gods. It is considered the quintessential denial of faith. Yet, one man's believer is the other man's idolater, blasphemer or infidel. Yet, Torah did not go on a diatribe against idolatry because of theological or doctrinal reasons. Idolatry was forbidden because ancient idolatrous practices were cruelly inhuman. The behaviors of ancient idolaters were barbaric, often including human sacrifice and other equally depraved behaviors. Torah prohibited these practices for the sake of elevating human behavior, and not for the sake of nebulous doctrinal purities.

In ancient times, there were those idolaters who understood the need for humane behavior in their practices, and each, in their own ways, acknowledged what they understood to be the Creator. While the purpose of this short essay is not to review ancient idolatrous practices, it is to look into Scripture to see what exactly the prophets have to say on the subject. In order to understand the teachings of the prophets, I need just refer to one scripture verse.

At the end of the prophetic period, the prophet Malakhi gives to us an interesting and revelatory word from God. In chapter 1, verse 11, the prophet states in God's Name:

“For, from the rising of the sun until its setting, My Name is great among the nations, and everywhere offerings are burnt and offered up to My Name, yea, a pure oblation, for My Name is great among the nations, says the Lord of Hosts.”

Now, we must ask, in the days of the prophet Malakhi, which is the generation of the original return of the Israelite exiles, in approximately 500 BCE, where and how is the Name of the God of Israel great amongst the Gentile nations? Which nations is the prophet referring to here? Granted God's Name is great in Israel, but Israel is one nation (in the singular), not nations (in the plural). So, what nations does the prophet refer to? Apparently the understanding is as follows.

God knows the limitations of human intellect, and understands well how we human beings are often erred in our understandings of spiritual matters. Knowing human limitations, God does not judge us, any of us, by what we think in our limited human minds, blemished as they are the the metaphorical forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Good and Evil. Instead, God looks into the human heart, and judges us, all of us, by our moral and righteous behaviors.

When it comes to Divine worship, God apparently does not judge the form, but rather the intent of the individual worshiper. While said worshiper might be worshipping within a religious system defined by Torah as idolatrous, nevertheless, God does not hold that against the individual worshiper. Instead, God looks to the heart, and if that individual is sincere, and that one's behavior righteous, then God calls such a one "the righteous of the nations" (hasidei umot haolam). God accepts and blesses such an individual, even if such an individual be practicing idolatry, as defined by Torah.

This understanding is clearly expressed by the classical Torah commentators to this verse in Malakhi. The classical commentary Rashi quotes one of the Talmud's interpretations of this verse and says, *"Our Sages stated (Men. 110a): For they [the nations] call Him [the Creator] the God of the gods. Even one who has an idol knows that He [the Creator, the Heavenly Father] is the God Who is over all of them - and everywhere they [the nations] donate in My Name."*

Another classical commentator, the Mahari Karo states, *"from one end of the world to the other, all the nations call upon my great Name."* And, *"in every place even a Gentile offers a sacrifice to my Name, he brings a pure offering... the nations honor Me, but you [Israel] dishonor."*

The Metzudot David commentary writes, *"from the place where the suns rises to where it sets, my Name is great amongst the idolaters (Akum), for they all acknowledge that He (blessed be He) is the First Cause that gives to all."*

Rabbi David Kimkhi (RaDaK) writes, *"if I were to command them [the nations] like I have commanded you, they would be offering to My Name a pure offering, not like what you do, for you bring an unclean offering... this is the opposite of the nations for they honor and respect My Name."*

I could go on and show the commentaries of Ibn Ezra and the Malbim. They expand on the above sentiments, and reinforce them. Yet, I feel that the point here should already be clear. God loves sincerity and praises it, and God hates hypocrisy and condemns it.

When the idolatrous nations do good, God acknowledges it, and when Israel does bad, God exposes it. Let this serve as a lesson to all the racists, and chauvinists out there who think themselves superior and call themselves, "God's people," all the while that their deeds are that of Hell, instead of those of Heaven. This is as much a lesson for those who embrace "replacement theology" as for those who do not!

God does not condemn sincere worship based on the theology of the worshiper. This is made very clear by Ibn Ezra, Malbim, the Metzudot David and others. God cares, now and forever more, about what we do, and not so much about what we think!

Later Torah tradition, teaches us, in no less than in the name of the immortal prophet Elijah that Gentiles can receive Divine inspiration and prophecy equal to any child of Israel, depending upon one's behavior. *"I call Heaven and Earth to bear witness, be it a man or woman, Jew or Gentile, freeman or slave, all can receive Divine inspiration (Ruah HaKodesh, the holy Spirit), all in accordance with their actions."* (Tana Dvei Eliyahu, Rabbah 9a).

In his commentary to Maimonides' code, the Mishneh Torah, Torah Foundations, in the discussion about prophets and prophecies, Rabbi Aharon Soloveitchik has written that if there ever was a tried and true Gentile prophet to rise from the nations, it would be obligatory for even Israel to heed his words at the direction of God. (Sefer Perah Mateh Aharon, page 57)

In Isaiah it is written (66:21), *"And from them too will I take for priests and for Levites," says the Lord.*" God will make priests and Levites from the nations to serve Him in the rebuilt Temple (see also Rashi). In Tana Dvei Eliyahu, Zuta, 20:6 it states that the righteous of the nations are referred to as God's priests. *"Let Your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let Your devout ones sing praises" (Psalm 132:9). "Your priests," these are the righteous of the nations of the world. They are the priests to the Holy One, blessed be He in this world, such as Antoninus and those like him.*

What we learn from this is that Torah does not view the theologies of others as being a hindrance to their being righteous human beings who are blessed and acceptable to God. Unlike other religions, Judaism does not condemn non-believers and delegate them to an after-life of suffering and torture due to their practice of their own sacred beliefs. While Judaism believes idolatrous beliefs to be mistaken, such a mistake does not in Torah eyes, evoke Divine wrath and eternal punishment.

So, why argue over religion? Missionaries of all kinds will never cease to exist. Peoples with all agendas will go on and on. Everyone is so convinced that "my way" is right, and therefore "your way" has to be wrong. And equally everyone wonders, why can't others see the things that are so clear and "self evident" to "me."

You see! This is the absence of faith! When one demands that everyone be just like them, this is the opposite of faith and the very definition of the path of impurity, that, as we have seen above, is hated by God.

Now, maybe you have a little more insight into why I am so vocal in condemning the hypocrisy that exists in my own greater community. I pray that each of us would have the courage to not only recognize, but also to speak out against the modern day extremists and desecration!

If we want to save religion, then we have to act sincerely and truly religious. This requires of us to expose and condemn the religious extremists and hypocrites, especially when they are in our own camps, calling themselves "ultra-orthodox." There is no such thing! We have Torah and we have Halakha (Law). Those who walk in their path are called Torah faithful. Those who do not, (in spite of extremist appearances), simply are not walking the Torah Way, and thus are far from Torah's God and His Grace.

