CHAPTER 13

The Concept of Idolatry in Current Times

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The concept of idolatry, which has accompanied Jewish thought since biblical times, can arouse feelings of discomfort in the hearts of those living in the contemporary period. Ostensibly, this notion gives expression to the violent and problematic side of monotheism and religious faith, which tends to regard other religions as unworthy of respect.[1] It is a notion that challenges the very possibility of all interreligious discourse. The halakhic discourse that employs this concept goes even further, evincing an increasingly extreme discourse regarding the possibility of contact among religions. This can perhaps be translated into the concrete halakhic question regarding whether a devout Jew can enter a church, visit Buddhist temples, or visit temples belonging to the Hindu pantheon.

Should the Bible or biblical monotheism be understood as one of the formative fundamental elements of violent religious culture? How should we relate to the disturbing calls that appear in the Bible for extremist action by the devout in their contact with other religions which they regard as idolatry? At least in the context of the Western religions, we can advance this weighty argument with regard to one fundamental element of the religious faith: a willingness to struggle for the religion, sometimes to the point of a willingness to sacrifice one's life in the name of his or her faith. However, this struggle is also translated as the denial of other religions and therefore results in acts of repudiation of the faiths

1 On religion and violence see, for example, Mieke Bal, *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (London: A&C Black, 1989), 13–19; G. L. Jones, "Sacred Violence: The Dark Side of God," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 20 (1999): 184–199; Yehuda Liebes, "Of God's Love and Jealousy," *Azure* 39 (2010): 84–106; Adi Ophir, *Divine Violence: Two Essays on God and Disaster* (Jerusalem: The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Tel Aviv: Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2013) [Hebrew].

of others.[2] This repudiation may be based on error and falsity on the part of the other religion and idol worship in the sense that it is untrue, "for all the gods of the nations are idols," says the Psalmist, leaving truth and honesty as the domain of one faith alone. This repudiation may also be a manifestation of the struggle between the gods and is actually an ongoing part of religious war and the broad pantheon of faiths struggling against one another, perhaps with justification.

This article does not seek to trace the history of the Jewish religion's prohibition of idolatry, as expressed in the formative prohibitions in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, the biblical prophets' articulation of the prohibition of idolatry, and the way in which the Talmudic and the medieval halakhic discourse broadens but at times also limits the prohibition's applicability.[3] Rather, it attempts to understand the concept of idolatry by means of a philosophical inquiry, with the aim of proposing a possible religious typology that passes the test of ethicality.

General Directions of Thought on Idolatry

I break down modern Jewish thought's discussion of idolatry into four aspects: consciousness-related, psychological, spiritual, and ethical. In other words, we can attempt to identify the fundamental elements of different positions found within Jewish thought on idolatry not as formalistic positions but rather as an ideological or ethical ones. In this way, we can refrain from proposing a legal position that rules out certain practices of "idolatry" or "prohibited worship" and instead propose an observation of the deep meaning of the movements that requires different depths of inquiry in order to understand the meaning of idolatry or acts that are referred to as such. We can even characterize it as deep movements of struggle against idolatry: the struggle for "religious consciousness," the struggle for "religious authenticity," the struggle for "religious sanctity," and the struggle for "religious ethicality." I regard all of these elements as part of one project of major importance that enables us to rethink the notion of idolatry: the concept of sanctity (*kedusha*)—proximity and distance, refinement and risk.

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2 See Hanoch Ben-Pazi, "The 'War against Midian' Narrative in the Book of Numbers: The Bible's Prototype for Religious Wars and Violence," *Education and Its Context* 39 (2017): 71–95.

3 For a systematic and organized review of this subject, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

The Consciousness-Related Aspect

To present the consciousness-related aspect of idolatry here, I make use of a number of important essays, all of which, to some extent, play a role in the ongoing discussion regarding idolatry that was presented by Maimonides. This allows us to think about the act of contending with idolatry as the major act of monotheistic faith: relating to God through "negative theology."

This is an attempt to propose not only that the biblical Jewish faith evolved under specific historical conditions as an ongoing struggle against "paganism" and "idolatry," but also that *this* has been the dynamic, permanent, and frequent meaning of the struggle against idol worship: the construction of a worthy monotheism. In my view, this is one of the most interesting directions for the philosophical construction of the meaning of "idolatry" as an endless project. The extended process that is the intention of the Torah and Judaism is an ongoing process of refining and purifying faith that is carried out through the performance of an infinite consciousness-based act of removal. Ostensibly, the deep meaning of religious faith is coming to know divinity in its infinite and imperceptible sense. This, however, is not a one-time act of faith versus faith, but rather the ongoing engagement in a boundless consciousness-based struggle against all actualizing and reductive concepts of divinity.[4]

This approach is of course simply ongoing philosophical development of Maimonides' position regarding idolatry, and the place of his halakhic and religious position in the context of the doctrine of the recognition of, and faith in, God, which he presents in *The Guide of the Perplexed*. According to this approach, the project of negative theology is not a linguistic game regarding what can and cannot be said about God, but rather an ongoing consciousness-based project in which all negative consciousness can be translated into positive consciousness. For this reason, it is also necessary to continue repudiating the refined faith in order to continue refining it.

Hannah Kasher proposes an analysis of this concept in Maimonides's thinking in her book *Heretics in Maimonides' Teaching*. Clearly, the most important application of negative theology is the systematic examination of the possibilities of idolatrous faith. In her book, Kasher proposes undertaking a mirror reading of

4 In his collection of writings *The Religion of Israel*, Yehezkel Kaufmann clarifies this argument as the best historical way of reading the religion of Israel as it emerges from the Bible; that is to say, based on the revival of Jewish faith from within and against the idolatrous concepts surrounding it. See Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

Maimonides's discussion of idolatry in the different possibilities of atheist, idolatrous, and polytheist heresy as a way of redefining monotheistic faith.

Methodologically and philosophically speaking, this approach is the outcome of the notion that proper faith is an endless process, and that therefore the deep meaning of idolatry is what defines the process of the refining of faith. In a profound sense, this is an in-depth interpretation of the manner in which faith is presented in the Ten Commandments. It consists of two opposite or parallel processes. The first is the respect that is given to God's explicit name and the importance of refraining from using it in vain or perhaps using it at all. The second is the extremely detailed account of the prohibitions against the diverse kinds of idolatry, in imagery, in nature, and in human acts.

In his book *Judaism and Idolatry*, Asa Kasher formulates the definition of Judaism using the language of the sages as follows: "Every person who rejects worshipping the stars is like one who has acknowledged the entire Torah."[5] If we take into account the existence of a fundamental contradiction between Judaism and idolatry, we can begin redefining Judaism; that is to say: "the rejection of all idolatry is like loyalty to the central principle of Judaism."[6] We pay special attention here to the faith-related and consciousness-related principle, which positions Jewish faith as completely contradictory to idolatry. Kasher goes one step further with his assertion that "**the Jewish religion carries the meaning of active opposition to all possible acts of idolatry**" (emphasis in original).[7] From Kasher's perspective, this definition is a key that requires significant further development in order to redefine and redescribe different aspects of Judaism as taking part in this active project: the meaning of the commandments or the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. With the caution that is characteristic of his writing, Kasher depicts this definition not as the only meaning of the Jewish religion, and not as the positive definition of Judaism, but rather as an interpretation that enables the fundamental discussion of Judaism. By means of this definition, he embarks upon a close reading of the commandment that prohibits the worship of idols:

> "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. . . ." (Exodus 20:4–5) Three components: identification of certain objects;

5 Asa Kasher, *Judaism and Idolatry* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2004), 27 [Hebrew].
6 Ibid., 27.
7 Ibid., 27.

> identification of a certain human approach to these objects; an imperative to refrain from demonstrating this approach to these objects.[8]

Kasher describes a process from the historical dogmatic context of the worship of objects that are considered to be idols to an account of the special tactical approach toward these objects—an approach summed up by the words, "you shall not worship them." However, attention must also be paid to the third step, which is decisive in this discussion, and which involves the assertion that "everything in the world that is of prominent importance in human life can serve as an idol for the person in question."[9] Moreover, it may also be possible, using Kasher, to highlight the greater claim and to provide an affirmative answer to his question: "Can everything that a person decides to view as an important aspect of his world sooner or later become an idol of that person?"[10] It is difficult to imagine "any aspect of the world—whether it be an object, a quality, a situation, or an idea," that cannot become an idol or stand at the center of a ritual.

At this point, I set aside Kasher's analysis and description of the concept of ritual, or "worship," which must be distinguished from allegiance, wonder, or even excessive appreciation, and focus on the claim that regards idolatry's role as a function that defines the process of faith.

> The Jewish religion's rejection of all possible expressions of idolatry is not passive opposition. It is not a purely emotional response of revulsion in the presence of any expression of idolatry, and it is not an absolute intellectual position negating all idolatry everywhere. The Jewish religion's rejection of all possible expressions of idolatry is meant to find expression in a person's willfulness, in both his way of life and his numerous deeds. It is meant to constitute active and practical opposition to all possible expressions of idolatry, and to all expressions of an extremely positive attitude toward any aspect of his world—the attitude of someone who assigns this aspect supreme value.[11]

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8 Ibid., 29.
9 Ibid., 31.
10 Ibid., 31.
11 Ibid., 40.

The Psychological Aspect—the Mental Aspect

Another perspective from which to consider the issue of idolatry focuses on the mental aspect of the phenomenon. The examination I wish to recognize here considers not only the formal and practical question of the relationship between faith and the worship of gods and idols but also its spiritual and psychological elements. The deeper meaning of religious faith is a complete allegiance to the truth, which means a turn inward, to the individual's element of the "self." It is therefore not only possible, but also appropriate, to describe it as individuals' internal allegiance to themselves, and their demand for absolute honesty with themselves.

A profound and challenging problem pertaining to the issue of idolatry is manifested in the Hebrew term used to refer to the phenomenon in Jewish thought: *avodah zarah* (literally, "foreign worship"), and specifically in the word *zarah*, or "foreign." In this sense, any action that is not characterized by internal allegiance but rather by allegiance to an external force that is foreign to man and that causes man to act in contradiction of his internal values and beliefs is classified as *avodah zarah*, or idolatry. The deep meaning of idolatry is the internal action that is performed not out of internal allegiance but rather out of external compulsion.

The basic belief underlying this approach can be the religious spiritual truth that views the man bearing the "inner point," or perhaps the "spark" or the "soul," which is a "part of God above." When a person takes himself seriously as someone who bears within him the inner point, all of his honest and direct willingness to serve God is clearly linked to this divine inner point. The journey of the divine, therefore, passes first and foremost through the inner journey. In this way, man's primary attentiveness to the divine voice is his inner attentiveness to himself and his selfhood.

This metaphysical argument is not intended to blur the existential argument, which is equally as important. Shifting existential religious attention to the individual himself is also a result of inner observation regarding the religious experience. Though many view the development of this position as a solution to the hardship faced by the devout individual with the "death of God," and though some define this position as one that, in itself, also contains the fear of defrauding one's self, I regard this existential position as a deep spiritual response to the fundamental question regarding the meaning of man's existence.

I am not certain that Rav Kook would be pleased to find himself in the company of Heidegger, but it is difficult to ignore the close proximity of their positions. Rav Kook refers to a state of "I am in exile"—when the individual's I is in exile, that is, far from one's selfhood:

> And I am in exile. The internal I of self, of the individual and of the public, is not revealed in his internality. [It is revealed] only according to the worth of its sanctity and purity and according to the value of supreme courage, saturated by the pure light of elevating radiance, which flares in its presence. . . .
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> The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord [Messiah], that valor and might is not external to us, it is our own breath, the lord our God and David our King whom we shall seek. We stand in awe before God and before his goodness. We shall seek our "I," our selves, and we shall find us. Cast off all alien gods, remove every stranger and *mamzer*, "And know that I am the Lord your God, who brings you out of the land of Egypt to be your God, I am the Lord."[12]

In a traditional sense, here we encounter the important message of *ḥazarah be-teshuvah* ("returning" to religious practice), meaning the individual return to one being oneself, or at least enabling the soul to find its rightful place as if "from ancient times." In philosophical terms, it is important to note one of the most important developments of this mental approach: the position of Martin Heidegger. The spirit of Heidegger hovers above us when we consider arguments of this kind. The analysis of man as an ongoing being, or as a constant coming into being of existence, is the core of his contention regarding the *Dasein* (coming into being) and its relationship with the *Sein* (being). The major question facing humans is the way in which they actualize being in their existence and their life. Human existence is an existence of coming into being, as we actualize being through coming into being. The key question facing humans pertains to the extent to which they bring being into existence in time, and the extent to which they evade or deny it.

The major expression instituted by Heidegger in the broad discussion that followed him is authenticity, and the question of the manner in which a person reacts to being or refrains from contact with it is related to the authentic and inauthentic modes of the individual's existence. This can truly be described as a test of existence that allows a person to live a weak life or a life that is devoid of meaning: speech that is not speech, a look toward the future that dares not observe the future, and a look toward the past that dares not touch the fundamental questions of existence and being. It is a test that finds expression in the

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12 Taken from Abraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Lights of Holiness* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1950), vol. 3, 140, "Seeking Our I, Our Inner Selves."

terms of existentiality at the time of being. If we can assign religious meaning to the words of Heidegger, it would pertain precisely to this topic: to the choice between the allegiance to being or denial of being. In a judgmental sense, it is a concrete expression of one's allegiance to oneself, or one's lack of such allegiance and subordination to the stranger. In the context of our discussion here, this is the deep and troubling meaning of idolatry.

As discussed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, the concept of testimony refers to the *Dasein*'s exposure to being. After defining the *Dasein* as the mode of coming into being of the human, who is dependent on temporality, Heidegger examines the possible linkages between human and reality, and between the *Dasein* and the *Sein*. According to his approach, it is a quest for a connection to being, in contrast to the possibility of retreating into the meaningless. This connection to being is what defines the mode of authenticity.

Heidegger searches for the presence of the *Dasein* on its own and in connection with reality itself, as opposed to the meaningless, and in this way he addresses the major question of authenticity. The existential question of the *Dasein* focuses on the ways in which the *Dasein* exists: being-within-the-world, being-with, or being itself. In its manners of existence, does the *Dasein* give expression to its self or to their self?

The authentic modes of existence are closely related to one's ability to face one's own temporality and the fact of one's death. Heidegger transitions to the second part of his book with a consideration of the significance of the temporality of the *Dasein*, in which he establishes the impossibility of the ontological conception of the *Dasein* as a totality, based on the impossibility of perceiving death through the death of others. This effort to contend with the limits of finiteness and the human limits and to consider them vis-à-vis death by definition raises the question of the outstanding. In Heidegger's eyes, the human, or the *Dasein*, facing one's own death is of existential importance with regard to the ability not only to contend with the limits of the I, but with the possibility of giving authentic expression to the everyday life. The being-toward-death described by Heidegger is the *Dasein*'s ability to face its own finiteness—that which gives meaning to the temporality of its life. Here, we note that the *Dasein*'s existence is the existence of being within temporality. Put more simply, the essence of human existence is the ushering of being itself into a time-contingent reality, and for this reason the human ability to hold significance must involve contending with the temporary nature of our being. This, in turn, is dependent on our ability to cope with our being-toward-death. This intellectual step is difficult not only due to the strict philosophical phenomenological discussion it requires, but also, and primarily, due to the uncompromising demand it makes on authentic existence. On this

basis, and in accordance with Heidegger, I highlight the existential project of the authentic existence of being-toward-death.

The consciousness of the *Dasein* is born at the moment of this Heideggerian connection, because it raises the question of testimony, or what Heidegger refers to as the *Dasein*'s testimony regarding the authentic potentiality of being.[13] Deep understanding of these unique phenomena enables us to think anew about the *Dasein*, and understanding that recognition of the finiteness of the *Dasein*—the fact of its death, in the mode of existence of being-toward-death—enables a person to leave his or her own circle toward reality. In a profound Heidegerrian manner, it is the possibility of leaving a meaningless existence for an existence of meaning. But about whom is the witness testifying in the testimony about being? This is the question that troubles Heidegger, and it is the question with which he begins: "We are looking for a potentiality-of-being of *Dasein* that is attested by *Dasein* itself in its existential possibility."[14] In a tone that is both proximate and distant, we see the manner in which Jean-Paul Sartre goes about discussing the concept of authenticity by means of the importance of the concept of freedom and the actualization of existentialism as an actualization of humanism. In an extreme manner, Sartre asserts that "Hell is other people," meaning that responsiveness to the expectations and judgements of others implies a coercive other that makes things difficult for the I.

The line of thinking that lies at the foundation of this discussion pertains not to the issue of faith and religion, but rather to the question of man's authenticity and one's ability to be attentive to oneself and one's selfhood. This approach, which was initially formulated by Spinoza in his book *Ethics* and which highlights the serious danger of the human being influenced by their surroundings and by the ideas of others, became virtually a motto—whether meaningful or empty of content—regarding one's effort to know oneself and to be attentive only to oneself. In such a description we can sense a spirit of cynicism, as the use of man's attention and man's obsessive engagement with man's own self can lead to narcissism and egoism. This argument, however, may actually be aimed at facilitating man's encounter with the self.

13 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, vol. 1.
14 Ibid., §54.

The Spiritual Aspect

The next aspect of idolatry I wish to discuss here is the potential for a person's religion to play this role. That is to say, there is a spiritual-religious danger that, through a relatively simple dialectical process, our religious commitment itself can become a kind of idolatry, as manifested in the manner that spiritual commitment becomes institutional commitment and commitment to material objects. This is the spiritual danger that is spoken about by the mystics. The dangerous side of holiness is that the sanctifying approach, in itself, becomes immanent and therefore idolatrous.

In a philosophical analysis of the phenomenon of religion, Levinas describes the Jewish religion as "a religion for adults," which seeks to establish a conceptual system regarding sanctity that differs from all other religious conceptions:

> But all its effort—from the Bible to the closure of the Talmud in the sixth century and throughout most of its commentators from the great era of rabbinical science—consists of understanding this saintliness of God in a sense that stands in sharp contrast to the numinous meaning of this term, as it appears in the primitive religions wherein the moderns have often wished to see the source of all religion. For these thinkers, man's possession by God, enthusiasm, would be consequent on the saintliness or the sacred character of God, the alpha and omega of spiritual life. Judaism has decharmed the world, contesting the notion that religions apparently evolved out of enthusiasm and the Sacred. . . . It denounces them as the essence of idolatry. . . . This somehow sacramental power of the Divine seems to Judaism to offend human freedom and to be contrary to the education of man, which remains *action on a free being.*[15]

Ostensibly, Levinas's interpretation constitutes the proposal of an alternative: religion as an adult concept that is not based on the God-man dialectic that annuls human freedom. However, the opposite is true: the concept of a religion that is separate from all the foundations of religion discussed above condemns

15 Emmanuel Levinas, "A Religion for Adults," in his *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 11–23, here 14.

man to freedom in an absolute sense, or, to use Levinas's words: "atheism is worth more than the piety bestowed on mythical gods. . . ."[16]

As far as Levinas is concerned, Judaism views itself as closely related to Western philosophy, and numerous attempts at synthesis have sought to forge a link between Jewish and Greek wisdom. From Levinas's perspective, this marks the transition from engagement with divine revelation to engagement with content that meets mental and intellectual criteria.

Philosophical inquiry sets forth from the position of totality in order to achieve its entry into the infinite. In terms of the religious question, Levinas moves onward from the atheistic to the ethical position. This philosophical thinking must overcome the conclusion of the dialectics of religion (similar to the dialectics of the master and the slave, man determines the God by whom man wishes to be determined). Levinas's answer would be to venture forth from the dialectic in search of the role of the infinite as an Other who is not consistent with any of the categories of the subject.

The Sacred Book or the Sacredness of the Book

The Jewish model, which places greater emphasis on the Torah than on God, and on the book than on the experience, demarcates a path of deep contending with the danger of the "sacred" and the "numinousness" of religions. For Levinas, the thought that immanent sanctity exists in the sacred books amounts to the "idolatry of the Torah."[17] Sanctity does not stem from the object, but rather from specific modes of human activity that sanctify it.

To guide our discussion from the assignation of immanent sanctity to a book to the sacred modes of reading the book, Levinas distinguishes between two concepts of sanctity: sacredness, which is an expression of immanent-intrinsic sanctity; and sanctification, or the manner in which humans make certain things sacred. These two terms are representative of two different approaches to the Holy Scriptures: the Holy Scriptures as independent sacred entities—for example, as a source of religious authority or as writings that provide an experience of revelation—versus a sanctifying approach and the assignation of a status of sanctity aimed at describing or interpreting only the manner in which humans relate to the Holy Scriptures.

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16 Ibid., 16.

17 Emmanuel Levinas, "Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry," in his *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 67.

Here, I summon Levinas's ethical assertion without attempting to analyze its epistemological meaning. For Levinas, every outlook of "conception" and every outlook of "desire" is a dangerous outlook that transforms the idea and the text into an object. The sacred text's significance lies in our ability to deviate from the text's subject-object relationship. In Levinasian terms, the significance of the past lies not in the fact that it is perceived as the past but rather in its capacity as a "past that was never the present." Inquiry into the text can also be a process of putting the text to death. The whole idea of the text is that one is not engaged in an object called the Torah but rather in the reading that goes beyond it.

The fact that the Torah is a book is what transforms it into a book of anti-idolatry, he explains. His view focuses not merely on the book as an object sitting on the desk of the phenomenologist, but rather on the book as a unique tool—on the book's book-ness. I think that as a result of the major fear of all things relating to books, the "ontological" human attitude toward the book, which regards books as a source of information or a "tool" for learning, or as a text for study, is not properly assessed. In truth, however, it is the mode of our being.

We need not trace the history of paganism in the context in which the Bible was written, as paganism still exists today, in modern times. The idolatrous sanctifying approach is not only a story of primitive and ancient groups and religions but rather also the idolatrous sanctifying approach of groups and religions that continue to operate in the present.

In a more explicit manner, Levinas regards the idolatrous threat as a realistic political or economic threat and as one of the temptations of idolatry. According to Levinas, idolatry is based on myths—not only myths originating in primeval stupidity or fears, but rather myths that can originate from the subconscious aspects and the stronger hidden passions of man. Herein lies the meaning of their great strength: according to Levinas, the antithesis of myths and contemporary idolatry of the Torah as a "book of anti-idolatry" is intended to advance a "logical opposition."

Levinas maintains that the fact that the Torah is written in book form also constitutes a special mode of religion that establishes opposition to idol worship. The reference here is to the Torah as a book: "But I wish to speak of the Torah as desirous of being a force warding off idolatry by its essence as Book, that is, by its very writing." The reason for this is simple: because relating to the book places man in the position of approaching the object, a book, as something that is to be read. This necessary condition of being a book attests to the reader that sanctity is not found in the Torah but rather in its reading. The Torah, as a book that is read, immediately makes its partners readers or potential readers. From Levinas's perspective, the relationship with the Torah is like the relationship with God:

"a book thus destined from the start for its Talmudic life." This teaches us that although there is a book called the Torah that does indeed have a dimension of sanctity, it immediately affirms that its real life is found outside itself, in its reading. The ways in which it is read brings it to life. As far as Levinas is concerned, these are Talmudic modes of reading. Although it is a book written in letters that are prohibited to touch, it is precisely this constancy that enables its participants to be regular commentators on the text through "permanent reading or interpretation and reinterpretation or study. . . ."[18] Reading its letters allows renewal, which is the true protection against idolatry. When Levinas uses the expression "hearing the breath of the living God in them," he is directing us toward God by means of reading beyond the letters in the direction of the infinite. This does not mean that God is embodied in the letters, but that in some way He is nevertheless written in them. The vitality of the letters is found in the lines, between the lines, and in the changing ideas of the readers interpreting them, in all places, and in all the possibilities in which the letters are echoed. All the possible readings, even the strange ones and the ones concerned with the forms of the letters, allow us to breathe life into the text and to endow it with a voice and an echo.

The fear of a hardening within the text, Levinas explains, is based on the fact that language, especially the language of the plastic arts, tends to fix and immobilize, to enclose within concepts and patterns, and to immobilize the saying (*le dire*) within the said (*le dit*). Nonetheless, he maintains, it does not do so completely, as it also contains in itself an element of that which is not said, an element of inspiration. To illustrate this notion, Levinas uses the interesting and picturesque metaphor of a musical instrument, which is made of matter—something that is stable and fixed, but that also allows the instrument to be played, facilitating a new openness of music and interpretation.

> The cello is a cello in the sonority that vibrates in its strings and its wood, even if it is already reverting into notes, into identities that settle into their natural places in gamuts from the acute to the grave, according to the different pitches. Thus the essence of the cello, a modality of essence, is temporalized in the work.[19]

This metaphor leads directly to an understanding of the Holy Scriptures as a musical instrument, the playing of which gives them life. Although the instrument

18 Ibid., 58.

19 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 41.

itself is made of wood, an object, the possibility of playing it gives it its spirit. This raises the question of whether the Holy Scriptures are unique in comparison to other inspirational writings. Tradition, he argues, must be seen not as ensuring the reliability and purity of the sources it conveys but rather as a place at which all the harmonics resonate: "an entire life is breathed into the letters of the text. . . . A text stretched over a tradition like the strings on the wood of a violin!"[20]

Though constructed from physical matter, the book's book-like quality facilitates, and perhaps even dictates, its state of being "beyond itself," always "beyond the book." Sanctity is not part of the book itself but rather of the approach to it as something that always lies beyond it. Perhaps both the Bible and the Talmud should be seen as texts that address the reader and that contain within themselves their turn to their reader. It is a model of a text that lies "beyond itself" or, to use Levinas's words, "*l'au-delà du verset*" (beyond the verse). The Talmud is interested in the existence of the text, but also in the existence of the reader. In this sense, Levinas's act of interpretation itself becomes an ethical action.

We are therefore already able to understand Levinas's unequivocal statement regarding God:

> I do not wish to define anything using God, as I know only humanity. I can define God using human relations, but not vice-versa. The notion of "God"—God knows that I do not oppose him, but when I need to say something about God, it is always out of relations between people. The unreasonable abstraction—that is God. I speak about God in terms that describe the treatment of the Other. I do not oppose the word religion. However, I accept it for the purpose of describing a situation in which the individual exists as someone who can no longer hide. My point of departure is not the existence of an extremely sizeable or powerful entity. The situation to which I am referring, if I may, is similar to that of Jonah the Prophet, who cannot escape. I refer to this extraordinary situation—in which you are always facing the Other, who has no more room for privacy—as a "religious state," and everything I subsequently say about God starts from this state, and not vice-versa. The abstract notion of God is a notion that sheds no light on any human condition. The opposite is true.[21]

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20 Emmanuel Levinas, "The Strings and the Wood: On the Jewish Reading of the Bible," in his *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 127.

21 Emmanuel Levinas, *Cahiers de l'Herne*.

The Ethical Aspect

The discussion in the previous section leads us directly to the focus of the present section: the ethical aspect of idolatry. The ethical position is an additional notion that gives concrete significance to the discussion of idolatry. Though its formulation may be unusual and draw attention to other aspects of the discussion, it ultimately leads us to the issue of the basic ethical commitment of being a human being. Following Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida, I would like to suggest an ethical position face the question of Idolatry. Although it is a philosophical position par excellence and a modern position that can also be considered postmodern, it contains certain aspects that bring the discussion back to the subject of idolatry and to its biblical and even mythological foundations.

When we consider the fundamental philosophical positions of our time, we take note of the significant tension that exists between immanent positions and transcendental positions. In the discourse that Levinas begins for us, the natural foundation of the immanent positions is the foundation that precedes the I and the ego, that precedes all, and that finds expression in the significant danger posed by total positions. It is the unified, general, all-encompassing position, then, that can be considered the greatest form of idolatry.

If we formulate this idea in terms of idol worship, the result is modern paganism as described by Heidegger: the natural approach that introduces order to reality, that establishes hierarchies of reality, and that endows existing reality with the foundations of order and rule. There is no need to seek out this position in Heidegger alone or in the related ideological positions, as it is widespread in the religious views. It is the Stalinist risk of all religious positions: the risk that the formative total position will put an end to all differentiation and the uniqueness of all others.

The total position constitutes the danger of modern idolatry, whether it envisions the totality of the state, the totality of ideology, or the totality of society. Deconstruction of the idea of totality, which is a necessary precondition for the struggle against idolatry, is found in the infinite obligation of one person to another. In an effort to develop an alternative position on the social contract and the state, Levinas borrows the concept of "the pact" from the Biblical and Talmudic language. Although the Talmudic discussion of the pact depicts a formative event in Jewish law,[22] the discussion is broken down into ethical

22 Levinas's discussion is based on the proposal of a philosophical reading of the Talmudic text in BT *Sotah* 37.

questions regarding the ethical meaning of the manner in which the pact is established: "face-to-face"—people facing one another, even within the public at large. But the Talmudic account expands the event of the establishment of the pact to include a large number of formative events and laws: not a single general constitution, but rather a large number of pacts that together, in their mutual solidarity, constitute the "pact." Levinas refers to this general coming together as a coming together of law and philosophy. Society does not accept a formative constitution of one great faith, but rather creates an infinite collection of obligations toward each individual human being. Summing up, we can say that if we compare the community or the People as a whole to a circle of points, then Levinas's conception of the pact is that of a network of threads that connects the different points, as opposed to all the points being connected to the center of the circle, which is the binding law.

Levinas says the following about this: "The general spirit of the legislation must be extricated from it. The spirit of the law must be investigated. Philosophy is not prohibited, and the intervention of wisdom is not unnecessary." A special relationship is required between generalizing wisdom and the individual laws that make the major ethical ideas implementable in practice. The concrete ethical aspect of the specifications of halakha is their direction to the concrete—the personal.

> It is precisely the concrete and particular aspects of the Law and the circumstances of its application which give rise to the Talmudic dialect: the oral law is a system of casuistry. It is concerned with the passage from the general principle embodied in the Law to its possible executions and its concrete effects. . . . All general thought is threatened by its own Stalinism. The great strength of the Talmud's casuistry is that it . . . preserves us from ideology.[23]

In accordance with this idea, we can say that the obligation's importance to the halakhic dimension is found in the obligation to not remain in the realm of abstract spiritual philosophy. However, the danger of this obligation is the new ideology it creates, which ultimately constitutes the erasure of the different individuals and all differentiation among them.

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23 Emmanuel Levinas, "Reading, Writing, Revolution," in *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 220.

On the other hand, the halakha holds decisive importance as "the struggle with the angel." According to Levinas, it is the ethical man's personal struggle to not choose pure "angelism" that does not take the risk of practical life—to not remain committed to an ideal ideological position of principle that has no practical expression. Action is the concrete ethical response, and the metaphor of the angel depicts a position that seeks to preserve its purity as a spirit without a body. Danger, however, lies in the fact that obligation to the practical world will ultimately build us a new constitution that does not regard people as taking part in the practical world—that we may enslave individuals to a new ideology of our own making. The struggle against the angelic is given meaning by joining the individuals, and not only the general ethical principle, as joining individuals is the quest for a system that preserves the concrete, which is done in the writing that is unique to the Talmudic halakha.

The halakha is also important in another way that is related to the importance of the ethical aggadic interpretation. Talmudic halakhic writing struggles against general ideas and halakhic rules expressed in all-encompassing language. The Talmud directs the student's attention to the existence of "private law" and the obligation of all individuals toward everyone who joins the pact. According to Levinas, the significance of the halakha lies not in the law in its general sense nor in the details and the fine points of the law as presented in the *Shulḥan Arukh*. Law's significance, rather, lies in the concrete obligation between one person and another, an obligation that stems from standing face-to-face with the Other. This manner of reading and learning halakha constitutes severe criticism of all the existing halakhic codices, which must be regarded as violations of the overarching principle of there being no overarching principle. Adhering to a master plan ends in the growth of an ideology and enslavement to an ideology. Levinas seeks the individual, the Other facing the I, and in the presence of a large number of human faces an overall pact is established. It is not generalization that plays the decisive role here, but rather the mutual guarantee of the pact.

In this context, let's consider a well-known quote of Levinas regarding the intellectual and aggadic place of the halakhic argument: "It is certain that, when discussing the right to eat or not to eat an 'egg hatched on a holy day,' or payments owed for damages caused by a 'wild ox,' the sages of the Talmud are discussing neither an egg nor an ox but are arguing about fundamental ideas without appearing to do so."[24]

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24 Emmanuel Levinas, "Introduction: Four Talmudic Readings," in his *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 4.

The Question of Tolerance—Instead of a Conclusion

"How then can we choose between religion and tolerance?" asks Levinas. His answer is that when based on responsibility and obligation, religion can constitute a basis for true tolerance. The meaning of religious tolerance is the ethical obligation whose existence the discipline of the commandments has the ability to ensure:

> The fact that tolerance can be inherent in religion without religion losing its exclusivity is perhaps the meaning of Judaism, which is a religion of tolerance. . . . The welcome given to the stranger which the Bible tirelessly asks of us does not constitute a corollary of Judaism and its love of God . . . but it is the very content of faith. It is an undeclinable responsibility. . . . The Jewish faith involves tolerance because, from the beginning, it bears the entire weight of all other men. The way in which it seems to block off the outside world and to display indifference towards the idea of a mission, together with the religious war lurking within that religion, results not from a sense of pride but from the demands that one has to make on oneself.[25]

According to Levinas, religion can lead people toward the absolute, but not in the name of an imperialistic seizure of control capable of devouring all those who refuse it, but rather as an absolute demand that is turned inward toward the self and that charges it with infinite responsibility.

25 Emmanuel Levinas, "Religion and Tolerance," in his *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 173–174.