

Eradicating the Impurities in Our Lives

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In this week's Parsha, Moshe commands Bnei Yisrael to destroy everything in Eretz Yisrael that was used to worship other gods.

"אֲבַדְתָּ אֶת כָּל הַמְקוֹמוֹת אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ שָׁם הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם יֹרְשִׁים אֹתָם, אֶת אֵלֵי-לְקִיָּהֶם עַל הַהָרִים הַרְמִים וְעַל הַגְּבְעוֹת וְתַחַת כָּל עֵץ רֵעָנָן. וְנִתְצַתְתֶּם אֶת מִזְבְּחֹתָם וְשִׁבְרֹתֶם אֶת מַצְבְּתָם וְאֲשֵׁרֵיהֶם תִּשְׂרֹפוּן בְּאֵשׁ וּפְסִילֵי אֵלֵי-לְקִיָּהֶם תִּגְדְּעוּן וְאִבַּדְתֶּם אֶת שְׁמֵם מִן הַמְקוֹם הַהוּא"

"Destroy; you shall destroy all the places where the nations, from whom you shall take possession, worshipped their gods: on the high mountains and on the hills, and every leafy tree. You shall break apart their altars, you shall smash their pillars, and their Asherim shall you burn in fire; their carved images shall you cut down, and you shall destroy their names from that place".

Moshe paints a very clear picture of the specific items used in idol worship and what steps Bnei Yisrael must take to eradicate those items.

Rashi, Rabbeinu Bachya, and the Ohr HaChaim teach similar ideas regarding the double language of אֲבַדְתָּ אֶת, "Destroy, you shall destroy."

Rashi offers a meaning behind the double language: from here we learn that when we are required to eradicate objects of idol worship, we must be certain to thoroughly uproot them.

Rabbeinu Bachya similarly explains the wording to mean that when we destroy items that have been worshipped, we must not let the remains rest about; rather, we must scatter them into the wind, drown them in the dead sea, or something similar.

The Ohr HaChaim defines אֲבַדְתָּ אֶת to mean that we are required to perform two acts. 1) We must ground the item into small pieces, and 2) we must either scatter those pieces into the wind or throw them into the dead sea. If we have not satisfied both conditions, we have not fulfilled the commandment.

From the verses and the commentaries' explanations, the seriousness of this commandment is quite clear: "full eradication" is required, no "If, When, or But". However, I want to contrast this commandment with what occurred in Parshat Matot, chapter 31.

Bnei Yisrael have just defeated Midian and brought all the spoils of war to Moshe and Elazar. Moshe becomes angry with Bnei Yisrael since they took captive the men and women who caused Bnei Yisrael to sin against Hashem, and Moshe orders that the captives be killed. He then details - to the soldiers that touched a corpse - the procedure of purification for themselves and articles in general. Then, in verse 31:23, which is the

foundation of our laws of Kashrut, Elazar tells Bnei Yisrael what to do with the spoils of war, “everything that comes into fire – you shall pass through fire and it will be purified; but it must be purified with the waters of sprinkling. And everything that does not come into fire, you shall pass through waters.” Hashem tells Moshe in verse 31:27 that they should “divide the plunder in half, between those who undertook the battle [...]”, which indicates that the spoils may be kept.

"כָּל דָבָר אֲשֶׁר יָבֵא בְּאֵשׁ תַּעֲבִירוּ בְּאֵשׁ וְטָהַר, אֲדָם בְּמֵי גִדְהָ יִתְחַטֵּא וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָבֵא בְּאֵשׁ תַּעֲבִירוּ בַּמַּיִם"

Rashi relates, based on the Gemara in Avodah Zarah 75b, that the manner in which a vessel is used defines the way it should be cleansed from what it has absorbed: e.g. A vessel that is used for hot water should be cleansed with hot water, and that which is used for roasted meat (for instance, a spit and grill), should be seared white hot in flames.

The Sforno understands the word וְטָהַר purified to mean that it must be purified and decontaminated from the negative residue of the idolaters.

The Daat Zekeinim explains why this commandment was only given now: it is because the fight with Midian took place in the homes of the Midianites, and now Bnei Yisrael are exposed to and have the opportunity to take the vessels of the idol worshippers. Therefore, Bnei Yisrael are instructed on how to remove the physical and spiritual impurities of those items.

Why is there a different procedure for the spoils of Midian and the potential spoils of when Bnei Yisrael conquer Eretz Yisrael?

The simplest answer is that we are not dealing with the same form of prohibition. With regard to the spoils of Midian, Bnei Yisrael did not acquire items that were used in the direct service of idols; rather, they plundered basic utensils. The verse would therefore be teaching that even items that were not used in idol worship still require purification. This verse is the source of the law that any food-related vessel (of certain materials) we purchase from non-Jews requires immersion in a Mikveh.

However, I do not find this answer sufficient. When we understand the prohibition and severity of Bnei Yisrael using items that have been involved in any form of idolatry, and this prohibition is on a biblical level, then it would be appropriate that we must act stringently and forbid the spoils of Midian. So why are we allowed to keep those spoils?

I think there is a better answer, which is provided by the Rambam, Laws of Avodah Zarah 7.1, and the famous real estate advice; “location, location, location.”

The Rambam writes that it is a positive commandment to seek out and eradicate all idolatry and all items used in the practice of idol worship from Eretz Yisrael. וּבְאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִצְוָה לְרַדֵּף אַחֲרֶיהָ עַד שֶׁנֶּאֱבַד אוֹתָהּ מִכָּל אֶרֶצְנוּ Within the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael, it is mandatory to pursue it until we destroy it from the whole of our land. Eretz Yisrael is the foundation of our community and our Jewish life; as such, we are obligated to remove all impurities that contaminate it. However, there is no such commandment for outside of Eretz Yisrael, with the exception of the places we create communities. אֲבָל - בְּחוּץ לְאֶרֶץ אֵין אֲנוּ מְצֻוִין לְרַדֵּף אַחֲרֶיהָ אֲלָא כֹּל מְקוֹם שֶׁנִּכְבַּשׁ אוֹתוֹ נֶאֱבַד כָּל עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים שָׁבוּ

outside of Eretz Yisrael, we are not commanded to pursue it, save that any place which we may conquer we should destroy idolatry therefrom. Regarding Midian, we were not conquering their land, and we had no intention of living there; we were only passing through. As such, Hashem gave us the permissible procedures on how to “Kasher” the impurities from the utensils.

The deeper lesson that can be learned from this is how to build our Jewish homes, regardless of where they are. I, like many other people, have “Kashered” the efficiencies of many a hotel room when traveling. When that has not been possible, I would double-wrap everything before I would put my food in the microwave or oven. All this is done within the guidelines of permissible kosher standards. But at home, meat and milk are kept completely separate: sinks, microwaves, ovens, etc...

I think that the Parsha is not only teaching us about physical impurities, it is also teaching a more critical lesson in eradicating our spiritual impurities. The spoils of Midian only had the ability to affect our physical wellbeing and we were permitted to Kosher them, but the utensils still required spiritual purification. In Eretz Yisrael, the utensils used in idol worship are definitely physically impure, but more critically, they are spiritually impure, and thus have no possible remedy.

Eretz Yisrael is our communal home and the global center of our faith. We should learn the message of this week’s Parsha that we not only must keep our communal home physically and spiritually pure, we should strive to do so in our actual homes as well.

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