

"STOLEN GODS"

One of the most disturbing and yet revealing verses in all the Torah occurs in today's Sedra. Jacob and his wives, the daughters of Laban, flee from Laban who had exploited them in the course of many years. Before leaving, and unknown to Jacob, Rachel steals her father's teraphim -- which were his household idols or, according to some commentators, certain primitive gadgets with which Laban thought he could foretell the future, and which he worshiped as deities. Rachel's reason for this theft, according to the Rabbis, was to prevent her father Laban from worshipping idols. When Laban discovers the flight of his daughters and son-in-law and their family, he pursues them and reproaches Jacob for making a hasty exit without the proper and ceremonious farewell. This leads him to the climax of his rebuke and his complaint: lamah ganavta et elohai, "Wherefore hast thou stolen my gods?"

What a pathetic figure is cut by this old and crafty fool! Here is a man shrewd enough to run rings about Jacob in business matters, and yet he stands there so pitifully and plaintively pleading for his paltry few teraphim! Lamah ganavta et elohat? "Wherefore hast thou stolen my gods?" According to Jewish legend, his grandchildren cried out to him, "Grandfather, we are ashamed of you! How foolish you are! How can a God be stolen?"

Of course, the grandchildren were right, religiously and spiritually: a God that can be stolen is no God. And of course, Laban

was right psychologically and culturally; in the context of belief in teraphim and icons, in fetishes and idols, gods can be bought and sold, bartered and stolen.

Historically this has always been so. Not only can idols be stolen, but they possess a special fascination; they all but beg to be stolen! Moses, at the end of his career, warned his people against the temptation towards idolatry. For you know, he tells them, how spiritually and morally degenerate are the Canaanites amongst whom we live. Beware, therefore, against worshiping their gods. Va-tir'u et shikutzehm ve'gilulehem, etz va-even kessef ve'zahav -- for you have seen their abominations, their revolting idols made of wood and stone, of silver and gold. What a curious logic! Moses calls them shikutzehm ve'gilulehem -- and yet they are apparently so attractive that he warns his people against worshiping them! Detestable, contemptible, abominable, repulsive, disgusting, revolting -- and yet they exert an ineluctable, hypnotic fascination! Lamah ganavta et elohai, cried Laban -- and we can understand and even sympathize with him.

All through the period of the Prophets until the end of the First Temple, Israel tended to worship such strange gods -- especially the gods of their enemies. Lamah ganavta et elohai, "Wherefore hast thou stolen my gods?," is the call of the pagan world to the Israelites of old.

But lest we smugly assign such naive and absurd superstitions as god-stealing to ancient days and primitive men, let us at once

acknowledge that we are no less unscrupulous when it comes to modern idols and the teraphim of contemporary man.

Consider the process of assimilation to which Jews of the Western World are subject in greater or lesser degree. We have appropriated to ourselves a great deal of the culture of the West. But, as the late and lamented Ludwig Lewisohn once said, assimilation in the United States has not usually taken place at the level of Harvard or Princeton, but at the level of Hollywood and television and the cheap pulp magazines a druggist sells under the counter. The Rabbis already had this in mind when they exclaimed in reproach, ki'mekulkalim bahem asitem, ki'meshubahim bahem lo asitem -- if you are going to emulate the non-Jew, why do you not emulate what is noble and sublime in his culture, rather than only the worst of them and the vulgarest of their mores! In some measure, we have borrowed what is valuable and enduring; but for the greatest part we have stolen the cheapest gods of the pagan West!

For instance, the contribution of Reform to Jewish education in this country has been to abandon the study of Torah -- the highest value in all of Judaism -- and to substitute for it the Sunday School: this educational fraud which allows Jews to continue their ignorance uninterrupted while retaining the feeling that they are fulfilling their obligations. And where did Reform get this institution from? -- from Protestantism! They stole the gods of the Protestants!

Modern America is today experiencing a renaissance of neo-

paganism -- progressive nudity, mini-morality, a neurotic and compulsive hedonism which entails a joyless pursuit of joy. And some Jews have stolen these obscene little teraphim -- so much so that, to our eternal shame and everlasting chagrine, it is usually Jewish writers with characteristically Jewish names who have become the major force in literary obscenity, who have become the masters of the fashionable expletive, who have decided to expose to decent society what should always remain buried within the deepest recesses of a soiled and sick mind. We have seen shikutzehem ve'gilulehem -- and we have found them irresistible. Wherefore have we stolen their gods?

There soon will be celebrated in the Western World the merry season of Christian celebrations. But many American Jews, ignoring their own wealth of festivals and customs, will be mimicking and aping and emulating their non-Jewish neighbors. And all of this mimicry will take place at the lowest possible level -- the kind of party-making distinguished not by spirit but by spirits. Lamah ganavta et elohai...

However, I would like to focus on a more subtle variation of the theme of god-stealing. If stealing household teraphim from a superstitious heathen is bad, how much more dreadful is it to steal the opportunity of a fellow Jew to experience the genuine worship of the true God of Israel!

Let me put it another way. Rachel's act, according to the Rabbis, was a noble one for she tried to prevent Laban from worshipping these idols. She had such contempt for them that she even sat on them.

Yet, in a most remarkable and unusual passage, the Zohar (I, 164b) castigates Rachel for her act of stealing the teraphim! To defile the idol and expose its worthlessness and inefficacy is a worthy act. But, according to the Zohar, Rachel was severely punished for the act of god-stealing, so much so that because of it she died in childbirth. What is the reason for the severity of this punishment? Be'gin tzaara d'abuha, af-al-gav d'itkavnat le'tav -- because, although her intentions were good, she did so at the expense of causing anguish to her father! She robbed him of his religious security, she humiliated him, she denied him access to the only source of his faith without him having anything else to fall back upon.

Now, let us apply to this case the old Talmudical logic known as kal va-homer. If stealing the gods of a superstitious old pagan is considered so heinous as to deserve such a terrible punishment, then kal va-homer, most certainly a hundred times over again, is it an act of unspeakable cruelty to deprive a young and innocent child of the opportunity to worship the one true God of Israel! Yet that is precisely what too many well meaning but misguided parents do every day of the year; they steal not their fathers' gods, but their children's genuine and authentic religious faith in God.

An extreme illustration of the tragic consequences of such faith-stealing occurred this week when the press recorded the story of a 24-year old Jew from New Jersey who went to Vietnam and pledged himself to a life of celibacy as a Buddhist monk. The new monk, the

press told us, was born in Newark and underwent Bar Mitzvah. What is most revealing is the following passage:

I wrote my parents today to tell them, "Today I am becoming a monk," he said. They knew I was going to do it. They haven't said too much about it...

When I was a kid, I was a Torah reader in the Synagogue. My parents didn't get excited about that. I don't think they're excited about this.

"Didn't get excited about it!" Of course he abandoned his Jewishness. Can one blame him overmuch? The child read the Torah -- and received from his parents no endorsement, no enthusiasm, no approval. Just "not excited!" Parents cruelly and sadistically imposed their own agnosticism -- if one can use this sophisticated term to describe their stupid mindlessness -- upon an innocent child. And when you steal a child's faith in Judaism, then his religious instinct remains unfulfilled and unrequited, and the result may very well be -- a Buddhist monk. That boy's soul, his neshamah, cries out: lamah ganavta et elohai -- not, "wherefore hast thou stolen my gods?," but: "wherefore hast thou stolen my faith in God? Why did you kidnap me from my faith in God?"

Is this an unusual case? Well then, let me attempt to spell out for you the psychology of such parents; unfortunately, we may even recognize it. "My child should read the Torah? I certainly do not intend to make a fuss about it. For all you know, he may even come back and say that he has made up his mind to become a rabbi, heaven forbid. He may try to turn my home topsy-turvy by making it kosher and forcing me into other such medieval and antedeluvian customs.



Why, who knows but that he may not want to come home wearing 'peios' and turning into a Hasid! Let him be a good, clean-cut American boy, go to the best schools, and let us be done with this nonsense!"

And so the boy did not become a rabbi, did not turn his home topsy-turvy, did not grow 'peios,' and did not turn into a Hasid. Instead, he became a Buddhist monk... Some "nachas!"

I wish I could feel that this is just an off-beat case, the act of a psychotic young man, a story good for nothing more than an illustration in a sermon but otherwise uninstructional. However, my own experience tells me differently. Only a couple of years ago I received a religious question directed at me from a young man whom I had convinced to leave his New England home to attend Yeshiva University, without the enthusiastic approval of his parents. These parents, who worship at Temple almost every Friday night, were disturbed by this phenomenon of religious stirrings in their son. The question the young man asked me was whether it is permissible for him to wear the tefillin for the Minhah service. I told him that before giving him an answer from the sources of the Halakhah, where material for solving the problem exists, I would like to know what occasioned the question. He informed me that he was going home for several days vacation, and that whereas his father begrudgingly would allow him to say his prayers in the morning, he would be absolutely furious if he saw his son wearing the tefillin! Because the son did not want to enrage his father and suffer banishment from his home, he wanted to know whether he could

put on the tefillin for Minhah, when his father would be away at work. And so a Jewish child in our own day, in twentieth century America, is a Marrano in his own home, and well-meaning but foolish parents have turned into contemporary inquisitors! Lamah ganavta et elohai -- wherefore hast thou stolen my faith?

I sometimes wonder how much different our even more committed Jews are in this respect. I have heard the kind of arguments that follow too often to dismiss them as atypical: "Hebrew school is alright -- but never Day school. Because that means a parochial school, and that's much too 'Catholic' for us..."

Or: "I am willing to send my child to a Day school; but please never refer to it as a 'Yeshivah' -- because you know what that implies..."

Or: "I am willing to go along with a Jewish education in elementary school, but high school? Why, that is ridiculous! He must devote all his time to his secular studies in the best possible high-school so that he can get into the right college so that he can study in the right graduate school so that he can get into the proper firm afterwards..."

Or: "A little religion, maybe; but not too much...!" As if we in our contemporary society, and even we in the circle represented by institutions such as The Jewish Center and Manhattan Day School and Yeshiva University, stand in imminent danger of being inundated by a deluge of excessive piety!



So we steal the gods of the gentile world, and, on top of that, we often deny our own children access to the treasures of Judaism, and rob them of what little faith they evince before it has a chance to flower and to grow.

As parents it would do us good to keep on the alert for every sign of healthy development of religious intuition in our children. When we discover it, we must develop it with no less attention and concern than we do their talents for piano or art or mathematics. For man is fundamentally religious, he possesses what Hasidism has called ahavah tiv'it u-mesuteret. If we "don't get excited," we may not have a situation as daring and exotic as a Buddhist monk as a result, but we certainly will have unJewish Jews who will kneel at the shrine of assimilation, participate in the cult of religious mediocrity, and whiff the incense of spiritual ignorance.

Jacob, who did not know of Rachel's theft of the teraphim, was annoyed at Laban's accusation of lamah ganavta et elohai. And so he answered: im asher timtza elohekha lo yihyeh, "with whomsoever you find your gods, he shall not live." Unknowingly, Jacob condemned his beloved Rachel to death.

In a sense, an echo of an echo of that ancient curse resounds through the halls of time and still has relevance in our own day. A Jewish community which denies its young the opportunity for true religious faith; which robs its youth of the purity of its spiritual inclinations; which creates conditions that make healthy Jewishness im-

possible; which bequeathes to the next generation its own spiritual sterility and religious mediocrity; which "doesn't get excited" about reading and studying Torah -- lo yihyeh, cannot survive.

It is for us to dedicate ourselves to fanning the spark of the love of God wherever we find it, to search for it deeply and diligently in every young soul and heart, to care for it tenderly, to encourage it wisely, and to bless it.

Then and only then shall we not only survive, but truly -- live. Ki hem hayyenu ve'orekh yamenu u-vahem nehegeh yomam va-lailah. For they, the words of the Torah, are our very life, and they give meaning to the length of our days, and in them shall we meditate by day and by night.