

Kachinas in Denver
Parashat Re'eh
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Shabbat Shalom.

Some 40 years ago, I spent an evening with a doctor in Denver. He had a wonderful collection of pottery from the South West, and I admired it. He smiled, and told me how he had acquired the pots.

He had interned near the Hopi Indian reservation in Arizona. He had always worked with wood as a hobby, and had brought his tools with him. At some point he acquired a friend from the reservation, and they would companionably work together in his wood shop during off hours.

His friend taught him something about the craft of making Kachina dolls. He was good at making them, and his Hopi friend would give him pottery in exchange for his better Kachina dolls. What would he do with the dolls? Sell them, of course. For years, there had been quite a bit of money to be made in the selling of Kachina dolls, but there was a problem - no observant Hopi would think of selling one. They are an important part of Hopi religion. At the same time, no collector would be happy about buying a Kachina doll without a careful chain of evidence, unless, of course, the collector could buy the doll directly from a Hopi.

The doctor was not a Hopi. From his friend's perspective, he could not, as a consequence, make a real Kachina doll. There was no ritual issue then in selling those dolls. A business partnership was born, and, judging from the pottery collection I saw in Denver, it had flourished. Some 40 years later, I still find it amusing to imagine collectors of Hopi artifacts around the world, whose collections include a Kachina doll made by a doctor from Denver.



Deuteronomy 12:2-3

Early in today's portion, we read this: "You must destroy all the sites at which the nations you are to dispossess worshiped their gods, whether on lofty mountains and on hills or under any luxuriant tree. Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site."

When I first started to read this portion in preparation for this morning, that passage stopped me entirely. The language is vivid and uncompromising. There are no conditional clauses, no ifs, no maybes. It also has the pride of place, it is Moses' first law given in this section. I couldn't ignore it, but I also didn't want to accept its simple meaning – it's "peshat". To the extent that I have any academic training in anything, it is in anthropology, and I've done a little archaeology. The destruction of artifacts from another culture is not to be taken lightly. Also, like most of you I'm sure, I still remember the horror of watching the Taliban destroy the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 2001. How can that ever be acceptable?

That was a month ago, so I simply stopped reading. I took it up again a week later. This time I did manage to read the entire portion, and a number of short commentaries. It was clear, though, that I was going to have to focus on those three difficult verses.

I have no desire to destroy this Doctor's Kachina dolls. I was looking for some way to diminish the clear sense of commandment that I feel in those verses.

First, one limitation is written in Etz Hayim, right in the Peshat commentary. It says "The Torah does not require the Israelites to engage in a worldwide campaign against idolatry, but only to eliminate it from the land of Israel where it might influence them. This is consistent with the biblical view that for other nations idolatry is not a sin."

So there is a limitation of space. It turns out there may be also be a limitation in time. Rabbi Berkowitz, in his commentary on these verses, says this: "This chilling legislation is historically bound, and must be understood within the biblical context. As a young nation still insecure in its path, Israel is fragile. God fears that

the practices of the native peoples will lure the Israelites into idolatry.”

I will admit, by the way, that even though this limitation serves my purpose, it makes me nervous. It is too easy to dismiss profound and important ideas by their age, by explaining them as being sensible once, in one imagined context or another, but inapplicable today. I like to think of the words of Torah as timeless.

A third way to limit the application of these three verses might be by being very careful about what we mean by idolatry.

Knowing how deeply I was wandering into the weeds with these three verses, Rabbi Perkins was kind enough to send me a few texts. One was by Rabbi Steinsaltz called “Peace without Conciliation – the Irrelevance of Toleration in Judaism”. He wrote that Judaism, like other monotheistic religions, is inherently intolerant. Again and again we read that our God is a jealous God. When it comes to deities, Judaism does not share well with others. But Rabbi Steinsaltz also points out that Judaism differs from Islam and Christianity in one crucial respect – it does not presume to be the only appropriate religion for all of humanity. Judaism is the religion for one people – us. We are guided by and bound to 613 Mitzvot. But we only think of seven of them, called the Noahide laws, as applying to all people.

Interestingly, one of those seven is idolatry – but idolatry for a non-Jew is considered to be the active practice of a polytheistic religion. Islam has never been considered an idolatry by Judaism. Christianity, because of the belief in a trinity, is a bit more complicated, but it has been widely considered a true monotheism by Jews since the middle ages. Rabbi Steinsaltz was even daring enough to suggest that Hinduism – almost the archetype of a modern pantheism, should at least be looked at carefully. He wrote “It is important to introduce a distinction between theology and religious practice. In the ancient religions grouped under the name of Hinduism, there are many gods and local shrines, but the theological principles that guide belief and provide a uniformity of moral standards assume that all the deities revered in India or elsewhere are forms of, expressions of, or names for, one ultimate reality or God.”

I’ve struggled quite a bit while writing this, second guessing myself each step of the way, suppressing one question after another. There are examples of passages of

Torah that suggest practices that have been diminished by the careful application of study and legislation over generations. But it is way above my pay grade or ability to try to emulate them. Torah resists attempts to weaken the scope of its laws. It seeks instead to be broadened, to be applied in new ways for new issues. How else can we think of these three verses?

Rashi is a good place to begin – he quite literally broadens the discussion, by adding one more verse – the very next verse after those three – which reads “Do not worship the lord your God in like manner”. Rashi writes “It is a prohibition addressed to one who would blot out the name of God from any sacred writings or would pull out a stone from the altar . . . Another possible meaning is that you should not behave like the native peoples so that your sins would cause the sanctuary of your ancestors to be laid waste”. So a passage whose peshat is an order to destroy other people’s shrines is brilliantly turned around to become a caution about how we ourselves should behave, lest some later people finds it morally appropriate to destroy our own shrines, and indirectly our own history.

Another text that Rabbi Perkins sent me – really, he knew I was out of my depth here – was from a blog by Rabbi Neal Loevinger. He was writing about another few verses from Deuteronomy, that, like the ones I was focused on, are striking in their vibrant use of active verbs. From Deuteronomy 9:21, where Moses is talking about his angry response to the people’s creation of the Golden Calf: “As for that sinful thing you had made, the calf, I took it and put it to the fire, I broke it to bits and ground it thoroughly until it was fine as dust, and I threw the dust into the brook that came down from the mountain.” Compare that to the verses about the destruction of the shrines: “Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site.” The language is very similar, as are the objects. What has changed is who created those objects.

Rabbi Loevinger wrote about those verbs – about the multiple distinct steps that the Torah describes as necessary for the destruction of an idol. This is what he said:

“Perhaps this long process- breaking, grinding, scattering- is really about the process of confronting our own deeds. If we think of idols not as physical things

but as representations of our own mistakes, misdeeds, misdirected loyalties and missed blind spots, then the image of Moshe grinding and scattering the Calf is really about a long process of looking at where we went wrong. The Israelites couldn't just remove the Calf and say everything was OK; they needed to take their false ideas about God and humankind and take some time to reflect on their mistakes. "Grinding and scattering" means: when you find an idol, which is probably within you, be thorough and fearless in uprooting it and making sure it can't be used again."

Our idols, in the end, are those things that stand in the way – between ourselves as we are today and ourselves as we are asked to be. In a few days the month of Elul will begin. For all of us, may it be a time of preparation, of repentance, and of the thorough destruction of a few more idols.