

Breaking Idols



Erev Rosh Hashanah 5779
Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen

Many thousands of years ago Abraham, your great-grandad times thousands and thousands, was impacting upon the world around him in ways that would resonate throughout the ages. Abe was a unique young man with a radical and entirely new belief system. Unlike all those around him, he believed in just the one God. For many Abe was a crazy, precocious and eccentric young man. For others he was a thorn in their sides, telling them they were doing it wrong and criticising their core beliefs – such chutzpah. His family thought ‘he’ll grow out of it...it’ll never last’. Yet for others he was intriguing – he seemed content, enlightened, there was something about him.

Abe’s relationship with his father was not good. They had constant arguments as Abe rebelled against everything his father and his people believed in. Terach, Abe’s father, loved his son deeply - his noble character, his strong spirit and so wise for his young age. But he was scared. Terach could see the power behind Abe’s convictions and was fearful that he would abandon his home and way of life. He was terrified Abe would anger the gods with his radical thinking. One day - Abe was working in his father’s shop which dealt in idols. ‘It’ll do him good,’ Terach thought, ‘to sell the idols in the shop - to be immersed in our traditions. It’ll rub off on him’.

A customer entered the shop and asked Abe to make an offering on her behalf to the idols. After the woman left, something shifted in Abe. He took a club and broke all of the idols and placed the club in the hands of the biggest idol. When his father returned, Terach asked, ‘who did all of this?’ Abe replied, ‘I can't hide it from you - a woman came carrying a dish of flour and told me to offer it before the idols. I did, and one of the idols said, 'I will eat it first,' and another said, 'I will eat it first.' The biggest one rose, took a club, and smashed the rest of them’. Terach said, ‘do you think you can trick me? They aren’t real!’ Abe replied, ‘Did you hear what you just said!?’

After that day, despite his father’s best efforts, Abe never returned to his people’s ways – he received a calling to set off on a new path, to sow new seeds and to walk a way that instead of creating and worshipping idols, broke them and found promise and light in the cracks and delighted in the struggle of an uncertain journey ahead.

This midrash from Genesis Rabbah, slightly re-written, reminds us of the radical beginnings of our religion. A religion of breaking idols, of subverting the world around us, of criticising society and holding onto high ideals and creating meaningful ways of existing. Yet, as we stand on the eve of year 5779 I wonder what Abraham would say. We may no longer produce physical idols to worship and sacrifice before but we are still creating idols and the effects are just as real as the stone idols that Abe smashed all those years ago.

We create numerous idols consciously, unconsciously, recklessly and intentionally – we worship things as if they are complete and perfect and free from scrutiny. For some, particular political leaders become gods, worthy of worship and unable to do any wrong. For others social media becomes a space abundant with idols – we produce selfies that present happy and harmonious lives, without revealing the full picture. We chase celebrity lives and likes on Facebook, re-tweets on twitter and so on – they hold more value than anything. For some, Israel is an idol – a country unable to be criticised. For others their set of political beliefs, be that far-left, or far-right, are sacrosanct. For some, Judaism is an idol – it can only exist in this particular shape, ‘this’ is what Judaism feels like – not that, ‘this is what it looks like and should be’ – not that. There is no room for diversity, no space for argument and positions become entrenched and idols are born.

We create idols in the conversations we have and the entrenched positions we take. We can’t hear the nuances, be open to tolerance and understanding. Instead we mistakenly believe that our opinion is inviolable. We close our minds and numb our hearts. We create idols in the stories we tell about ourselves and each other and we hang onto those stories as if they are real and all-powerful. ‘I am not good enough’, ‘they are more successful than me’, ‘Muslims are dangerous’...so many idolatrous stories that understand the world to be black and white and that don’t allow for multiple voices. We search for unity without realising that the divine/meaning, is found in the in-between, in the struggle and in the meeting of different opinions.

As Abraham taught us, we are a people of iconoclasts – a people who break idols and have a way of living that can allow for a third space in our society.

A pivotal moment in our history was when Moses came down from Mount Sinai after receiving the Torah from God and broke the tablets of law in front of the people. It was the breaking that was more significant than the revelation. For there is, in that moment of destruction, a creative redemptive power in the possibility of the re-build. Everything is shaken up so that liberation is possible. We see this again when the Temples were destroyed. Out of the rubble rabbinic Judaism was born – a religion that focused not on buildings and sacrifice but on people and words – on dialogue and study – on listening and debating.

As we enter this period of reflection and chant our confessional prayers we are reminded that nothing is perfect or absolute. It is ok to back down, to make mistakes, to forgive and to not hold ourselves to unachievable standards – in fact, that is our sacred obligation as Jews for in so doing we break our idols. We know that there is nothing but the unknown mystery/ever-evolving/unfolding process that we inadequately call God. That’s all we have - the divine -the in-between - the uncertain wilderness – the fractures.

Our synagogue, here at Jackson’s Row is a place for iconoclasm - for breaking of idols. Whether that be the stories of our egos (those truths we have lived by and that do us harm), or whether it be in challenging our own positions and beliefs to make space for others. Here is where we can uncover what is real. We realise that beauty, divinity and meaning is found in the in-between, in relationships, in dialogue. It’s not in transactions or chasing after perfection, success or unity. For, these days teach us, nothing is certain or absolute. And yes, this is terrifying, but it is also freeing. There is nothing to lose and everything to gain.

May we in the year 5779, channel our inner Abraham and continue to use this time to break our personal idols and the ones we have collectively made. May we appreciate the beauty in every moment and concentrate on relationships and dialogue. As we set out, in December of this year, at Jackson's Row, with our listening project, where we will meet as a community in people's homes – may we be able to listen to each other, live in the in-between, and continue to build a vision for this community that continues in the tradition of breaking idols and providing a meaningful and fulfilling life for its members.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – may this be God's will – Amen.

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