



Does the Mitzvah to Eliminate Idol Worship Apply in Israel Today?

Must Churches be Torched in Israel?

As a new returnee to Judaism, I attended Diaspora Yeshiva, which had programs on Mt. Zion and in the Old City of Jerusalem. Living in the Old City, I was surrounded by churches, and the sound of gonging church bells dominated the soundscape. It was jarring to pass by many more churches and crosses every day, than I ever encountered in Denmark, my native Protestant country. We laughed a bit at the big church on Mt. Zion, with its beige walls and mold-grey roof, that resembled a camembert cheese. Other than that, we lived in a peaceful distance from our Christian neighbors and didn't provoke them in any way. Not only in the Old city, but around the Land of Israel, churches dot the landscape. The Israeli government has permitted Christian communities to thrive in our midst. My sister told me that such a community in her neighborhood is known for its excellent chocolate, which the Chareidim favor, due to its strict Kosher supervision. I'm not going to discuss here, whether its permitted to buy such chocolate, yet, I wonder how all these Christians ever got visas to live in Israel, when Israel's interior ministry gives such a hard time to our sincere conversion candidates and the Noahides are completely barred from receiving permanent resident status. We learn in this week's *parasha*, that it is a mitzvah to destroy idol worship, especially in Israel. Most halachic authorities hold that Christianity – with its deifying of a man – is considered idolatry. Not every Israeli shares the government's permissive attitude. At a panel held for yeshiva students, debating whether Jews are commanded to eliminate idol worship in Israel today, Rabbi Gopstein answered in the affirmative and called for churches to be torched. "Did the Rambam rule to destroy idol worship or not? Idol worship must be destroyed. What's the question?!" Rabbi Gopstein later explained that he was not calling to take operative steps, but that this is Rambam's approach, and it's the responsibility of the government, not of individuals. R. Bentzi Gopstein was subsequently accused of incitement and his political party, *Otzma Yehudit* was banned.

The Positive Torah Mitzvah to Destroy Idolatry

Parashat Re'eh, which is abundant in laws and statutes, opens with the mitzvah to wipe out idolatry from the places under Israel's dominion:

ספר דברים פרק יב פסוק ב אַבְדֵּם תִּאְבְּדוּן אֶת כָּל הַמִּקְדָּשִׁים אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ שָׁם הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם יֹרְשִׁים אֹתָם אֶלֶהֵיהֶם עַל הָהָרִים הָרָמִים וְעַל הַגְּבָעוֹת וְתַחַת כָּל עֵץ רַעֲנָן: (ג) וְנִתְּצֹתֶם אֶת מִזְבְּחֹתָם וְשִׁבְרֹתֶם אֶת מִצְבְּתָם וְאֲשֵׁרֵיהֶם תִּשְׂרֹפוּן בָּאֵשׁ וְכִסִּילִי אֶלֶהֵיהֶם תִּגְדְּעוּן וְאִבַּדְתֶּם אֶת שְׁמֵם מִן הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא:

"You shall utterly destroy from all the places where the nations, that you shall possess, worshipped their gods, upon the lofty mountains and upon the hills, and under every lush tree.

You shall tear down their altars, smash their monuments, burn their *asherim* with fire, cut down the graven images of their gods, and destroy their name from that place" (*Devarim* 12:2-3).

Rambam explains, "We are commanded to utterly eradicate all vestiges of idol worship from the Land of Israel. To shatter, burn, destroy and cut down – any method needed to destroy the idols, their altars, and their houses of worship ([Sefer Hamitzvot, Positive Mitzvah 185](#)). He expounds upon the mitzvah in *Mishna Torah*:

"It is a positive mitzvah to destroy false deities, all their accessories, and everything that is made for their purposes..., as [[Devarim 12:2](#)] states... and, as [implied by [Devarim 7:5](#)]: "Rather, what you should do to them is tear down their altars." In *Eretz Yisrael*, the mitzvah requires us to pursue idol worship until it is eradicated from our entire land. In the diaspora, however, we are not required to hunt after it. Rather, whenever we conquer a place, we must destroy all the false deities contained within. [The source for this distinction is [Devarim 12:3](#), which] states: "You shall destroy their name from this place," [implying that] you are obligated to hunt false deities in *Eretz Yisrael*, but you are not obligated to do so in the diaspora ([Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 7:1](#)).

From these sources, it seems that it would be a mitzvah for me to arrange a fieldtrip to various churches for my students – equipped with hammers and other smashing tools. Especially considering what *Sefer HaChinuch* writes, that "we were commanded to destroy all houses of idolatry with all types of destruction – with breaking, with burning, with demolition, with cutting – whatever is the most effective way of quick destruction in order not to leave a trace of idolatry... The mitzvah applies to males and females in every place and at all times; as it is a commandment upon us to destroy the name of idolatry, if the power is in our hands" ([Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 436](#)). So why do Torah Jews seem so apathetic, allowing all this idol worship to exist in our midst and in the heart of the holy city of Jerusalem?

If You Find an Idol Must You Destroy it?

In the last few decades, a favorite volunteer opportunity has been to participate in archaeological excavations in Jerusalem. Dr. Eilat Mazar has been excavating ancient Jerusalem for decades. Most of the excavations have been devoted to the upper City of David and the Ophel (just south of the Temple Mount). Whereas many of the findings have been Jewish symbols and artifacts, among them a number of idols from ancient Jerusalem were also unearthed. For example, a pendant figurine of an Egyptian god was discovered by a student during Eilat Mazar's 2012 Ophel excavations. It dates back to around the time of King David and Shlomo. This fits with the fact that King Shlomo married the daughter of Pharaoh (I *Melachim* 3:1). Perhaps, this figurine belonged to her or some other member of the royal idol-worshipping harem (I *Melachim* 11:4). If you are a volunteer digger, 'lucky' enough to discover such an item or any other idol, the question is whether you are obligated to smash it? That would probably not go over so well with those who value the idols. However, if you look closely at the text in *Sefer HaChinuch*, the mitzvah to destroy idol worship only applies when "the power is in our hands." Meaning, in a situation where Jews have complete control, such that the idol bashing will be free of retaliation or punitive measures from non-Jews. Considering the probable world-wide objection to the destruction of these archeological 'treasures,' belonging to humanity, we are not required to smash idols. This applies to wherever we may encounter them – in museums, restaurants, private homes etc. in Israel or anywhere else.

Aiming for a Pure, Holy and Idol Free Israel

In response to the question of whether the soldiers that conquered Israel and Jerusalem transgressed the mitzvah to destroy idol worship, Rav Menachem Kasher quotes *Sefer HaChinuch* that "the mitzvah only pertains when our hands are domineering." He explains that, in our time, we do not have the power to destroy idol worship in Israel. The reason is that we are restricted by international law, which dictates that a conquering nation is banned from causing any harm to the holy places of any other nation. Furthermore, it is forbidden to provoke the nations (*Yalkut Shimoni, Song of Songs* 2:986). For this, could cause them to, G-d forbid, retaliate and bring terrible tragedy upon Israel, and upon all Jews scattered in the diaspora. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai cautions us not to rush to destroy idol worshipping altars, in case they will force you to rebuild them in a stronger way and thus transgress a Torah commandment (*Devarim* 16:22). This

surely pertains to our times, since, if our soldiers had torn down the idol worship in Israel, without doubt, we would have been forced to rebuild them (Rav Menachem Kasher, *HaTekufah HaGedolah* pp. 260-264). Not being able to actively destroy idols, doesn't mean that we are permitted to indulge in them, such as gazing at ancient idols in museums, as it states, "You shall not turn to the worthless idols" (Vayikra 19:4). The *Sifra* offers two possible understandings of the verse: 1. The prohibition against studying idol-worship 2. The prohibition to look at idols. Therefore, if you unearth an idolatrous artifact, do not gaze upon it. Rav Moshe Feinstein rules that, although it is prohibited to study idolatry including idolatrous mythology, the Torah prohibits studying only what is authored by a proponent of the religion. We may study these subjects, if the teacher derides their beliefs and does not have the students read texts written by those who believe in the idols (*Shu't Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah* 2:53). In the same line of thought, it is permissible to keep idol figurines purchased from a museum shop, (which were never used for actual idol-worship) to demonstrate at the Seder what silly gods the Egyptians worshipped. Yet, it is still recommended to dispose of them ([Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff, Grave Issues about Graven Images](#)). I believe it is important to heighten awareness – through peaceful means – that the appearance of idols in Israel is a serious Torah infringement. Living in an egalitarian, tolerant world, makes it challenging to regard the sight of any church in the land of Israel or the rest of the world as a desecration of Hashem's name. Yet, despite, desiring a pure, holy and idol-free Israel, it makes sense to me that we need to exercise patience and restrain ourselves from taking the law into our own hands – walking around smashing idol worship in Israel or anywhere else – until the Oneness of Hashem will be revealed to all. Let us pray that this day will come speedily and in our time!