



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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"What, Me? Worry?!"

I am a worrier. My friends and family tease me about it.

I sometimes worry about personal matters, and sometimes about professional concerns. More often, I worry about things that are going on in the community or in the world.

I worry about the economy, and I worry about Iran's development of nuclear weapons.

Because of my background in psychology, I sometimes compare my worries to the thoughts of patients who suffer from obsessive compulsive disorder. Like them, I sometimes have one worry on my mind and can think of nothing else. But I long ago decided that my worrying, though it may seem obsessive, is far from an indication of mental illness. Many people worry.

It is only very recently that I came to consider the possibility that, although my worrying was not a sign of a psychological disorder, it might be a sign of a theological disorder, a spiritual fault.

What prompted that consideration was a passage in the writings of Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the late 19th century head of the Yeshiva of Volozhin, in Eastern Europe. In the introduction to his commentary on *Deuteronomy*, Rabbi Berlin, or the Netziv, as he is known, makes a remarkable statement:

"Reading carefully the words of instruction contained in this book, *Deuteronomy*, words which were divinely inspired and uttered by Moses our teacher, each person will find 'milk and honey' in accordance with his spiritual level... Therefore, each person should read it contemplatively, according to his ability, and he will find a straight path upon which to walk... So let this book be a source of illumination for one's life journey..."

I decided to heed the Netziv's counsel in reading this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Va'etchanan*, (*Deuteronomy* 3:23-7:11). But I immediately found myself facing a dilemma. Among the many themes and topics in this week's Torah portion are some strong words prohibiting idolatry. "Do not act wickedly and make yourself a sculptured image in any likeness whatever... You must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them." (*Deuteronomy* 4:15, 19)

How does this apply to me? What "milk and honey" can I find in proscriptions against idol worship? When was I last tempted to make for myself a graven image, or to bow down to the sun or moon or stars?

The only answer I can find to resolve this dilemma is to profoundly redefine the meaning of the prohibition against idolatry for our day and age.

Idolatry in ancient times was a process by which primitive men identified a single object to worship. They turned away from the vastness of the universe and its complexity and isolated either a heavenly body or some artifact of their own making, and

came to believe that it, and only it, was worthy of their adulation. They became fixated upon a small fraction of reality. They became obsessed with one thing, and that thing was far from representative of the whole picture.

In more modern times, the process of idolatry took a different turn. Instead of fixating upon an object, human beings fixated upon an ideology. They came to believe that the vastness of the universe could be reduced to a set of ideas. Those ideas included the Enlightenment, nationalism, scientism, socialism, fascism, and communism. Those are but several of the idolatries of more recent history.

What they all have in common is a fixation or obsession with one set of ideas, as if that is all there is to life. That is where my nasty habit of worrying comes into play. The worrier becomes consumed with one fear, which may be trivial or may be monumental, but which is only a small part of the totality of existence.

When worrying is conceived of in this manner, it becomes apparent that worrying itself may be form of idolatry. When one is consumed by worry, the person is limiting his or her attention to one idea, or fear, or concern. Such individuals are ignoring the fact that there is a big world out there with a lot going on. They are certainly forgetting all the positive blessings that probably surround them.

Admittedly, this is a novel interpretation of idolatry, but it is one that fits our modern circumstances much better than sun worship or offering animal sacrifices to a totem.

This redefinition allows for a deeper understanding of another passage in this week's Torah portion, the *Shema*. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One". Only the Lord is One, because only He is

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all-encompassing. Nothing else is One in that sense – not the sun or moon, and not the currently popular ideology. They are all but parts of the greater whole.

Only of God is it said, "He is the place of the world, and the world is not His place." He contains the world; the world does not contain Him.

This is the real meaning of monotheism. Not that there is one God, but that God is One. Only He is big enough, complete enough, total enough, to be worshipped. Everything else is partial, fragmentary, and fractional. Everything else, including our worries, are mere idols which do not deserve the devotion we give them.

Perhaps the cynical Alfred E. Neumann of the comic books of my childhood was making a profound theological statement when he said, "What, me? Worry?!" ■