

Introduction to Tractate ‘Abodah Zarah

The law of idolatry takes as its task the negotiation between Israelites and the pagan world in which they live: how Israelites are to conduct themselves so that at no point and in no way do they give support to idolatry. In its basic exposition ‘*Abodah Zarah* rests squarely on the foundations of Scripture, supplying rules and regulations that carry out the scriptural commandments about destroying idols and everything that has to do with idolatry. But it formulates matters so as to transform the entire topic of idolatry into an essay on Israel’s relationships with the Gentiles, who are idolaters by definition.

- I. Commercial relationships with Gentiles
 - A. Festivals and fairs
 - B. Objects prohibited even in commerce
 - C. Objects prohibited for use but permitted in commerce
- II. Idols
 - A. General principles
 - B. The *asherah*
 - C. The *merkolis*
 - D. Nullifying an idol
- III. Libation wine

For the written Torah idolatry is not to be tolerated. In its Land Israel is to wipe out idolatry, even as a memory. Scripture is clear that Israel is to obliterate all mention of idols (Exo. 23:13). They are not to bow down to Gentiles’ gods nor serve them, but they are to overthrow them and break them into pieces (Exo. 23:24): “You shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and hew down their Asherim and burn their graven images with fire” (Deu. 7: 5, 25–26).

Scripture’s law does not contemplate Israel’s co-existing in the Land with Gentiles and their idolatry. But the law of ‘*Abodah Zarah* speaks to a world that is not so simple. The Land belongs to Israel, but Gentiles live there, too—and run things. And Israel no longer forms a coherent collectivity but a realm made up of individuals each with his particular interests. ‘*Abodah Zarah* commences its treatment of the subject with the opposite premise: Gentiles live side-by-side (whether or not in the Land of Israel) with Israelites, and Israelites have to sort out the complex problems of co-existence with idolatry. That co-existence involves not whole communities, the people Israel and the peoples, whoever they may be, but individuals, individual Israelites living side-by-side with Gentiles.

The law deals with commercial relationships, matters pertaining to idols, and finally to the particular prohibition of wine, part of which has been served as a libation to an idol. The whole is regularized and ordered. There are relationships with Gentiles that are absolutely prohibited, particularly occasions of idol-worship, which are complicated, as we shall see, because the law recognizes that these occasions are major commercial events. When it comes to commerce with idolaters, Israelites may in some instances not sell or in any way

benefit from certain things. In other instances they may sell but not utilize certain other things, and in some instances they may both sell and utilize still other things.

Here, we discover quickly, the complex and systematic mode of the sages' thought that governs the law's treatment of the topic vastly transcends the rather simple conception that animates Scripture's discussion of the same matter. There are three unstated, but vital, premises which guide the law in *'Abodah Zarah*. First, that which a Gentile is not likely to use for the worship of an idol is not prohibited. Second, that which may serve not as part of an idol but as an appurtenance thereto is prohibited for Israelite use but permitted for Israelite commerce. Third, that which serves idolatry is prohibited to the Israelite both for use and for benefit. In relationships with the Gentiles (meaning, idolaters), the law takes for granted a number of facts that yield a single generalization: Gentiles, like all idolaters, are assumed routinely to practice bestiality, murder, and fornication.