

Dear Michael,

If Judaism forbids idolatry, why is it ok to worship the Torah? That is your question to me for this morning. A rather startling question—until I began to think about it and appreciate its complexity.

Do we worship the Torah? Do we give the appearance of worshipping the Torah? Michael, I sat and thought and played a kind of game that I like to engage in when thinking about all different kinds of problems and situations. I put myself in the position of a Martian who was sent by his Martian supervisor to study religious life on Earth. As I travel across the planet, I discover many different religious faith groups. One very small one calls themselves Jewish. Here is a synopsis of a section of my Martian's report.

These Jews pray in different styles but some of the practices are common to all of them. The differing styles reflect some houses of worship where men and women do not sit together while praying while others do have men and women together. In some, all the men are cover their heads while in others some men go covered, some go bare headed. This is also true for women but there seem to be fewer places that require head coverings for women and in those places where there seems to be freedom of choice, fewer women seem to choose to cover their heads.

All the synagogues or temples seem to feature a prayer language that is foreign in all countries save one to the native tongue of the worshiper. They call this language Hebrew. In one country, Israel, it is the native tongue of the worshipers as well as the language of prayer. In this country, all the worshipers actually understand all the words they are saying. Outside of Israel some synagogues seem to use more Hebrew than others but Hebrew is common to all of them.

The report goes on to include all different kinds of observations, what people wear, what kinds of food is served and when, etc.

Finally, we come to this interesting section. The Jewish worshipers proclaim allegiance and faith to a God they call Adonai or Eloheem. This God seems to take the form of a parchment scroll that is kept during most of the worship service in a kind of cabinet or closet that they call an ark. They call the scroll a "Torah". It is wrapped in fine velvet cloth. The fine cloth is covered with beautiful silver ornaments. It is handled with great reverence. People kiss it when they are near it. People stand for it as it is raised aloft and special songs are sung for it. The worshipers also bow down towards the cabinet or closet where the Torah scroll is

contained. This Torah must be a mighty God for the religious people called Jews on planet Earth.

The Martian's observation on the Torah strike at the very heart of the fear I feel each week when we march with the Torah. Is kissing the Torah an idolatrous act? Bowing before the ark -- these ritual customs give me personally great pause. For many years these practices were abandoned in Reform congregations but even as a youngster in the more traditional congregations that I grew up in, I was somehow bothered by the urgent need some people seemed to have to kiss the Torah as it marched by them.

So, Michael, I ask myself "what is missing?" How does our Martian get it so wrong? How can I tell him what is really going on?

The answer is rather complicated-- but I will begin with simple statement-- we can never take the Torah from the ark--hold it up, parade it, embrace it if we do not also read from it and listen to its words carefully-- that is the key.

WHY? Because.....

We, Michael, are a religious people whose faith has the radical notion that God can be found inside a book. I do not know how else to say it. We say that God is found in a book. Accessing God means studying the book-- continually studying the book and discovering the deep meanings, the deep wisdom, and truths of the book. We call the book by many names -- Torah, Tanakh, Bible -- and the Jewish religious way is to read the book, think about the book, and strive to live your life according to its wisdom. This is the great statement of the ancient teacher Rabbi Ben Bag Bag "Turn it, turn it, because everything is in it. Spend your life in study of it because there is no better lived life than that."

Now the really unusual thing about the book is that there is no universal agreement about what the book means. There are at least two different religions that use the book as a primary text -- Jews and Christians -- and we have large areas of disagreement on what the book is about. For Christians, it is a preliminary book -- a volume one introducing a newer set of teachings that they claim are rooted in the first.

Jews do not agree with that understanding, Michael, but even among Jews there is no full agreement on what the torah means -- what the God who is found in its pages wants us to do.

You see, Michael, for us, the Torah functions as both a text that we study and learn from as well as a symbol. Our Martian thinks that we worship the Torah as an idol because our Martian does not understand what a symbol is. A symbol is something that we look at, but it symbolizes or represents or points to something beyond it -- something higher.

An easy example here is the flag. The United States flag symbolizes our country -- its values, history, and purpose. For many people around the world our flag has been a symbol of freedom and democracy. That is why some people become so upset when a flag is burned. It is not the mere burning of a piece of cloth, it is viewed as an act of violence against the fabric of our democracy. But since our democracy allows freedom of expression, there are others who say even burning the symbol of freedom should be permitted. That is what America is about.

For Jews, the Torah is a symbol even more sacred than the flag is to Americans. That is why our Martian confused it for God. The Torah is the ultimate symbol of Judaism. The Torah stands at the center of every synagogue. The Torah symbolically points us towards our faith. In fact, Michael, having the Torah as our symbol is one of showing the very complexity of what Judaism is all about. Ours is not an easy religion and faith comes with difficulty for us.

I gained a renewed appreciation for this about two years ago while on sabbatical and spending time at the Virginia Episcopal Theological Seminary. I sat in the chapel there several times looking at the cross and observing the worship. The cross, of course symbolizes the death of Jesus. The climax of the worship is the sacrament known as the Eucharist or communion -- that part of the Eucharistic rite in which the consecrated bread and wine are distributed to participants in the worship. It is in consecrating the bread and wine that they become the body and blood of Jesus through a prayer known as the epiclesis wherein the holy spirit enters and transforms the bread and wine.

The cross is a symbol but the Eucharist is real -- the reality of the corporeal Jesus has entered the church. There is a physicality to Christianity that Judaism does not have.

We too follow a deliberate ceremony where with prayer and ritual we take the Torah scroll from the ark, we parade it, we sing about it, we honor it and then we read it and learn its words. What communion is for Christianity, interpretation is for Jews. We discuss what the text means.

When we think the Torah is God, we are no longer Jews, but idolaters. There is a famous story of the late, great Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg. He had been invited to France to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Paris from the Nazis. While attending a great banquet celebrating the liberation, an elderly Catholic priest approached him and said proudly that during the occupation an elderly Jew had knocked on the back door of his church one night clutching a Torah scroll. He asked the priest if he would take the scroll and hide it from the Nazis in the church. The priest took the scroll and hid it. At that point Rabbi Hertzberg turned to the priest and said to him: "Next time hide the Jew and let the scroll go."

The scroll is precious and a great symbol but it is not God. As Jews we are commanded to sacrifice even a Torah scroll if we can save a human life.

Judaism's most essential commandment is to oppose idolatry and fight idolatrous practices. There are those in our faith who don't understand this commandment even today. There are those who have turned the soil of Israel -- the land of Israel -- into an idol. As you know, Michael, my Zionist commitments are second to none, but when Torah teaches us that no rock is God, it means no pile of rock, no mountain of rocks, no West Bank Rocks, no East Bank Rocks, no rock even in Jerusalem is God. To hold a rock to be sacred above all else is to be an idol worshiper. The rock can at best be a symbol for what lies beyond and when we forget that we risk losing who we are.

So, Michael, don't go looking for any Martians at our services -- and I may be the only one trying to think like a Martian -- but also try and keep in mind that important line between symbol and idol and whenever you think someone is crossing it, speak up.

That too is a Jewish obligation.

Keep asking those questions and keep turning the Torah's pages over and over.