

**KISSING THE TORAH SCROLL - IDOL WORSHIP
OR
CONCRETE DIVINE CONNECTION?**

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To my teachers at the Academy for Jewish Religion,
who have opened wide
the many different windows
of Jewish beauty, ethics, and wisdom.

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PREFACE

This senior project evolved as a personal challenge to understand the practice of kissing a Torah scroll (ספר תורה). Questions and concerns about this Jewish ritual became theological in nature. Ever since I began my studies at the Academy for Jewish Religion (AJR), I developed a kind of courage which allowed me to ask difficult questions about religious issues. I learned to question my own stand on God, faith, and ritual. However, thanks to those who accused me of being engaged in idol worship as an anthropologist, I took it upon myself to examine the belief that going to an ashram is idolatry but going to a synagogue is not. In addition, I chose to examine whether or not the practice of kissing the Torah scroll, which presumably contains the written word of God, has any residue of idolatry, or if idolatry is even relevant to understanding the practice of kissing the Torah scroll.

Prior to my studies at the AJR I was exposed to a cross-cultural range of spiritual practices and experienced several different non-Jewish rituals. I lived in ashrams and practiced a Buddhist life style; I also participated in Native American Sweat Lodges and tepee ceremonies; and I was a worshiper in Christian and Baptist settings. It became important for me to understand why we call it “paganism” or idol worship when people bow to the Buddha, or put flowers in front of his image, but we do not seem to have such concerns when Jews bow to the Torah scrolls in the Ark, kiss each scroll as it goes around the room, decorate it with “fancy clothes” and “jewelry,” dress it with some degree of ceremony after it is read, and dance with Her as one would dance with a beloved. Is the medieval Christian custom to walk around with a monstrance¹ different²? Can we say with certainty that Jews are so different from the others in the way they worship? Praying before a pillar of stones, or a tombstone is forbidden for Jews. But, why is praying before the Kotel, leaving prayerful notes in its nooks, and touching its

¹ A monstrance is the vessel used in the Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran Churches to display the consecrated Eucharist Host. In the medieval period monstrances were constructed for the public display of relics, but the term is now usually restricted to those used for hosts.

² I use this example for the sake of argument, but I do not mean to equate the host, the presumed body of Christ with a Sefer Torah.

stones in loving embrace any different than going to Mecca and kissing the *Khana Kaaba* (The Black Rock)?

Another reason that I began to have questions about these Jewish rituals is because I am a religious relativist. I believe that no religion is better or worse than any other. We must show respect to other religions on their own merit and we have no right to judge other religions negatively. However, it is well known that ethnocentrism³ is common among many cultures around the world. Joseph Campbell⁴ makes a very important observation that all the great civilizations have viewed their own religion as being supreme ever since antiquity. The Greeks and Romans, Hindus and Chinese were able to view the gods and customs of others sympathetically, yet thought of their own as supreme. On the other hand, the monotheistic religions--Judaism, Christianity, and Islam--view the gods of others as no gods at all, but devils, and their worshipers as godless. Judaism and Islam even have difficulty accepting Christianity as a monotheistic religion.

But, what we learn from history is that ethnocentrism also exists among Jews. In the Middle Ages, for example, Jews who opposed Hasidism – the *Mitnagdim* ("the Opponents") – considered Hasidic leaders to be poor scholars. They also considered the *tzaddik* ("A holly righteous person") to be an idolatrous figure that undermined traditional religious hierarchies. The *Mitnagdim* further argued that Hasidic study of mysticism cheapened the tradition and undermined the separation between sacred and profane. In addition, the rise of popularized mysticism had fueled false messiahs with terrible results. Hasidism, they feared, was simply another form of pseudo-messianism. Considering the location of the movement's foundation and its attraction for former Shabbtaians, one did not have to strain too much to see the apparent similarities between Hasidism and Shabbtaianism.

³ Ethnocentrism is the tendency to believe that one's ethnic or cultural group is centrally important, and that all other groups are measured in relation to one's own. It is "thinking one's own group's ways are superior to others" or "judging other groups as inferior to one's own". The ethnocentric individual will judge other groups especially with concern to language, behavior, customs, and religion.

⁴ Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By, How we re-create ancient legends in our daily lives to release human potential*, Penguin Books Ltd. 1972, p. 10.

The following are two examples to show the nature of ethnocentrism. An informant, Lew Ross has been a follower of the Native American ways for over twenty years. Lew was brought up as a Born Again Christian. When he changed his faith his family treated him as an outcast and called him “a devil worshiper.” He understands the family’s attitude, because he accepts that each person has his or her own different level of spirituality, yet he is amazed to see how people so readily disparage anyone who is of a different religion. Similarly, Amy Harbo, a Presbyterian practitioner who is studying to become a member of the clergy, explained that Presbyterians protest the Catholic Church because of its use of icons and sacrament, since they are not supposed to have crosses, iconic symbols, saints, or chancel in their own church. Presbyterians consider Catholics to be idol worshipers.

Today, such ethnocentric claims interfere with the ability to maintain an interfaith relationship of any kind. By pointing to members of other religions and saying that they are idol worshipers or performing *Avodah Zarah* (idolatry), Jews “put down” the others and see them as inferior. Such a perspective not only absolves us from finding faults in Judaism or in Jewish communities, but also perpetuates disrespect. As long as people find fault in others, they do not find fault in themselves. In addition, this arrogance prevents Jews from recognizing that some of their own practices mimic those of “others” (and may even have derived from alien practices). This is especially true of practices involving the kissing of objects. When Jews engage in such acts, they do not consider themselves idol worshipers and believe that they are God’s true and exclusive partners who hold the ultimate truth.

Jews who think that idolatry is only the domain of other religions should examine their own practices more closely before they denigrate others. We should look at some of our own questionable rituals, particularly those related to the veneration of the inanimate object known as a Torah scroll. Specifically, we should examine the rituals involved in reaching out to it when it passes⁵.

⁵ This is only when the scroll contains the names of God. Once the scroll is altered or the names of God are removed, the scroll will no longer be considered sacred or special.

The subject and argument of this paper is contained in its title, *Kissing the Torah scroll - Idol worship or Concrete Divine Connection?* It attempts to collapse the distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish rituals and eliminate any negative connotations about the “other.” It reveals that most religions use rites in similar ways. The only distinctions are the cultural symbolism and belief systems that are unique to each religion.

In this examination of the practice of kissing the Torah scroll I attempt to clarify how and why it began; what the practitioner believes he or she is doing when reaching out to kiss the scroll; what the positive and negative aspects are of this practice; and whether the overall practice qualifies as a pagan or a legitimate ritual. Because this analysis is framed in a universal conceptualization of customs and rituals I found it difficult to use the term “idolatry” with its relation to the custom of kissing the Torah scroll. When the term “Idolatry” is used, it is usually presented in a negative way - it has negative energy and casts a shadow on the custom of kissing the scroll. Instead I chose to replace this term with a more general and universal term, which is “Concrete Divine Connection” (CDC). This would provide a neutral understanding of the practice of kissing the Torah scroll.

This paper reviews Jewish resources and literature and also provides the anthropological perspective of the custom of kissing the Torah scroll. For the latter, I have used the methods of interviews⁶, questionnaires and blog material from the web. I selected two random groups of informants who, by their accounts, shed light on the meaning of this custom. The first group consists of informants from non-Jewish faiths that share a common custom of kissing sacred objects. The second group consists of Jewish informants that share their feelings about kissing the Torah scroll. I followed the philosophy of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who said: “Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else’s inner life, we gain it through their expressions,

⁶ About the names of informants used in this paper; when the full name is used, it means that their consent was given to use the name. When only first name is used, the informant preferred not to use the full name. Questionnaire is Appendix #3.

not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness. It's all a matter of scratching surfaces..." He calls this "The Native's Point of View".⁷

Chapter 1 begins with the classic anthropological example of a stranger who encounters a new and unfamiliar culture. It describes how one understands this new culture and what impressions it makes on him or her. This demonstrates how easy it is to fall into ethnocentric thinking and how it could cause ambiguity and separation between Jews and others. While kissing a sacred object is the focus of this paper, I found it important to mention yet another custom which is practiced by Jews and by other religions alike. This is the practice of bowing to deities, which is also viewed by Jews to be an idolatrous act. Kissing and bowing to deities are mentioned together in the Bible. However, because the act of bowing is out of the scope of this paper, I include this discussion in Appendix #2.

Chapter 2 is a selection of Jewish texts from the Bible, responsa literature, the *Shulchan Arukh*, and various commentaries that deal with the custom of kissing the Torah scroll. Most importantly, this chapter illuminates that kissing the scroll was not a recommended custom in certain circles, and that today Orthodox Jewish women struggle with the prohibition against women touching and kissing the Torah scroll. The chapter includes a blog for Orthodox women, which is fully presented in Appendix #4 - "Imamother.com – Connecting Frum Women." It demonstrates the fact that some of women challenge the religious dogma of separation and find many ways to touch and kiss the Torah scroll. This is to show that there is something very important in the perception and the act of touching and kissing the Torah scroll. However, the available information on this topic is scarce.

Chapter 3 deals with the historical, social, and psychological aspects of the custom of kissing the Torah scroll. It reveals that the custom of kissing sacred objects

⁷ "From the Native's Point of View": On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding, in: *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 28 no. 1 (1974), pp. 26-45.

can be traced all the way back to the Bible. It shows us that the Israelites probably borrowed a pagan custom and incorporated it into their own rituals. The psychological aspect of the custom speaks to the human need to relate to concrete objects that exists in all religions. These objects have a special meaning and the act of touching and being touched creates emotions that connect one to the divine. This section comes alive through the ethnographic material taken from a small random sample. This material includes interviews with people of all ages and across all Jewish denominations and reveals how people feel when they kiss the Torah scroll and why people do it.

Chapter 4 introduces the term “Concrete Divine Connection” and compares it to the classic conceptual framework of the term “idolatry.” The chapter also shows what my informants say about idolatry and how their understanding of the term creates confusion. The confusion as to whether kissing the Torah scroll is idol worship or not exists not only for people of today, but is also apparent in the different interpretations one finds in the classical literature.

Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on the Torah scroll itself and discusses the different ways in which this sacred object is understood by scholars, rabbis and lay people. Mostly, it shows how the Torah scroll is used during worship as a concrete divine connector. It examines the problematic nature of using the Torah scroll as a sacred object and asks whether or not it is a holy representation of God.

1. ETHNOCENTRIC VIEWS ON RITUALS

Imagine that you are a stranger to the Jewish world. Imagine that you enter a synagogue during a special gathering. You note pictures or painted images on the wall of the sanctuary. You note that what appears to be the Jewish god takes form in a parchment scroll, which is covered with a fancy velvet cloth and is adorned with silver ornaments. Most of the time, this scroll is kept in a special cabinet. When the scroll is taken out of this cabinet, all the people in the room stand up. As certain people hold the scroll and walk around with it in the aisles, you see other people kiss this object either by touching it with their book or with the fringes of their shawl and then kissing the book or the shawl.

On this particular day, you see people dance while holding the scroll with apparent ecstasy. When the scroll is uncovered, different men and women read from it. Before someone recites, what seems to be like the blessings over it, he or she kisses and touches the outside of the scroll with the fringe of his or her shawl and then kisses the fringe. Some people touch their shawl to the words in the scroll that is about to be read before kissing it. And at last, after the scroll is read, it is held up in the air with its words facing the congregation. The people reach out toward the scroll with their pinky finger, while reciting a specific response, and then kiss the finger.⁸

Now, what comes to your mind? How would you describe this kind of divine worship? Does all of this remind you of other rituals? Perhaps a Pow-wow?⁹ A Puja?¹⁰

⁸ This idea of presenting the hypothetical scenario at the synagogue is inspired by the anthropological paper: *Body Rituals Among the Nacirema* by Horace Miner, 1956. Various anthropologists and sociologists have used the term *Nacirema* to examine aspects of the behavior and society of American people. It offers a form of word play by spelling "American" backwards. The original use of the term satirizes anthropological papers on "other" cultures, and the Northern American Culture. The paper was originally published in the June 1956 edition of *American Anthropologist*.

⁹ A Pow-wow is a gathering of North America's Native people. A modern Pow-wow is a specific type of event where both Native American and non-Native American people meet to dance, sing, socialize, and honor American Indian culture.

¹⁰ In Buddhism, Puja (Sanskrit & Pali: pūjā) are expressions of honor, worship, devotional attention. Acts of Puja include bowing, making offerings and chanting. These devotional acts are generally

Perhaps this observation brings you to a point where you begin to form some ideas about these customs or about the people who worship?

A Jewish audience will immediately recognize this ritual and will nod. Jews are very familiar with these types of actions in the synagogue and other occasions where different objects are kissed. Some of the objects kissed include the following:

- The *tallit* [prayer shawl] is kissed just before putting it on.
- The *tefillin* [phylacteries] are kissed when they are taken out of their bag and before placing them back in the bag.
- The *mezuzah* on the doorpost is sometimes kissed upon entering or leaving a house. It is done by touching the *mezuzah* with one's hand and kissing the fingers that made contact with the *mezuzah*.
- The curtain on the Ark [*parokhet*] is kissed before one opens it, or after closing it when the Torah is put away.
- A *siddur* [prayer book] and *Humash* [Jewish Bible] are kissed before putting them away. These holy books are also kissed if they are accidentally dropped on the floor¹¹.

The fundamental problem with these actions or rituals is that adoring and kissing an object during worship is not exclusively a Jewish practice. We see that Christians kiss relics and holy images to connect to divinity. Kissing the cross is an especially holy act. People kiss the foot of a statue of Saint Peter in Saint Peter's Square. Muslims kiss the *Khana Kabba* (The Black Rock) and Native Americans kiss the rod. When done by others, Jews recognize this action of kissing as Idol worship, and it has become a marker of separation of the Jews from others. Indeed, the term "idolatry" has negative and derogatory connotations when Jews discuss the non-Jewish religions. In the

performed daily at home (either in the morning or evening or both) as well as during communal festivals and Uposatha days at a temple.

11 Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Pray as a Jew: A Guide to the Prayer book and the Synagogue Service*, New York: Basic Books, Harper Collins, 1980, p.43f.

Talmud Bavli, *Masechet Avodah Zarah* and in various responsa, we read about rabbis who warned Jews not to mingle with others on the basis of their unique religious practices. A great number of laws that prevented Jews from mingling with non-Jews and even doing business with them were instituted on the basis of the idolatrous practices of the non-Jews.

This ethnocentric attitude mentioned above refer to the act of kissing sacred objects, which might be considered worship of images. It also includes the negativity about the practice of bowing to deities. The prohibition against images and pictures is just as serious as is the prohibition against bowing. We find that the rhetoric about bowing is also a form of ethnocentrism and is something to be considered for future research and analysis. A summery analysis is found in Appendix #2.



2. JEWISH TEXTS THAT MENTION KISSING THE TORAH SCROLL

In order to explore the custom of kissing the Torah, it is important to trace this custom through the different available written records that we have today. The following are the sources that mention and refer to the act of kissing the Torah scroll. Surprisingly, the sources contain little discussion about the custom¹².

2.1 Ways to kiss the Torah scroll

Different customs are mentioned regarding the correct way to kiss the Torah. *Shaearim Metzuyanim B'halacha*¹³ cites Ari Z"l who maintained that one should kiss the Torah with one hand rather than with one's mouth. *Shaarei Ephraim*¹⁴ writes that one should kiss the Torah with his mouth and while doing so he should recite from the Song of Songs 1:2; ישקיני מנשיקות פיהו – Give me of the kisses of your mouth. Only when it is not possible to kiss the Torah scroll by mouth should one use the hand.

2.2 A hint for kissing the Torah scroll in the Psalms

The reference of kissing the Torah scroll as believed to be in Psalm chapter 2 is obscure and unclear. Many commentators tried to translate the phrase נשקו בר but, interesting enough, none, except the Gemara, translated it as kissing the Torah scroll. Rabbi/Cantor Howard Nacht, in his senior project at the Academy for Jewish Religion, provides the full discussion about this phrase.¹⁵

ספר תהלים 2:12

נִשְׁקוּ בַר פֶּן יֶאֱנֹף וְתוֹבְדוּ דֶּרֶךְ כִּי יִבְעַר כְּמַעַט אָפוּ, אֲשֶׁרִי כָל חוֹסֵי בּוֹ.

12 Translations to English is by Ziona Zelazo.

13 שְׁעָרִים מְצוּיָנִים בְּהַלְכָּה הֶנ"ל

14 שְׁעָרֵי אֶפְרַיִם, שְׁעָרֵי יְסַעִיף ד' – quoted in The book Ta'amei Ha-Minhagim U-m'qorei Ha-Dinim, p. 64-65.

15 Appendix #1

Psalms 2:12

Pay homage in good faith, lest He be angered, and your way be doomed in the mere flash of His anger. Happy are all who take refuge in Him. (JPS)

ועל כך כתוב במסכת סנהדרין, דף צ"ב, עמוד א: "אין בר - אלא תורה, שנאמר: נִשְׁקוּ בַר."

It is written in Sanhedrin 92a: "Var is nothing else but the Torah, as it is said: Kiss Var."

2.3 Standing when the Torah scroll is passed and kissing it

In the *Talmud Bavli Kiddushin* 33a we learn about the obligation of a student to stand up when his teacher passes by within the area of four *amot*. One would assume that it is reasonable to do so out of deep respect to a teacher. However, the Gemara adds that it is not only the respect to the teacher that is dictated, but also the obligation to respect the knowledge of Torah that this teacher holds. From this we see that standing when a teacher passes, is, in fact, standing for the Torah. In our case, it is reasonable to think that if one rises in the presence of those who study Torah, certainly, one should rise for the Torah. Based on this Gemara, *Sefer She'arim Metzuyanim Be'halacha*¹⁶ provides a further assumption, but with no explanation; that when the Torah scroll is taken from and is returned to the ark, people rise and also kiss the scroll. However, *She'arim Metzuyanim Be'halacha* gives us an important opinion; there should not first be touching the scroll and then kissing the hand because it is a custom practiced by masses. Rather, one should hug the scroll with both arms and kiss the scroll directly.

ונושאים אותה אל התיבה: ... שאין לעשות כמו שהרבה מהמון עם שנוגעין בידיהם את הספר ומנשקין את הידים, אלא יחבק הספר תורה בשני זרועותיו וינשק הספר תורה בעצמו.

¹⁶ שערם מצויינים בהלכה סי" כ"ג ס"ק א

2.4 The custom to kiss elders after worship

Daf Yomi Digest¹⁷ incorporates Rashi in the explanation for kissing the Torah scroll. In his commentary to *Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah 17a*¹⁸ Rashi writes that it was customary for people to kiss those who are greater than themselves when leaving the synagogue out of respect. So, one can conclude by applying one of the principles of the biblical hermeneutics of *Kal Vachomer*¹⁹ – if one kisses people who are greater than oneself, then certainly one should kiss the Torah scroll, the greatest of all.

אבי חדייהו - חזה דרך בני אדם כשיוצאין מבית הכנסת מיד הוא נושק לאביו ולאמו ולגדול ממנו בארכובה או בפס ידיו [משום כבוד]:

Avi Hadayu observed the custom when people leave the synagogue. Immediately he gives kisses to his father and to his mother and to the one older than him, on the leg from under the hip-bone to the ankle, the knee and its surrounding parts, or the palm (the hand from the wrist to the tip of the finger) [out of respect].

2.5 Bringing children to the synagogue to kiss the Torah scroll

This further explains the custom that the Rema brings in *Shulchan Arukh/Orakh Haim* 139:3 : [*Mishnah Berura* 7]

שולחן ערוך/ אורח חיים - סימן קמט סעיף ג, משנה ברורה סעיף ז

וכתב הרמ"א: ובמקומות שמצניעין אותו בהיכל שהוא הארון בבית הכנסת – מצוה לכל מי שעוברת לפניו ללוותו עד לפני הארון שמכניסין אותו שם. וכן הגולל ילך אחר הספר תורה עד לפני הארון שמכניסין אותו שם (ד"ע ומהרי"ל). ועומד שם עד שיכניסו הספר תורה למקומה. וכן נוהגים במגביה הספר תורה, כי הוא עיקר הגולל כמו שכתבתי בסימן קמ"ז. **ויש שכתבו שבאים התנוקות לנשק התורה, כדי לחנכם ולזרזן במצות. וכן נוהגין (אור זרוע).**

¹⁷ Daf Yomi Digest, *The Daily Resource for Thousands of Daf Yomi Learners Worldwide*, Kidushin 33, November 10, 2008

¹⁸ רש"י, עבודה זרה 17א, ד"ה אבי חדייהו

¹⁹ literally translated as light and heavy, or lenient and stringent; an *a fortiori* argument. If a specific stringency applies in a usually lenient case, it must certainly (even more so) apply in a more serious case.

... And there are those who wrote that babies (or young) come to the synagogue in order to kiss the Torah, in order to educate them and speed up their learning of the mitzvot.

Interestingly, it is not clear whether the Rama seems to be troubled by the practice of kissing the Torah scroll, or perhaps he wishes to see the practice limited to young children. I believe that his intent was not that only children should kiss the Torah scroll. Rather, even children should be brought to the synagogue to kiss the Torah; the adults who are present should certainly kiss the Torah scroll.

2.6 Kol Nidrei

There was a custom to kiss and hug the Torah scroll before the *Kol Nidrei* service began. This gave people an opportunity to ask for forgiveness directly from the Torah scroll, and in a public setting.

קיצור שולחן ערוך (שחיבר ר' שלמה גנצפריד) - סימן קל"ב, סעיף א:

במדינות אלו נוהגין קודם כל נדרי מוציא הגדול שבקהל ספר תורה ומסבב עימו סביב הבימה והאנשים מחבקים ומנשקים את הספר תורה ומבקשים מחילה וסליחה על מה שפגמו בכבוד התורה ומקבלים עליהם מהיום ואילך ללכת בדרכה, ואומרים כמה פעמים הפסוק אור זרוע וגומר.

Kitzur Shulchan Arukh (by Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried) – Siman 132a

In these countries it is the custom that before *Kol Nidrei* the pre-eminent individual among the community takes out a Torah Scroll, and he circles with it around the *Bima*. And the people hug and kiss the book of the Torah, and they ask pardon and forgiveness for how they damaged the honor of the Torah, and they accept and take upon themselves from today on to walk [observe] in the Torah's ways.

2.7 A precaution about kissing the Torah scroll

The following source issues a precaution about the manner of kissing the Torah scroll. When people carry the Torah scroll to the *Bima*, they often detour or bend down to allow those who are not within reach of the Torah scroll to kiss it. Some rabbis refer to this act as an act of degradation and believe that those who behave in this way should be strongly reprimanded. The responsa stresses the idea that it is more respectful for the Torah scroll to have people come up to it to be kissed rather than having it²⁰ come to the people.

שו"ת ציץ אליעזר חלק י"ב סימן מ

Questions and answers – Tzitz Eliezer, Part 12 Siman 40

א. בחובת הקהל לגשת אל הס"ת ולנשקה.

- a. On the obligation of the congregation to approach the Torah Scroll and to kiss Her²¹.

לח"א

א) אודות מה שבהרבה פעמים מוציא הס"ת (הספר תורה) מארון הקודש להוליכה אל הבימה לקרוא בה, צועד אתה כמה צעדים אחורנית או לצדדים ומושיטה לעומדים שם שינשקו אותה. גם בעיני הדבר נראה תמיד למוזר ואני מרגיש בכך כפחיתת כבוד לס"ת כאילו מחזרים ומבקשים שינשקו אותה, וגם עצם הסטיה אתה ממחוז חפצה מהוה אי כבוד לה, וברור שכבודה היא שכל העומדים וכל הנמצאים יחזרו המה אחריה ויתקרבו אליה לנשקה. ואלה שלא מתקרבים יהיה מאיזה טעם שיהיה אין לו לנושאה להתקרב אתה אליהם.

- a. With regards to the matter which many times he [the *shaliach tzibur*] takes the *Sefer Torah* out from the ark so that he would walk Her to the *Bima* to read from Her. He steps with Her a few steps backwards or to the sides, and he extends Her to those who stand there, so that they would kiss Her. In my eyes (in my opinion), this thing has always seemed strange, and I feel that it is like diminishing the respect for the *Sefer Torah*, as if [they are] courting [or follow Her] and asking [the people] to kiss Her. And also in the matter of

²⁰ The reference refers to the Torah as feminine. There is also a possibility to translate Her instead of It.

²¹ See above.

removing Her from the area of Her desire [the ark] constitutes disrespect for Her. And it is clear that Her respect (honor) is that all those who stand and all those who are present would follow Her and would get closer to Her to kiss Her. And those who do not get closer to Her, from whatever reason it would be, the one who carries Her should not get closer [to those who stand].

ומה מאד שמחתי שמצאתי לאח"ז (לאחר זאת) בספר שו"ת ריב"ם (רבי יוסף בן רבי מאיר) שנייטוך²² שכבר הרעיש על הדבר הזה, ובקצת עיקר דינים לבני ישראל שבתחילת הספר בסעי' ט"ז כתוב לאמר: להזהר בעת פתיחת הא"ק = הארון קודש = בשעת קריאת התורה שיטול הש"ץ (שהשליח צבור) הס"ת ויסבב התיבה לצפון ולדרום, וכל או"א (אדם ואדם) ילך אל התיבה לנשק הס"ת אם ירצה, אבל לא יולך הש"ץ את הס"ת אצל כל או"א ויושיט לו הס"ת כמו חתיכת חפץ, כמו שראינו בארץ אשכנז, וזה גנאי גדול ובזיון גדול לתורתנו הקדושה, והוא דומה לחילול השם, כי איך ימלא לבו של בו"ד (בשר ודם) שלא להטריח א"ע (את עצמו) לילך לס"ת לנשק כ"א (כי אם) שהס"ת יבוא אליו, ע"כ (עם כן) נ"ל (נכון לדעתי) שהקולר ההוא תלוי על צואר הרבנים היינו שישגיחו על הדבר הזה בכל מקום שידם מגעת ולהגליל השייך אליו יזהר להזהיר שלא להעשות כן, וישראל קדושים בודאי ישמעו ויעשו יקר וגדולה וכבוד להש"י (להשם יתברך) עכ"ל (עד כאן לשון). רואים עד כמה שאורייתא קמרתחי בהגה"ח הנ"ל על הדבר הזה עד שמצא לנחוצו להתריע על כך בחריפות כזאת.

And how happy I was that I found after that in the book of Question and Answers of the Riba"m Shneituckh, who already made "noise" [made an issue] about this matter in the past, and a little about main laws for *Be'nei Israel*, at the beginning of the book in *sa'if* 16 as it is written:

To be careful during the opening of the ark; at the time of the reading of the Torah, that the *shaliach tzibur* would take the *Sefer Torah* and would circle around the ark to the north and to the south, and each person would walk to the ark to kiss the Torah if he wished. But the *shaliach tzibur* should not walk with the Torah from person to person, and extend the Torah to him like an article [commodity] as we saw in the land of Ashkenaz [Germany]. This is a great disgrace and shame to our holy Torah and it resembles blasphemy. For how could a human's heart be satisfied if presume to not trouble himself to walk over to the Torah to kiss, but rather, the *Sefer Torah* should come to him?

Therefore, it is right in my opinion that this neckband hangs on the necks of the rabbis [the obligation depends on the rabbis], which means that they have to supervise this matter in every place that they are involved in rolling [the Torah]. That which belongs to him [the obligation] will be careful and will warn that it would not be done so, and Jews who are holy will certainly follow [what they

²² ורשא שנת תקע"א

hear] and they will offer respect and glory and honor to the Blessed name (End of the words of Ribam Shneituch). We see the extent to which the Torah is angered in the gloss of the Sage mentioned above in so far as in this matter that he found it necessary to protest this in such sharp [strong] language.

2.8 Kissing the Torah scroll during an *aliya*.

The following is a commentary by Rav Baruch Haberlander of Budapest, Hungary. He addresses the time of the *aliya*, when the custom of kissing the scroll is at the beginning and at the end of the Torah reading. There are different ways to do it, and one example is that one touches the place either with the *tallit* or with the mantle of the Torah scroll. With the fringes of the *tallit*, the reader first touches the writing of the beginning of the *aliya*, then the end, and last the beginning. Then the reader kisses the fringes of the talit. And after he is done reading; he touches the end and then the beginning.

המנהג לנשק ההתחלה והסוף בקריאת התורה²³

הרב ברוך אבערלאנדער

שליח כ"ק אדמו"ר זי"ע, וראש הישיבה - בודאפשט, הונגריה

כבר בכ"ב מנחם-אב תש"י רשם הרי"כ ביומנו¹: "ממנהגי הרמ"ש שליט"א: כשעולה לתורה, נוגע בטליתו במקום הקריאה תחילה, סוף, תחילה ונושק. ואחרי הקריאה: סוף, תחילה²." ומקורו ב"רשימת מנהגי יארצייט שיש בהם חידוש" שבסה"מ תש"ח עמ' 146, ומשם בס' המנהגים עמ' 13.

והנה בשו"ע או"ח סי' קלט ס"ד נאמר: "כל הקורין מברכים לפניה ולאחריה ופותח הספר קודם שיברך ורואה הפסוק שצריך להתחיל בו ואח"כ יברך".

וב'שערי אפרים' שער ד ס"ג מוסיף: "ומראים לו המקום שיתחיל לקרות כדי שי(ו)דע על מה הוא מברך. ונוהגין שהעולה לוקח הטלית או המעיל של הס"ת ומעבירו על מקצת העמוד במקום שיש לו לקרות ונושק הטלית או המעיל, והוא מנהג וותיקין...". ושם סכ"ב: "ואחר גמר הברכה קודם שמסתלק ממנה יש לו לנשק הס"ת".

אבל בנוגע למנהג לנשק לא רק במקום התחלת הקריאה אלא גם בסופו יל"ע מה מקורו.

והעירני אבי הרמא"ח שי' מהדיון בסי' קמ ס"ג בנוגע לזה שעולה לתורה והראו לו במקום הלא נכון, ובט"ז ומג"א שם משווים את זה עם ההלכה בסי' רו ס"ו: "נטל בידו פרי לאוכלו ובירך עליו ונפל מידו..."

²³ WWW.KOVETZ.COM

²³ עניני ספר תורה, סעיף קנ 64. In The Book of Ta'amei Ha-Minhagim U-m'qorei Ha-Dinim, p. 64.

ובאם משווים ברכת העולה לתורה לדיני ברכת הנהנין צ"ע לכאורה, הרי שמה בעת שמברך לא צריך לציין או אפילו לחשוב על כמות האוכל שהוא רוצה לאכול, מציינים שמה רק את 'ההתחלה' ולא את 'הסוף'.

וקצת ע"ד המנהג שלנו נמצא ב'שערי אפרים' שם סי"ז: "נוהגין להעביר עם הטלית על אורך מקצת היריעה באותו מקום שמראין לו לקרות לנשקו נשיקה של חיבה, וכמש"ל, לפי שבזה מגלה דעתו שחביב עליו לקרות מכל הכתוב כאן..."

וראה 'חקרי מנהגים' לרא"י גוראריה עמ' עב ואילך.



נדפס בימי מלך ח"ג עמ' 1106. וראה ימי בראשית עמ' 206. ובשנים יותר מאוחרות שינה הרבי ובגמר הקריאה היה "מנשק עם הטלית במקום סיום הקריאה ובתחילתה ושוב בסיומה", קובץ מנהגי מלך עמ' 34.

2.9 The custom to kiss the fingers after touching the Torah scroll

In The Book of Ta'amei Ha-Minhagim U-m'qorei Ha-Dinim²⁴ there is a reference to a remark of the Ari Z"l, who felt that kissing the fingers after touching the scroll is no more than an act of ignorance. This remark is cited from the book of Yesod V'Shores HaAvodah²⁵. In addition, we read in Job 31:27 about the custom of pagans to reach out with their hand to the sun and the moon, and then kissing this hand. One can assume that this reference from Job sets the stage for the Jewish custom to first touch the Torah scroll with the *siddur* or the *tallit* and then kiss these objects. See the full reference in Chapter 3, section 3.1.

2.10 Women kissing the Torah scroll

References to women kissing the Torah scroll deserve a paper of their own; however, it is important to address it here briefly. It is the common perception within the non-Orthodox circles that in the Orthodox circles women do not have access to the Torah, and therefore, these women are deprived from kissing it.²⁶ However, there

²⁵ Yesod V'Shores HaAvodah, Alexander Ziskind M'Horodnah 1783

²⁶ I am not aware of Orthodox synagogues that do allow women to access the Torah on a regular basis, but perhaps they exist. I know that in the Carliebach Synagogue in the West side, NY women can dance with the Torah on *Simchat Torah*.

seems to be some indication that in certain Orthodox communities women do find ways to access the Torah, most often during *Simchat Torah*. In a blog that was created for Orthodox women,²⁷ there is an interesting discussion that sheds light on the desire women have to obtain a close connection with the Torah. These women manage to obtain that connection. There is certainly a great deal of meaning for them to touch the sacred object, but they also struggle with tradition and self identity.

Yael Levine²⁸ introduced a cross-cultural perspective on the custom of women kissing the Torah in her description of this custom in Sicily and Bagdad. The following accounts are translated from the Hebrew.²⁹

"In the community of Palermo, Sicily, women used to enter the men's section to kiss the Torah scrolls on the eve of Yom Kippur. Rabbi Ovadia (1450-1516) from Ventura reports this custom for women in his letter to his father who lived in Israel.³⁰ After the *Ma'ariv* service the men opened the gates of the synagogues and they sat there all night till the morning. The mother of the family used to come with the other women in the family to "bow and kiss those Torah scrolls." The urge of women to get closer to holiness was experiential [expressed with verbal accounts], and there was no records of historical evidence regarding these Sicilian women."

In a later period, in the community of Bagdad, the custom of women kissing the Torah also took place in different festive times. Amongst them were on the eve of *Yom Kippur*, *Shemini Atzeret*, and *Simchat Torah*. The information comes from the work of the collector and researcher David Sasson³¹, the son of the learned scholar Flora Sasson. "All the Torah scrolls from the *geniza* were taken out and put in the main synagogue (היכל) sanctuary. Both men and women made rounds in the different

²⁷ See Appendix #4

²⁸ יעל לוין, "נשים והיום הקדוש - הנהגות ומעשים", קולך, פורום נשים דתיות, עמודים 122-123 (תשרי-חשוון תשס"ח), עמ' <http://www.kipa.co.il/kolech/show.asp?id8-6>

²⁹ Translation is by Ziona Zelazo.

³⁰ מנחם עמנואל הרטום ואברהם דוד, מאיטליה לירושלים: איגרותיו של ר' עובדיה מברטנורא מארץ ישראל, רמת גן תשנ"ז, עמ' 40; אברהם גרוסמן, חסידות ומורדות, מהדורה שנייה, ירושלים תשס"ג, עמ' 302-303, 317.

³¹ דוד ששון, מסע בבל, ירושלים תשט"ו, עמ' רכז. וראו עוד שם, עמ' קכג

synagogues and kissed each one of the books. By contrast to the custom in Sicily, which was only for women, in Bagdad both men and women participated. Because of this, in 1898, Rabbi Yoseph Chayim (הבן איש חי) gave instruction for *Simchat Torah* and enacted a separate and special time for men and women to engage with the Torah scroll so that they would not mingle.³²

Finally, an anthropological study done in 1992 by Susan Sered³³ about elder Jewish women from Kurdistan and Yemen living in Jerusalem reveals that they participate in the services with body gestures. When the Torah is raised, they stand up, bow slightly, reach forward and then motion with their hands back towards the body. The women will often pull back the curtain in front of the women's section so as to get a better view of the Torah. These women make a special effort to attend synagogue on Mondays and Thursdays when the Torah is read. During the *Amida* and the recitation of the *Kaddish*, they answer Amen and roll their hands, kiss their fingers, and then touch their foreheads with their fingers. Another common ritual is that of kissing the prayer book as they leave the synagogue.

³² אברהם בן יעקב, מנהגי יהדות בבל בדורות האחרונים, ספר ראשון, מחזור השנה במנהגי יהודי בבל, ירושלים תשנ"ג, עמ' 210

³³ Susan Starr Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts, The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem*, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 112-114.

3. RELIGIOUS, SOCIAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE CUSTOM OF KISSING THE TORAH SCROLL

Any religiously based custom has an origin, and each origin brings to bear psychological and social factors to the custom. This section elaborates on these different theories. Some people believe that the custom of kissing the Torah scroll is not an authentic Jewish custom, but rather is a borrowed trait from other cultures. Others claim that it was developed during Biblical times and believe that it is a Jewish folk custom. Take for example what Rabbi Donna claims in the questionnaire; “Kissing or touching the Torah comes from the practice of a king writing a law and then using a signature ring to seal it into law. By us touching the Torah with a prayer book, we are saying that we seal the law and will follow it as law. That is what I was taught!” Donna used to consider it to be idolatry until her rabbi from Florida explained that it is like sealing the law! Donna adds: “But there can be another twist to it, as magical thinking of the Torah itself! Or kind of like kissing the words so they will be on your lips.”

3.1 Cultural borrowing

The custom of kissing sacred objects – deities, and bowing to them, has been a way to worship ever since antiquity and was common among the non-Jewish populations. It is believed to be a sign of adoration and respect for the divine. When the Israelites went astray, they imitated this custom of their neighbors, not only by kissing sacred objects, but also by bowing to the deity. We can trace this custom all the way back to I Kings and the prophet Hosea.

The following excerpt is from I Kings Chapter 19:18

י' וְהַשְׁאֲרֵתִי בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁבְעַת אֲלָפִים כָּל-הַבָּרְכִּים אֲשֶׁר לֹא-כָרְעוּ לְבַעַל וְכָל-הַפֶּה אֲשֶׁר לֹא-נָשָׁק לֹ.

And I will leave in Israel seven thousands [people] – all those knees that had not bowed to Ba'al, and every **mouth that had not kissed him**.

In the following excerpt, Hosea preaches against the kissing of calf-images.

Hosea 13:2

בְּוֹעֲתָהּ יוֹסִפוּ לַחֲטֹא וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם מַסֶּכֶה מִכֶּסֶּפֶם כְּתִבּוּנָם עֲצָבִים מַעֲשֵׂה חָרָשִׁים כֹּלֵה לָהֶם הֵם
אֲמָרִים זִבְחִי אָדָם עֲגָלִים יִשְׁקֹון.

And now they go on sinning; they have made them molten images, idols by their skills, from their silver, completely by the work of craftsmen. For these they appoint man to sacrifice. **They want to kiss calves!**

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that many polytheistic rituals survived in the monotheistic Jewish religion, and that many Jewish rituals include elements that are similar to those of other religions. Judaism borrowed these pagan rituals but invested them with a new meaning. One such examples includes the harvest festivals that glorify nature; these became Jewish festivals that symbolize revelation and redemption from slavery. Similarly, Judaism catered to the people's need for tangible symbols with concrete objects, such as the tabernacle and the Temple.

A reference to serve as a hint for why Jews kiss their *tallit* fringes, the *siddur* or their fingers after they touch the Torah scroll is illuminated by Rabbi Kapack. He points to the evidence of another influence of early pagan cultures on Judaism. This can be found in Job 31:27 and in the interpretations of Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Rabbi Se'adiya Gaon. Specifically, these commentators interpret the act of kissing the hand with the mouth as being a pagan's way of worshiping their celestial deities. The pagans used to wave their hands at the sun or the moon and then kissed their hands. Perhaps, this pagan ritual is reflected in the Jewish custom practiced after the Torah is read. The Torah scroll is held up in the air with its words facing the congregation. It is traditional to reach out toward the Torah, usually with the pinky finger, while reciting the congregational response (v'zot ha-Torah...), then kiss the finger.

איוב לא, כז: וַיִּפֶּת בִּסְתֵר לְבִי וַתִּשָּׁק יָדִי לִפִּי

Job 31:27

And I secretly succumbed, and my hand touched my mouth in a kiss. (JPS)

רש"י:

יפת בסתר לבי - לשמש ולירח לאמר אלוהות הם כקצת עובדי כוכבים הנדחים (ועובדים)
לכל צבא השמים:

Rashi: **And I secretly succumbed:** to the sun and the moon, as they say, they are godliness a little like star worshipers (idolaters) and they worship all the army of the skies.

אבן עזרא:

ותשק ידי לפי - מין ממני עכו"ם כי רובי הקדמונים טרם באו הנביאי' היו עובדים שני
המאור' על כן אמר גם הוא עון פלילי כי כחשתי לאל ממעל והעניין שהוא למעלה
מהמאורות:

Ibn Ezra: **my hand touched my mouth in a kiss:** A custom of those who worship the stars. Since the majority of the ancients worshiped those two luminaries before the arrival of the prophets. This is why he said that this is also a criminal sin, as I deny the God above, and the matter is that He is even above those luminaries.

רס"ג מפרט ואומר:

בפירוש: אבל מה שספר באמרו אם אראה אור, ויפת, הוא תיאור מה שעושים ה"צאבה"
(כת עובדי אלילים קדמונית) כאשר הם רואים את השמש או הירח ... נושקים את ידיהם
ומפארים אותו.

ובביאורו לפסוק: ונפתה לבי בסתר ונשק פי את ידי דרך כבוד והדור לו.

Rabbi Se'adiya Gaon: But what he told when he said: If I see light. It is a description of what the ancient cult of idolaters used to do. When they see the sun or the moon ... they kiss their hands and adore it. Thus, this is an act of respect and adoration of him.

הר"י קאפח העיר על אתר, "ומכאן המנהג כאשר רואים דבר קדוש מראים כלפיו ביד
ונושקים את היד."

Rabbi Yoseph Kapach remarks: And from here [the above commentaries] we learn that the custom is that when people see a sacred object they point the hand towards it and kiss the hand.

Avner Falk,³⁴ in his book, "A Psychoanalytical History of the Jews," also illustrates that many Jewish rites involve cultural borrowing, and are reminders of pagan rituals. Among these rites is the practice of unveiling the scroll of the Torah in the synagogue, which is reminiscent of pagan practice of undressing the goddess or her priestess in public. Similarly, in her doctoral dissertation, archaeologist Hava Katz³⁵ notes that even after the ancient Israelites destroyed all pagan cult objects and shrines after the destruction of the First Temple, they still were found to practice a modified form of "pagan" cult. Archaeologists believe that in order to form their religious and social thinking, the Israelites established alternative cult objects and centers, which were similar to those of pagans'. Instead of figurines and statues, they built simple symbolic stone monuments and decorated trees. In this way, the Israelites expressed their need to have a concrete object to replace the abstract notion of God. Since there is missing information about the faith and the cult of the Israelites during the latest Bronze period (1400 – 1200 BCE) and from the Deuteronomic's tradition³⁶, Katz adds that this archeological data contributes additional data to the understanding of the religion of this period.

3.2 Connection to the Biblical culture

In his book, "This is the Torah," Alfred J. Kolatch³⁷ suggests another origin of the practice of kissing the Torah scroll. During Temple times it was customary for a bridegroom to be crowned with flowers. Kolatch believes that, in later years, this practice was transferred to the Torah by dressing it with a crown of silver rather than with flowers. When paraded down the aisles of a synagogue, the crowned Torah scroll

³⁴ Avner Falk, *A psychoanalytical history of the Jews*, Associated University Presses, 1996, p. 58.

³⁵ חוה כץ, דגמי חרס אדריכליים בארץ ישראל מהאלף החמישי ועד אמצע האלף הראשון לפני הספירה, חיבור לשם קבלת תואר "דוקטור לפילוסופיה" אוניברסיטת חיפה, החוג לארכיאולוגיה, יולי, 2006 פרק 7.

³⁶ The Deuteronist (D) is one of the sources of the Torah postulated by the Documentary Hypothesis (DH) that treats the texts of Scripture as products of human intellect.

³⁷ Alfred J. Kolatch, *This is the Torah*, Penguin (Non-Classics); Revised edition, 2003), page 54.

is showered with kisses by its adoring bride, the Congregation of Israel. Kolatch finds the Song of Songs (3:11) to be the portrayal of the Jewish people as a bride and God as the bridegroom, who is represented by the Torah; "Wearing the crown that his mother gave him on his wedding day, the day of bliss."³⁸

In a private discussion, Rabbi Shammai Engelmayer,³⁹ mentioned that in his mind, "The basis for this custom lies in the building of the *Mishkan*—and especially the ark. The Torah says that all Israel was asked to participate in the building of the *Mishkan* and everything in it, which includes the ark. The *minhag* is based on the idea that there was a specific request that all Israel participate in the building of the ark, so as to be a part of what the ark would contain—the Torah. (This is suggested by the way Exodus: 25 words the description of how the ark was to be constructed.) [Thus] reaching out to touch the Torah and/or to kiss it is a way of showing one's love for the Torah and a desire to be one with it."

Interesting is the speculation that Rabbi Eleanor Pearlman provided in the questionnaire; "I think that kissing the Torah scroll may have some connection to the "*shma*" prayer: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might" She believes that the love is real and, as such, it requires a sense of intimacy and connection with God.

3.3 Transmitting the tradition

The custom of kissing the Torah scroll is also a custom that was transmitted from one generation to the next. In his book, "To Pray Like a Jew," Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin⁴⁰ tells us that there are no religious laws or *halacha* that require us to kiss a ritual or holy object. Instead, there is only the force of custom as it develops through the ages. Conservative Rabbi, Dorit Edut, believes in the power of tradition. She shares her view that the Torah embodies the laws that God has given us as a guide for living a good life.

³⁸ Translation is from JPS.

³⁹ Temple Israel Community Center, Cliffside Park, NJ – November 2009.

⁴⁰ Hayim Halevy Donin, *To pray Like A Jew*, Basic books, 1980, pp. 43-44.

It also represents history and “a direct connection with our ancestors of thousands of years”. As Rabbi Edut puts it, the Torah represents “the very life of our people and our evolving relationship with God.” She follows the tradition of kissing the Torah scroll because it expresses a personal love and commitment for the idea which this object represents.

Based on discussions with other informants, most of the time people do not really know why they kiss the Torah scroll. They simply feel that they have to do what is customary and what they were taught by their family members during their childhood. They say: “This is what my father was doing, and my grandfather too”, or “This is what I grew up with”. Some speculate reasons but admit they never took the time to find out why. For example, in a phone interview, Conservative Rabbi Michael Kohn, confirms this idea. He told me that neither he nor most of his congregants who are elders, cannot say why they kiss the Torah scroll. It is all the power of tradition. Conservative Cantor Ilan Mamber, wrote in the questionnaire that he kisses the Torah scroll because he sees it as a tool for learning the laws and the Jewish way of life. Most of the time he kisses the Torah scroll “by rote, so there are no special impressionable feelings about the practice”. Another informant, an unaffiliated executive chief of operations, kisses the Torah “because it is the custom”; he refrained from mentioning any feelings about this custom. And last, Rabbi Amy also writes: “I don’t know the precise origin of the custom of kissing the Torah, but I suspect it’s an offshoot of the *minhag* of kissing *tzitzit* during *Shma*. It’s an emotional religious act.”

3.4 Psychological factors

Rabbi Donin⁴¹ asserts that kissing in general is a universal sign of affection. It is known that it is an expression of love and endearment, and it could be expressed between man and woman or between parents and children. In particular, Donin adds, kissing of sacred objects is also the expression of one's special feelings for the ritual objects and the religious duties associated with them⁴². Indeed, religious customs evoke

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid page 43.

feelings and emotions that express a deep innate human behavior towards the divine. Based on the results of the questionnaire,⁴³ we learn that people feel connected with God when they show their love and devotion by a kiss. Although in some cases, the act of kissing the Torah scroll has become an optional practice, it is still one way that people feel they can express their religious devotion during worship.

The following are some accounts from the questionnaires. They show people's perceptions of love and attitudes about connection with God by their custom to kiss the Torah scroll. From this we see how people find different ways to explain their practice of kissing the Torah scroll. The different reasons employ rationalizations, emotions and feelings. In any event, the custom takes on its own role in bringing people meaning and a sense of belonging to Judaism and their community.

- Ken, a cantor from Honolulu says; "Kissing my daughter's head is holy to me. I do not care where I do it. I do it in public and it is just the way it is. I kiss the Torah with the same intention. A public expression of my connection with the source."

- Simcha relates kissing the Torah to an attempt to remain connected to a lost loved one through physical objects. As he writes: "If you have ever lost a loved one, you may know what I mean. There is power in my holding the sweater my late mother wore and breathing in her perfume one more time, or seeing her handwriting on a letter she sent me. Touching these things brings her closer to me. *L'havdil* (to make a distinction), this is how kissing and hugging the Torah works for me: it is an expression of my love for God. All we can do is hold what God has left us, this Scroll with its ancient words, dressed in a way that shows our respect and reverence. That is also why hugging the Torah and dancing with it on *Simhat Torah* is such an act of true spirituality and piety. Perhaps we would be a stronger Jewish community if more of us made an effort to leave our credit cards and computers alone one day of the week and made more of an effort to kiss the Torah more regularly."

⁴³ see Appendix #3.

- Gloria, a chaplain, considers herself to be “a Renewal/Reform/Chabad worshiper.” To her, “kissing the Torah presents a connection-intimacy, a stirring of memory/feeling of reverence/loving appreciation”. She kisses the Torah because she was taught that this ritual brings her heritage closer to her. When she kisses the Torah she feels “excitement, joy, and inclusion.” She describes this feeling as “intoxication or often a sense of fresh insight.”

- A male Reconstructionist researcher kisses the Torah scroll out of respect and “love.” For him, the Torah is like an iconic symbol and a tool of his religion. It is more a thread to tradition than something that evokes emotions within him.

- Miriam, an acupuncturist, considers herself a Jew with no specific denomination. However, she feels a close affinity with Chabad and sometimes with the Conservative movement. Miriam only remembers one time when she kissed the Torah, on *Simchat Torah* in a Conservative synagogue. She describes feeling connected to Judaism and God through that kiss. To her, the Torah represents the connection to God. Miriam describes the feeling of kissing God as being like a woman kissing her lover. On the other hand, she admits that kissing the *mezuzah* is a daily activity because she believes it will bring her good luck.

- Dale, a colleague of a friend writes: “I kiss her because I love her. When I held my first Torah at age 40 (because in my upbringing, we never came into physical contact), it/she felt like one of my 18 month old kids...I couldn't stop kissing them either. Maybe there is a link to some idol worship, but mostly I think we Jews made huge sacrifices to stay reunited with our dear bedecked scrolls. Like the beauty she is, we kiss her in recognition of what we owe her, what we want for her, and how blessed we have become through her.”

3.4.1 The need for concrete objects in rituals

In his book, "No Other Gods," Kenneth Seeskin⁴⁴ asserts that human beings need a material object to help them connect to God. This assertion implies that humans have a tendency to regard spatial or temporal objects as mediators to the divine. In contrast, Rabbi Neal Gilman⁴⁵ sees a danger in falling into idolatry when people attribute divine importance to concrete objects. To him there is no way to really grasp the nature of God. It is better to worship with abstract things. Interestingly, Gilman contradicts Seeskin, who believes that worship should be with concrete things. However, Seeskin's reference to "concrete things" are not spiritual in nature, but material goods that people get attracted to and forget all together about worshipping God. Seeskin and Gilman refer to different material things.

Today, for example, the psychological need for concrete sacred objects influences the Presbyterian denomination in a negative way. Informant Amy Harbo asserts that this denomination is dying out because; "it is too dark, no emotion is allowed to be expressed, and especially because there are no icons or sacred objects allowed during services". As a result, Amy says, people look towards the Pentecostal religion because of its lively participatory ritual element. Apparent from the rest of the interviews and the questionnaires, the need to relate to the divine with an object is powerful, and the Jewish informants certainly found their connection with God through the Torah scroll.

As Seeskin⁴⁶ puts it, "The usual criticism of Judaism is that it makes God too distant, too abstract.... It is difficult for people to have anything concrete on which to focus. According to Hegel⁴⁷, "Judaism cannot help but leave people feeling alienated from God. This criticism has some validity. Without a visual image of the divine or a series of intermediaries, God can seem distant, and with distance comes the risk of

⁴⁴ Kenneth Seeskin, *No Other Gods*", Behrman House, Inc. 1995, p. 107.

⁴⁵ Neil Gilman, *The Jewish approach to God, A brief introduction for Christians*, Jewish Light Publication, 2003, p. xi.

⁴⁶ Ibid, page 107.

⁴⁷ George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. Two, Second Division, Section 1.

estrangement.” This idea is mirrored by a psychologist in Israel, who posted the following in the Ravnet blog;

“I wonder if our fear of *avodah zarah* comes out of a sense that God is not imminent and the moment we see someone reach out & touch God we fear that this is *avodah zarah*. H z”I believed in a corporeal God, as does the Bible. During Musaf on RH I was crying during my own *tefilaat lachash* for no apparent reason. The non-apparent reason was the proximity we all too infrequently feel of God's imminence. What strikes me is the need for people to be close to the ark in order to feel close to God. Therein lies whatever failure we can point to. I consider myself lucky to sense God's imminence every few months. It rarely happens in shul, and only 50% of the time does it happen while I'm davening. Perhaps what we need to focus on is the ability to help people take that moment in front of the ark with them.”

Similarly, Yehudah Halevi, in his book “*The Kuzari*”⁴⁸ demonstrates the powerful need for concrete objects in worship in his discussion about the sin of the golden calf. Although the golden calf is often viewed as a paradigm case of idolatry, for Halevi the golden calf was not an act of idol worship at all. Halevi believes it to represent a case for making God concrete. The Israelites followed God's presence as the pillar of cloud and fire when they departed from Egypt. They also turned towards the cloud which hovered over Moses, when God talked to him. The delay in Moses' return made the Israelites insecure and they demanded an object of worship, towards which they could turn, just like the other nations. Although Halevi thinks that the Israelites should have waited for Moses and not made this image, he still understood that the Israelites did not, in their worship of the golden calf, deny the God who had taken them out of Egypt. Rather, they were looking for a picture that would provide them with a special presence of God, so that they could address as a deity something that symbolized God for them more than anything else – like the later ark with the cherubim, which contains the tablets of the law.

⁴⁸ Yehudah Halevi, *Kuzari, a book of proof and argument*, Ed. by Isaak Heinemann, In 3 Jewish Philosophers, ed. By Hans Lewy, Alexander Altmann and Isaak Heinemann, Toby Press 2006, p.372 – I.97.

Eliana Falk, a rabbinic student, has a problem with the description of the practice as kissing the Torah scroll. As she puts it, "I do think it is not 'KISSING' the Torah, but rather the concept of bringing the words of Torah to our lips (by touching and then touching our mouths)." Actually, she claims that this is what she was told. This statement is very similar to the Hasidic theology of *deveikut*⁴⁹. In his book "The religious thought of Hasidic text and commentary", Norman Lamm⁵⁰ cites a problem posed by Rabbi Yaakov Yosef. If *deveikut* is about getting closer to God, then how is it possible to achieve it when humans are corporeal and God is completely unseen and spiritual? The solution is to have a "more material thing" that represents God. To attain *deveikut* with God is to connect with the letters of the Torah and prayers, as it written in the Song of Songs 1:2; "By attaching your thoughts and inwardness to the inner spirituality of the letters the mystery of 'Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth' is solved". This is considered a needed intimate exchange between human and God.

⁴⁹ Cleaving to God is the highest attempt to communicate with God with prayers, meditations and good deeds.

⁵⁰ Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidim; Text and Commentary*, Ktav Publishing House, 1966, pp. 160-163.

4. CONCRETE DIVINE CONNECTION INSTEAD OF IDOLATRY

The various responses to my interviews and questionnaires established the fact that people look for concrete objects when they worship, and that the Torah scroll is one unique object in Judaism. We now need to begin our discussion of the custom of kissing the Torah scroll by considering what the term "idolatry" means. If we are to evaluate this custom in a comparative perspective, we cannot say that kissing (the Torah, or a statue, or any other object) is idolatry, because "idolatry" is a pejorative term that is not meaningful in a cross-cultural context. Because of this negative connotation, we need to find an alternative term that is more value-neutral and, therefore, more accessible for discussion and evaluation.

I suggest the use of the phrase "Concrete Divine Connection" (CDC), which stands for "Any way to conduct rituals with the use of concrete objects in order to create a meaningful personal or communal connection with the divine." CDC alludes to the idea that, in universal terms, all religions use objects in rituals and all religions have their particular unique objects. However, each religion attaches a cultural specific meaning to that object that fits its particular mythology and faith. So, I would suggest that the Torah scroll is a concrete object that helps facilitate a connection to God. By looking at the Torah scroll this way, we can place Jews and others on the same platform, so that Jews can compare and see whether they actually do what others do, without the use of the term "idolatry."

CDC considers the Torah scroll as a concrete object of veneration that is the mediator for the connection to God. By removing the term idolatry we stay focused on the main action of kissing the Torah scroll which is achievable by each person. As I learned from the interview with Lew Ross (mentioned earlier), Jews handle the Torah in a way which is similar to the way Native Americans handle their sacred rod. During a ceremony, Native Americans pass around a rod that is covered with sage and feathers. The rod is an object that is passed from generation to generation and represents a connecting link or the medium that connects the holder and Creator. With closed eyes, the holder uses the rod to touch first his right shoulder, then his left shoulder, and last

his forehead. The final step in the process is to seal the rod with a kiss. The holder then passes the rod to the next person. Lew told me that at times people get emotional and cry when they hold the rod. As he put it, "They savor the moment." One might suggest that this Native American custom and experience is not only similar to the way Jews relate to the Torah scroll, but it seems that the intention to connect to Creator or God is the same. The rod is also a concrete divine connector.

4.1 Ethnographic accounts about kissing the Torah scroll and idolatry

Now that I provided an alternative way of understanding idolatry, it is important to present the modern rhetoric of idolatry. When I see what people do and how they actually define idolatry, I am convinced that they, too, would prefer CDC over idolatry. In general, the blog discussions and anecdotal testimonies presented here demonstrate the problematic nature of this custom. People show that they are very uncomfortable and fear that they might commit idolatry by kissing the Torah scroll.

- Rabbi Amy is a Reform Jew:

"I would not be inclined to consider kissing the Torah scroll as idolatry because I don't think worship of the Torah per se is behind it.... I met a gentleman in a congregation I served many years ago who was opposed to doing *hakafot* with the Torah before and after reading because that struck him as idolatrous; he thought it looked like worship of the Torah, rather than God." Rabbi Amy adds that, "*Mezuzah* and Torah are signs of God's love (*Ahavah Rabbah*, *Ahavat Olam*) and so I can understand a 'loving response' to them. I would hope that is the extent of it, and that it is not idolatry for anyone. That said, there are those whose *halakhic* interpretations are so narrow and rigid and judgmental, that Torah/*halakhah* has become an idol for them: it has taken on ultimate meaning for them, even beyond God."

From a blog for rabbis; RAVNET list serve; 10/02/09

Subject: Report on *Neilah* prayers

...we invited people to offer personal prayers before the open ark at *Neilah*.... The first person to go up was one of my regular touchy-feely people ... There were quite a few couples who went up together, mostly husbands and wives, but also a father and his 6 year old daughter, and a grandfather and grandson. One family group went up and, to my surprise, three teenage boys (individually). A lot of people kissed the Torahs when they were there. I wondered what people were thinking (Of course, only the people themselves and God know; and, in my final prayer before the *tekia gedolah*, I referred to that fact. I thought of all the worries that people have. ... And of course I could hardly guess what was in the hearts of those who came up. But I made it clear that the moment was for anyone who had anything to offer to God, whether petition or thanks....

Response 1:

All this aside, and acknowledging the power of the moment, might I ask here, does it not strike one as a bit *avodah zarah* -ish? Ascending to the ark and kissing the scrolls, as many do with their *tzitzit*, and as some bow?

Response 2:

Just the opposite! For most people this is the holiest place in their immediate reality. If they feel close to G-d in that time and place, let them express themselves in words (or non-words) of prayer."

From the Union for Reform Judaism Digest blog (October 2006)

http://urj.org/worship/wisdom/torah_object_devotion/

Subject: TORAH AS AN OBJECT OF DEVOTION

1. October 2006 Digest 157

...Is there basis in Jewish law or other history/text for this type of personal worship? One of the issues this raises is the status granted to the Torah itself. I know a few people, including some Rabbis, who express concern that even the touching and kissing of the Torah is akin to idol worship (and they will not do it).

Personal prayer in a quiet meaningful environment is always important and appropriate. Standing before the Ark? What does that signify? I acknowledge that when I have the chance to hold the Torah (especially during services) I feel differently, and it does have an impact on me. So one can acknowledge that being close to the Torah can create a "moment."

Praying in front of it however, does raise some questions. Is it akin to idol worship? What is the significance being given the Torah in that context? And most importantly, what does our tradition have to say about the practice?

Sam

2. October 2006 Digest 157

I don't think it makes an idol of the Torah though—just a focus of quiet, personal prayer. I was a little taken aback when I first saw it at [a temple]. Then I tried it and found it a moving experience...

Mike

3. October 2006 Digest 158

I am always surprised when the issue concerning that praying before the Torah might be considered potentially akin to idol worship is raised. One of the great arguments in the ritual of the prayer service has been whether or not it is correct to stand during the Torah portion when the ten commandments are chanted. Some rabbis have believed that this might give the impression that certain portions of Torah are more important than other parts. This is not the case. Likewise, some have been concerned that the reverence we give the Torah might be considered by the uninitiated to be akin to idol worship. It just ain't so.

We rise before the opened ark for various reasons, and we do not pray to that which resides within it. It is all about *kavannah*. When ritual supersedes *kavannah*, and we forget why we do what we do and do it by rote, yes this can approach the level of idol worship.

Jim

From Ohr Somayach blog, a world leader in Jewish outreach based in Jerusalem;

Ohr Somayach International - Ask The Rabbi

http://ohr.edu/ask_db/ask_main.php/168/Q3/

Topic: Kissing the Torah

Eric Posnack wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

... One thing has always bothered me in services. It's the touching of the Torah with the prayer book and kissing the prayer-book afterwards. This strikes me as a form of idolatry. It appears to be worshipping the Torah as an idol and we're instructed by the Torah not to do that. How is this act not idolatry? Thanks again for your many emails, and I look forward to your response.

Dear Eric Posnack;

A kiss is a way of expressing love and affection, not only a means of worship. When a father kisses his child it does not mean he worships him. We love the Torah, as it is our way of maintaining closeness to Hashem, Therefore we express our love in the earthly manner we are used to, such as kissing, in order to encourage our feeling of love towards Hashem and the Torah.

Louis Orzech wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

What is the best way to honor the Torah as it is carried in the synagogue? This question applies to both when we are "touching-distance" from the Torah as well as when we are too far away.

Dear Louis Orzech,

One should stand. If the Torah is carried past you, it is a mitzvah to follow behind it until it is brought to rest. It is also customary to kiss the Torah, or to touch the Torah and kiss your hand. If you are too far away, you should stand and face the Torah as it is taken to and placed on the *bima* (table upon which the Torah is placed and read). Likewise, when the Torah is being carried back to the holy ark.

Rabbi Yehuda Segal, *zatza*l, the late Rosh Yeshiva in Manchester, used to point out that although it is a beautiful custom to kiss the Torah, very often people surge forward and push or elbow others out of the way! Rabbi Segal cautioned his students that it's better not to kiss the Torah than to push others in order to kiss the Torah.

From Beliefnet, a multi-faith e-community that provides forums for religious information, inspiration, spiritual tools, discussions and dialogue groups.

<http://blog.beliefnet.com/virtualtalmud/2006/10/of-love-and-torah.html>

Monday October 9, 2006

I don't share Rabbi Waxman's ambivalence about whether kissing the Torah smacks of the very idolatry Judaism has always been so vigilant against. I think of it more like kissing a love letter: a physical expression of a passion for the writer, in this case God.

Idolatry is when something takes the place of God as Number One on our priority list. We may have many idolatrous relationships in our lives: with our credit cards, our stock portfolios, our jobs, our looks, our electronic toys, all sorts of things we give higher priority to in our lives than to God. But when we show reverence for

the Torah, we are directing our attention to the One who is the reason why we are here as Jews in the first place.

That is why kissing the Torah is not idolatry in my book: because the Torah is not a substitute for God. It is what God has left us with. Therefore, it represents the closest most of us can come to "hearing" God's voice in our lives.

4.2 Classic interpretations of idolatry

The previous section showed that Jewish people are much aware of the idea of idolatry. Therefore, it is important to further analyze the normative habit of kissing the Torah scroll within this context. One way to explain the custom and its relationship to idolatry [in the classical sense] is from the linguistic aspect of idolatry and how it affects the custom of kissing the scroll. In general, the word *idolatry* as used in English comes from the Greek word *eidololatria*, a compound of *eidolon*, "image" or "figure", and *latreia*, "worship." This term is not found in the Septuagint, Philo, Josephus, or other Hellenistic Jewish writings. It is also not found in Greek literature. However, in common usage, idolatry is usually understood as a form of worship of a cult image, idea, idol, or object which the religious authorities determine as a mark of separation from other faiths⁵¹.

In the Bible there is no direct terminology for "idolatry", but when idolatry is hinted or mentioned it is used within the context of *avodah* - worshiping any kind of god, not only God. The term *avoda* [the root *avad*] refers to the worship of any god -- a strange god which pagans worship; e.g., "And you worshiped [*ve'avadetem*]... other gods" (Deuteronomy 11:16) or the worship of God of the monotheistic religions; e.g., "And you would worship [*ve'avadedem*] your God" (Exodus 23:25). Since worship of Gods or gods use the same term, it would be impossible to make a conclusive separation between Jews and others. On one hand, Jews are excluded from "strange" worship, and on the other hand, they are included with others as worshipers. If indeed, idolatry is a non-Jewish practice, we need to ask why Jews are different.

⁵¹ Wikipedia.

The rabbinic term for “idolatry” seems to be ambiguous and inconsistent. In Hebrew, idolatry is phrased as *Avodat Elilim*, *Avodat Gilulim* (עבודת אלילים, עבודת גילולים) *Avodat Kochavim* (עכו"ם) or *Avodah Zarah* (עבודה זרה). The root *avad* for *avodah* refers to worship. The word *Zarah* means “alien”. Together – *Avodah Zarah* literally means “strange worship”, but it is commonly translates as “idolatry,” “idol worship,” or “false worship”. Another ambiguity refers to the word *Zar* which can be understood in two ways. A “strange worship” could be the subject of worship -- meaning worshipping another god -- or the strangeness of the worship itself, meaning worshipping God -- even the right one--in the wrong way. It could also simply be a worship which is different than any other known to the people and which God did not command. This ambiguity is noticed by Halbertal and Margalit.⁵² In their book “Idolatry” they take the sin of the Golden Calf as an example; they wonder whether the sin was sin because it constituted worship of a wrong object – the Egyptian god, or because it constituted worship, as Halevi thought, a wrong method of worship of God by means of a calf? Another reference to the use of “strange” is the expression *eish zarah* --“strange fire” in the story of Aaron’s two sons who brought a strange fire and died, (Leviticus 10:1) but this particular case refers to a ritual rather than to a strange object of worship.

Since the custom of kissing the Torah scroll is not mentioned in the Torah, one might argue that it is a religious act that was not commanded by God. Halbertal⁵³ delves into the matter a little more and claims that since the most frequent usage of the term “idolatry” in the Bible is “the worship of other gods,” all worshipping of gods [of any kind] originated by God. So, for example, he thinks that bowing to the Torah is not a digression from God's commands, but bowing to that which the Torah did not command would be a form of *Avodah Zarah*. In the case of kissing the Torah scroll, the term *Zar* could be applied as well and one could deduce that this custom is an idolatrous custom because *Zar* is a strange custom.

⁵² Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, (translation is by Naomi Goldblum) *Idolatry*, Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 3.

⁵³ *Ibid* p. 3.

The Hebrew Bible portrays idolatry by using a negative language of rejection and dismissal of other religions. Idols are stigmatized as "non-God" (Deut. 32:17, 21; Jer. 2:11), "things of naught" (Lev. 19:4 et passim), "vanity" (Deut. 32), "iniquity" (1 Sam. 15:23), "wind and confusion" (Isa. 41:29), "the dead" (Ps. 106:28), "carcasses" (Lev. 26:30; Jer. 16:18), "a lie" (Isa. 44:20 et passim), and similar references. From this perspective it can be easily understood why Jews developed their negative and disrespectful attitude to other faiths. Unfortunately, Jews even today are still acculturated into this mode of thinking.

Another way to understand "idolatry" is from the way prophets relate to it. They address idolatry as worship which includes concrete objects such as wood and stone. For Isaiah, Jeremiah and Habakuk⁵⁴ the idolater bows to an idol which is the image itself but not to what the image represents. This means that the object is believed to actually be a god, rather than a sign or symbol of a god. In response to this prophetic view, the Catholic Church defended having icons in the church by saying that they are merely tools that serve to inspire and teach. First they argued this against the Reformation in the sixteenth century⁵⁵, and later in the seventeenth century during the iconoclastic debate.⁵⁶ The Catholics claimed that the function of images and their place in worship is only to serve as reminders of the gods—signs with no unique power of their own.

Rabbi Neil Gillman⁵⁷ offers a contemporary understanding of "idolatry", which can be easily identified in our daily life. In his book, "The Jewish Approach to God," Gillman writes, "The expectation that we humans can grasp the nature of God is a good preliminary definition of what the Bible calls the sin of idolatry. Any time we install a

⁵⁴ Isaiah 40:18-20, 44:9-20; Jeremiah 10:1-5, Habakuk 2:18-19.

⁵⁵ Carlos M.N. Eire, *War against the idols*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

⁵⁶ Daniel J. Sahas, *Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth century Iconoclasm*, translated and introduction, 1986.

--The Iconoclasts (those who rejected images) objected to icon worship for several reasons, including the Hebrew Scriptures' prohibition against images in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:4) and the possibility of idolatry. The defenders of icon worship insisted on the symbolic nature of images and on the dignity of created matter.

⁵⁷ Neil Gillman, *The Jewish approach to God, A brief introduction for Christians*, Jewish Light publishing, 2003, p. xi.

feature of creation and call it God, we are committing the sin of idolatry, the cardinal Jewish sin. It needs not to be a material object: it can be something much more abstract; a nation, history itself, a financial reward. Whenever we take something that is relative and install it as our ultimate value, we have committed the sin of idolatry. We have reduced God to something that cannot bear the burden of transcendence. That's idolatry".

In their book, "Idolatry," Halbertal and Margalit⁵⁸ add that every deviation from the accepted method of worship is a form of idolatry, even if God himself is the one being worshiped. This means that a form of worship can be idolatrous even if no idols or false gods are being worshiped.

To Rabbi Ohad Ezrahi⁵⁹, a kabbalist from the Judean Desert, Israel, idolatry means as follows:

"The world is full of living forces. *Avodah zarah* — idolatry — is when you give power to those forces, when you think that each thing has its own power, separate from the One." The way Ezrahi explains it, monotheism is "a second stage after the experience of being a pagan. If you don't experience paganism, your monotheism is more an ideology than a religious experience. First you have to know that there is a spirit in the tree, and in the river, and in the sky. *Then* you can know that it's really all one spirit."

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ The Forward, Jewish Paganism: Oxymoron or Innovation, December 09, 2005.

5. WHAT IS THE TORAH SCROLL ANYWAY?

5.1 Does the Torah represent an image? A picture?

Up to this point, it has not been clear how to approach the Torah scroll as a means for worship. Is it an image? Is it a picture? Or is it a symbol that represents God? There is a tension here. It is not easy to definitely say! To Cantor Ken from Honolulu, the Torah scroll represents a connection to the source. It is “the cyclical connection, the beginning and the end, the returning to the source” which has a spiritual dimension to it, not physical at all. But is kissing the scroll an act of worship of an image that is in the shape of Torah, or is it only a gesture that expresses a connection to God? No matter how we approach these questions, there is one basic dilemma how Jews can address God by utilizing objects in light of the prohibition against making pictures and images. What does the Torah scroll represents for Jews?

In light of what Halbertal⁶⁰ presents, the idea of the scroll as an object for worship is confusing. There are a number of contradictions in the Bible, which confuse the way we might deal with the custom of kissing the Torah scroll. On one hand God is assumed to have no image according to the first two commandments in the Torah, and Maimonides. The Bible also implies that images and pictures are improper representations of God (Exodus 20:2-4). On the other hand, Halbertal notes that there are other sources in the Bible, as well as in the rabbinic tradition and the Kabbalah (*Shiur Komah*), which imply exactly the opposite – that God does have an image. For example, when Moses asks to see God’s face, God replies, “You cannot see my face, for you may not see ME and live” (Exodus 33:20). Isaiah saw God sitting on the throne (Isaiah 6:1) and Ezekiel describes God as having a human form (Ezekiel 1:26). But, in contrast, we read in Deuteronomy 4:15, “since you saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you.” This passage poses the question of whether God has no shape, or it just had not been shown to the Israelites. In sum, Halbertal⁶¹ concludes that the prohibition against representation is not associated with God’s image but with the

⁶⁰ Ibid p. 47.

⁶¹ Ibid p. 46.

methods of representing God in ritual. The issue of worshiping God or idols is not whether the divinity has an image, but rather whether one is permitted to make a representation of this image.

The prohibitions against worshiping other gods [such as Ba'al], together with the prohibition of making representations of God by means of statues or pictures not only establishes a guideline against idolatry, but also dictates how people may represent God. We find that there is no one way to understand these guidelines. Halbertal⁶² provides a few examples that shed light on these problems. First is the use of anthropomorphisms in the Torah to describe God. When we read about God's mighty hand or God's finger is it possible to view these phrases as poetic images rather than literal descriptions? Second is the Biblical concept or metaphor of the marital relations between man and God; how easy it is to commit a sin of infidelity, which is also a definition of the sin of idolatry. Thirdly is this paradox: linguistic representations of God are permitted, such as describing God as having a hand. Artists, on the other hand, artists are forbidden to draw an image of God's hand, like those describing God as having a hand. What do we do with the Torah scroll as an object without violating the prohibition?

Halbertal also includes the point of view of Yehudah Halevi, who interprets the prohibition against making images as related to the method of worship. In the words of Halevi's Kuzarite king: "The theory I have formed, and the opinion of what I saw in my dreams you now confirm, namely, that man can only merit divine influence by acting according to God's commands. And even if it were not so, most men strive to attain it, even astrologers, magicians, fire and sun worshipers..." (*Kuzari* 1:98). The idol worshipers do not perform actions prescribed by the deity. But only actions that are given from God are proper. In this light, Halevi sees the Karaites as idol worshipers because to him, even though their intention is to serve God, they worship God by their own choosing and not by the tradition from Sinai. What does this say about the way Jews treat the Torah?

⁶² Ibid p. 37.

5.2 The Torah scroll as a Concrete Divine Connector

In spite of the prohibitions in the Torah against the worship of idols, it is fascinating that our most sacred tool to connect to God is a scroll. The special holy status of the Torah scroll is parallel to those of sacred idols in ancient Babylonian culture. In Hinduism, for example, the Vedas are the oldest of written scriptures and are meant to connect with the Hindu gods. When Hindus read from it, or when they drop it, they kiss the book. Like the Jews, they will not place the Vedas on the floor. Similarly, the Torah scroll has become a Jewish concrete object that carries the unique cultural and religious meaning for Jews alone.

The scroll as a CDC is considered holy. Some people believe that what makes the Torah scroll holy is the fact that it contains the name of God, especially the letters YHWH. Others believe that it is a sacred object because all of the words written in the scroll are God's words given to Moses. In certain kabbalistic traditions, the prohibition against erasing even one letter in the scroll is interpreted as a prohibition against erasing God Himself.⁶³ Take for instance children dancing or playing with small scrolls; these scrolls are not sacred because the name YHWH is not included in the child versions. Therefore, there is no need to be careful when handling this child version scroll. However, Jews treat the regular Torah scroll with much care and handle it in special ways. For example, they will go out of their way to save the scroll from fire and floods and never discard it when it is no longer usable; instead, they bury it as they would a human being.

The high status and the power of the Torah scroll goes beyond the "official" function in the synagogue. Some attribute to the Torah scroll special powers -- mystical and magical in nature. Jacob Neusner, in his book "Where we sat down" includes a chapter about "Myth and Babylonian Jewry in its historical setting".⁶⁴ He writes how the rabbis of the 15th century viewed the Torah as a source of supernatural power. These

⁶³ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New York: Yale University Press, 1988.

⁶⁴ Jacob Neusner, *Myth and Babylonian Jewry in its Historical Setting*, In *Where We Sat Down: The Story of Classical Judaism in the Period in which it was Taking Shape*, New York, Abingdon Press, 1972, page 78.

rabbis were believed to have the ability to control this power. Most interesting is the following: "However much they disapproved of other people's magic, they themselves were expected to do the things magicians did". A similar account of the magical power of the Torah comes from Shalom Sabar's paper.⁶⁵ He describes Jewish communities in Poland, Germany, Iraq, Libya and Israel that believe that the mystical power of the Torah scrolls could influence people's health and well being. For example, he shows that in Muslim countries, the Torah scroll was brought in the room of a woman in labor to make it easy for the delivery of a healthy child. Furthermore, in the Bible there is the story in Exodus 25 about the ark of the Covenant which was perceived to have supernatural power (called mana in the anthropological literature)⁶⁶. So sacred was the ark that it was not to be touched by human hands and its presence could bring life or death. According to the story in I Samuel 4:6, it brought disaster to the Philistines and killed thousands of Israel's people in Beth Shemesh.⁶⁷ In this episode, the Philistines identified the ark with Israel's God. The Israelites, on the other hand, regarded the ark only as a representation of God.

Jews also use the mezuzah in association with its mystical power. There are people who believe it to be a fetish for good luck. They like to add holy names on its parchment, (although it is not clear if those names represent God or not) to evoke that magical power. However, such beliefs are not welcomed by Maimonides. In his *Code of Jewish Law*, Laws of Mezuzah, 5:5 he refers to these people as fools:

ה [ד] מנהג פשוט, שכותבין על המזוזה מבחוץ, כנגד הריוח שבין פרשה לפרשה, שדי; ואין בזה הפסד, לפי שהוא מבחוץ. אבל אלו שכותבין בה מבפנים שמות המלאכים, או שמות קדושים, או פסוק, או חותמות--הרי הן בכלל מי שאין לו חלק לעולם הבא: שאלו הטיפשים, לא דיי להן שביטלו המצוה; אלא שעושין מצוה גדולה, שהיא ייחוד שמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא ואהבתו ועבודתו, כאילו הוא קמיע להנית עצמן, כמו שעלה על ליבם הסכל שזה דבר המהנה בהבלי העולם.

⁶⁵ Shalom Sabar, *Torah and Magic; The Torah scroll and its appurtenances as magical objects in traditional Jewish culture*, European Journal of Jewish Studies, V. 3, no. 1 pp: 135-170.

⁶⁶ "The portrait of supernatural power as residing in things and places that inspire feelings awe, wonder, or dread, feelings that are appropriate towards the supernatural itself" – from Richard H. Crapo, *Anthropology of Religion, The Unity and Diversity of Religions*, McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2003, page 9.

⁶⁷ I Samuel 5:1-7:1.

... But those who write inside names of angels. Or names of saints..... they have no part in the next world. These are the fools, that not only they have voided the fulfillment of the commandment [adding the names], but they took upon a great commandment which is the unification of the name of God and His worship and used it as if it were a good-luck charm for their own benefit, like their intellect came upon their heart thinking it is a pleasurable thing in the simple world.

Max Kadushin, in his book "The Rabbinic Mind"⁶⁸ also refers to the Torah scroll as holding the power of *kedusha*, which is holiness. This term parallels what anthropologists call mana. Kadushin and likewise *Talmud Bavli, Megilla 26b* rank the objects that Jews consider to have a *kedusha* in a hierarchical order of holiness. The Torah scroll is first, followed by the *Sepharim* (books), the bands that wrap the scroll, the ark, and lastly, the synagogue. The band is a *tashmish kedusha* (an article of holiness) of the Torah, but it outranks the holiness of the ark, which is also a *tashmish kedusha*. This, Kadushin explains, is because the band is closer to the Torah than the ark. Both are holy because they are in direct contact with the Torah. From this explanation we see that the synagogue is last, but is still considered to be holy in its own right.

Since an object with *kedusha* is endowed with a mystical power that is transmitted to other objects by direct contact, it would be reasonable to argue that when people kiss and touch the Torah scroll they might feel that the holiness could be absorbed by their hands. This is the way they can feel connected to God. The Last Kunter⁶⁹ also comments regarding touching the scroll with the hand and the transference of holiness and purity to the person;

דכיון שניכר שעושה זה שמנשק בידו במקום שיגע בספר התורה שפיר דמי לעשות כן. שמראה כאילו על ידי הנגיעה בספר התורה נדבק ביד רושם קדושה ולכן מנשק שם, וכן העולם נוהגים כשממשמשין ביד בתפילין משום היסח הדעת או כדי לתקנם כשזזו ממקומם, נושקים היד. וענין הנשיקה הוא חיבור לטהרה, ויש בזה משום חיבוב המיצוה (שם סעיף ד).

⁶⁸ Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind*, Global Academic Publication, Binghamton University, 2001, pp. 176-179.

⁶⁹ *Sefer Ta'amei Ha-Minhagim U-m'qorei Ha-Dinim*, p. 65.

Since it is recognized that the one who kisses with his hand in the place he touches the scroll, it is acceptable to do so. This shows that by touching the scroll the impression of holiness is glued to the hand, and therefore he kisses there. And this is also everyone's custom when they feel the *tallit* with their hand, for distracting the mind or when they move from their place, they kiss the hand. And the matter of the kiss is to connect to purity, and there is in it favoring the commandment.

It is the perception that *kedusha* or the holiness would make the people holy as well. Just like the band which holds the scroll, if Jews touch the Torah scroll, its power could be transmitted to them. Here, the idea that the Torah scroll as a concrete object helps facilitate a connection between God's holiness and the practitioner is convincing.

One final idea about the Torah scroll is in its representation for Eros and sexuality. Since rabbinic times, men were the ones who had access to the Torah. I once heard a lecture by the anthropologist Susan Sered who described the symbolic act of the Torah service as sexual. She claimed that women's body could be read as text. As men orchestrate the Torah service they treat the Torah as feminine: men dress and undress Her, they kiss Her, they unfold the scroll and then use the Yad, reminiscent of a sexual act. It is also interesting to note the gender switch – God is masculine, but the Torah is feminine. Reb Zalman, in his book "Wrapped in a Holy Flame, Teachings and Tales of the Hasidic Masters", ⁷⁰ adds to this idea. He writes:

"Someone who was taking some people on a vision quest wanted to know from me what to say to them about the feminine in Judaism. I was immediately reminded of something once pointed out by Theodore Reik. Go to any synagogue and witness the Torah service. Worshipers remove the Torah from the ark, and the Torah wears a great big crown, and they carry the Torah all around, and everybody touches and embraces her like a queen and kisses her, kisses the hem of her garment, as it were. Then they delicately undress her, place her gently on the table, roll her open, and read from her. Clearly, Torah is feminine. And Shabbat, the Queen, is certainly feminine. The Shekhinah, the Divine Presence, is certainly feminine. So the element of the feminine is embedded in Judaism, and the strange thing is that the very stuff that we threw out the door in the early days comes back in through the window".

⁷⁰ Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi, Netanel Miles-Yepetz, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame: Teachings and Tales of The Hasidic Masters*, Wiley Imprint, 2003, page 164.

Reb Zalman tells us that indeed, what makes the Torah scroll holy or sacred is the admiration for the feminine energy. Therefore, one should not be surprised to learn, as it was demonstrated in the ethnographic accounts, that when people talk about their love to the Torah or God, they could mean Eros. The Torah scroll is a sexual awakening for people without their being aware of this feeling.

5.3 Is The Torah scroll a holy representation of God?

When we see people kiss a sacred object, it would be relevant to wonder what perception they have about this object. As far as what is known, Jews do not feel that the scroll IS God, but yet, they find in the scroll a way to connect to God. According to Peirce,⁷¹ in the non-Jewish world, worshipping an object could be confused with worshipping a god and the idol could take the place of the god in the eyes of the worshiper. He refers to it as the danger of “substitutions”. What happens in this case, the gap between that god and reality could be blurred by using a representation that possesses the features of the god itself.⁷² The question is whether this “substitution” can occur with the Torah scroll? Could the two prohibitions – the first against the making of the sculptures and pictures and the second against the worship of other gods – actually fuse together and eventually be transformed from representing God to becoming God Himself...?

Maimonides struggled with this question in Chapter 1 of his *Hilchot Avodat Kochavim* section in the *Code of Jewish Law*, (משנה תורה).

Maimonides describes idolatry as developing in stages where at first, images served as intermediaries between the worshiper and God, and only later became gods. Initially, worshipers thought that worshipping the intermediaries was a way of showing respect for God, just like honoring the servants of a king is a way to show respect for the king. At first they worshiped the stars and the moons as intermediaries. Afterwards, false prophets said that God had commanded them to worship a certain star or the

⁷¹ C.S. Peirce's divisions of representations are three; similarity, metonymic, and substitution (in Halbertal p. 38).

⁷² Ibid, p. 40.

stars. As a result, they built temples and filled them with idols representing the stars. They were motivated to think that those idols were capable of causing good or bad. Eventually the people believed that the idols actually gave commands. Below is a citation describing the last phase of idol worship development:⁷³

ז וכיון שארכו הימים, נשתקע השם הנכבד והנורא מפי כל היקום ומדעתם, ולא הכירוהו: ונמצאו כל עם הארץ והנשים והקטנים, אינן יודעין אלא הצורה של עץ ואבן וההיכל של בנין, שנתחנכו מקטנותן להשתחוות להן ולעובדן, ולהישבע בשמן.

And as the days progressed, the name of the revered and awesome God was forgotten from the entire universe and no one knew of Him. Thus all the ordinary folk, including women and children, did not know of anything but the images of wood and stone and the stone temple, as they had been taught from childhood to bow down to them and to worship them.

From this philosophy, Maimonides prohibited idolatry because he wanted to ensure that the worship of God would be free of the possibility of the substitution error.

Although Maimonides' fear is realistic, it is safe to assume that even after centuries of using the Torah scroll as a Concrete Divine Connector, not a single Jewish person would believe that the Torah is actually God. For what we saw, for every one of them, the Torah scroll is special and kissing it merely constitutes a way to connect to God. Similarly, we find the same attitude toward their sacred objects by the Hindus and Catholics I interviewed.

- Nancy, a holistic healer of the Catholic faith, shared the following comments with me:

"I evoke the adornment of Saints, in particular Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. I have a figure of this saint in my work place and I like to kiss it on a daily basis at the beginning of my work day". When I asked Nancy what this figurine means to her, she explained that it is only a representation of what Saint Elizabeth is known for, being a compassionate human being and a person who overcame many crises in her life. The qualities of Saint Elizabeth are those which Nancy would like to have herself, so Saint Elizabeth's legacy is a model for her own life.

⁷³ Ibid.

In addition, Nancy told me that, in church, Catholics will kiss rosary beads as a part of prayer, or will kiss their hand after making the sign of the cross. It is also common to kiss the wounds on a crucifix, or any other image of Christ's Passion. Once a year, on Good Friday, people gather in the church and line up to kiss the cross held by the priest⁷⁴. As Nancy put it: "Adoration or veneration of an image or representation of Christ's cross does not mean that we actually adore the material image, of course, but rather what it represents. In kneeling before the crucifix and kissing it, we are paying the highest honour to our Lord's cross as the instrument of our salvation. Because the Cross is inseparable from His sacrifice, in reverencing His Cross we are, in effect adoring Christ. Thus we affirm: 'We adore Thee, O Christ, and we bless Thee because by Thy Holy Cross Thou has redeemed the World.'"

To Nancy, worship of an object becomes idolatry when the people who worship it believe that this object is actually god. To her, Buddhism is a religion of idolatry, because "they have statues of the Buddha that are believed to be god. But as a Catholic the material image that is adorned represents a life teaching and example." Similarly, Rev. Caffie Risher, Baptist, claims that in her faith there is no kissing of any objects during worship because of the fear that it is idol worshiping, and that the only connection they make with God is through "His Son, Jesus the Christ which is represented by the finished work at the cross."

- To Nunda, a Hindu woman, there are no substitutions for god, although she worships other deities. Hindus embrace the use of statues which are embedded with symbols about the aspects of god that should be remembered. She worships three deities-- Shiva, Krishna, and Parvatti. They are manifestations or reincarnations of Brahma, the creator. To Nunda, these are not the god that she worships; but each one of them is adorned by her because they model traits that she admires and likes to have herself. What the deities do, humans do. So, she will never think that Shiva, for example, is THE

⁷⁴ The Veneration of the Cross: In the seventh century, the Church in Rome adopted the practice of Adoration of the Cross from the Church in Jerusalem, where a fragment of wood believed to be the Lord's cross had been venerated every year since the fourth century.

primary god. "When we forget what the statue is trying to remind us and start seeing the statue as god itself we slip into idolatry. No wonder the temple priests will just toss the statues out of the temple and smash them in the streets when they chip or start to crack due to age....to remind us that it was only a statue, a symbol...god isn't being smashed, god never was the statue".

When I was in India, I noticed people coming to the river, submerging their personal Ganesh Chaturthi clay images and letting them float down the river. They let go of the images so that they would not get attached to the symbols and start believing that they have the power they don't have or make them what they are not.

6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The paper deals with the question whether the Jewish custom of kissing the Torah scroll is an act of idol worship or not. On first glance, the relationship between the terms “Torah” and “idolatry” seem to be totally contradictory and impossible. How can we link the Torah to customs of idolatry? But after delving into the many historical and sociological resources for this custom, it becomes clear that what we call “idolatry” is no more than a way to connect to and with the divine.

Jews have not “invented” the custom of kissing the Torah scroll as a sacred object. We see that this custom has its roots in pagan religions and it goes all the way back to Biblical times. All religions in the world, including Judaism, use sacred objects in their worship which symbolize their connection to the divine. The authenticity of the custom of kissing sacred objects is not only reflected today in many other religions, but it has become an integral part in Jewish practice. However, many Jews will not admit that it is an action that is equally valued and commonly practiced by all nations.

There is certainly a great amount of discomfort to think that Jews have integrated a pagan practice into their religion. Interestingly, many traditional authorities are troubled by the same concerns and proscribe kissing the Torah, or wish to see the practice limited to young children. According to my observation from reviewing the responsa literature, it seems that by comparison to the vast amount of responsa regarding kissing the *Mezuazh* or the *Tallit* fringes, there is not much discussions about kissing the Torah scroll. It would be interesting to find out why this is and whether it is connected to the same discomfort associated with the sensitive subject of idolatry. Did the rabbis avoid talking about the custom of kissing the scroll for a reason?

Another issue is that to openly admit that all religions are the same could shake the fundamental basic assumption that the Jewish people are the chosen people. It

raises the complex question of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. As Rabbi Rami Shapiro, in his blog "Toto: Behind the Curtain with Rabbi Rami" puts it⁷⁵:

If Jew were honest and admitted that Judaism's notion that Jews are God's Chosen People elevates Jews above all others in the eyes of God, would that help interfaith cooperation? If Christians who believed that Jesus Christ is the only way, life, and truth affirmed that faith and admitted that this means all other religions are false, would our dialogue improve? If Buddhists really made it clear that there is no soul, would those whose religions depend on the existence of souls be any more inclined to carry on a conversation? Would it improve relations between Islam and Christianity if Muslim attendees at interfaith gatherings voiced the central Muslim idea that the very thought of God having a son is anathema?"

This paper is an answer to Rabbi Shapiro saying "No"! There is no benefit for building a wall around Judaism as a defense mechanism in order to ensure that the Jewish people remain as unique as possible. The prohibitions to interact with non-Jews as strongly emphasized during the Talmudic times and today, or the linguistic downgrading references to non-Jewish religions as non-worthy and idolatrous are only some of the ways that facilitate separation on one hand, but arrogance on the other hand. This paper stresses the notion that creating "differences" on religious grounds does not help us understand what the custom of kissing the Torah scroll is about.

The term idolatry itself creates the wall of separation between Jews and non-Jews, and it is the attempt of this paper to remove this wall. But it must remain clear that even though Idolatry is removed from our discourse, the idea that kissing the Torah scrolls is an idolatrous custom remains. It is still maintained that Jews use customs borrowed from other religions, but its analysis is based on the commonality with others and not the differences between others. The accounts of informants from the Native American, Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist and Hindu religions show the similarities of kissing objects. The term Concrete Divine Connection, which replaces the term Idolatry establishes the idea that all religions, all people and all cultures are the same in their tendency to make spiritual connections with their gods by using material objects. The Torah scroll is only one of these objects.

⁷⁵ <http://rabbirami.blogspot.com/feeds/posts/default>.

There is nothing more valuable in my mind than to hear from people how they feel about their relationship to God and what it means to them to kiss the Torah scroll. The anthropological perspective using interviews and questionnaires shed light on this custom. It first illuminated the fact that the fear of committing idolatry by kissing the Torah is real, and that some informants find it offensive. I am hopeful that by introducing the view that this custom is a manifestation of the universal humane habit to search for meaning during worship, and that by removing any negative labeling about idolatry, I have provided a way that can make Jewish people more comfortable during their synagogue services. If worshipers understand these concepts, they will gain a new way to worship and create meaningful connections between them and God

Along with those who are critical of the custom of kissing the scroll, there are those who feel nothing by doing it, or do not even know why they are doing it. This is powerful information that shows how tradition plays its role in Judaism. If people would be able to set aside the idea of idolatry and understand that within the Jewish religion and tradition as within other religions lies this zeal to find connections to God, the custom of kissing the Torah scroll would become meaningful. Judaism has a unique response to that urge for connection and it is possible to make it a spiritual practice. Indeed, as it was demonstrated, finding a spiritual connection with the divine is the ultimate goal of many forms of worship. In the Jewish tradition, kissing the Torah scroll makes the bond with God.

The informants who expressed their kissing of the scroll as an act of love and respect for God strengthen the idea that there is a need to have a concrete object during worship to facilitate these connections. The feelings and emotions that come up during the service, in my mind, are the result of having the Torah scroll as a connector. There is nothing in any religion that would not allow the expression of feelings and emotions. Judaism goes against idolatry, but not against feelings. If kissing a sacred object comes to express something deep, such as the love of God, there should be even more of a desire to have the scroll in the synagogue during worship and kiss it.

The Torah scroll as a Concrete Divine Connector with its sacred words that it contains seems to become a symbol to the informants. It represents Judaism and God. In fact, Joseph Campbell⁷⁶ takes an important stand regarding the meaning of symbols in religious life. He takes an example from the North American plains Indians. When the buffalo suddenly disappeared from the North American plains, it left the Indians deprived not only of a central mythic symbol, but also of their way of life that this symbol once had served. He feels that likewise in our world, not only have our public religious symbols lost their claim to authority and passed away, but the ways of life they once supported have also disappeared. This paper actually shows that the Torah scroll with its symbol has not disappeared from Jewish life and religion. It remains a very strong presence for the individual and for the Jewish community and nation. The dilemmas and questions presented here regarding the custom of kissing the Torah scroll and its possible connection to idolatry only illuminate the fact that as times change, Jews who live in the modern world have even more desire to understand their Jewish world with a pluralistic perspective. It shows that even women in the orthodox communities challenge the old way of separation and exclusion and seek to be closer to the Torah by being able to kiss the scroll. They feel their connection with God is more meaningful if they can touch and kiss the scroll.

One challenge that this paper poses is what would happen if the Torah scroll, as a Concrete Divine Connector, becomes a worshipped object. In the event that practitioners expect the Torah scroll to contain *mana* or *kedusha* which would influence events in their life, there could be a danger that the term idolatry might have to be reintroduced to the discussion. When the Torah is used as a good luck charm or an amulet for people it will stop being a symbol and will become something that is believed to actually have this power, and I hesitate to say it – become a God. The fear that Maimonides expresses is a real fear. What Judaism must enforce is the idea that Jews cherish the holiness that lies in the content of the scroll – the wisdom, the stories, the laws, but not in the vessel itself. It is important to pay attention to why Jews kiss the

⁷⁶ Ibid, page 90.

scroll and what it means to them instead of focusing whether it is an idolatrous custom or not.

One last interesting thought is how the new H1N1 epidemic will influence the Jewish community. There is the question whether the custom of kissing the *Mezuazh* and the Torah scroll is sanitary and whether it should be modified as a means of prevention. Rabbi Moshe Waldoks at Temple Beth Zion in Brookline, Massachusetts⁷⁷ says for example: "Well, if you have a problem with it, you can wave at the Torah, I think the Torah will understand."⁷⁸ One could argue that the problem addressed here is not whether the "Torah would understand" not being kissed, but rather, whether people would understand from this new relationship that they would have with the Torah and God. What Rabbi Waldoks seemed to miss is the personal and spiritual aspects that this modified custom would bring to the Jews.

There is a fact that cannot be ignored, and this is the fear that Jews, just like other human beings have the potential to be idolatrous. Today, people worship material things such as money, technology, or sex. However, people do not seem to be bothered by it, and do not make this kind of idol worship as a concern in their daily life. So, why is there a question of idol worship when kissing the scroll and fear of idolatry? One should be encouraged to focus on the beauty of the custom and how it connects all Jews all over the world. Considering that even during ancient times there were similar customs, one should capture them in one's imagination and find the divine connection from within the heart and not from the logic and the intellectual domain.

⁷⁷ <http://www.vosizneias.com/38665/2009/09/20/brookline-ma-h1n1-prompts-modifying-kissing-of-the-torah/>

⁷⁸ See appendix #6.

Appendix #1

Missionaries, Messianics and the Masoretic Text

Senior Project for AJR By: Rabbi/ Cantor Howard Nacht

Psalm 2:12 . נשקו בר

Psalm 2: 12 begins with the phrase נשקו בר. This phrase, and this particular variation of the Root נשק [neshek, nashak] (alternatively i'~ or i'~), appears only once in the Tanakh. While in modern Hebrew the root נשק can mean either to kiss or to arm oneself, many sources take the position that the actual meaning of this phrase is unclear. While בר in Aramaic means son or son of, in Hebrew, among other things, it means pure or clean. Hence, נשקו בר has been often translated as "Dohomage in purity."

The Septuagint translates נשקו בר as "accept correction". St. Jerome's translation of the Tanakh known as the Vulgate translates as *adprehendite disciplinam*, or embrace discipline.

John Wycliffe (c. 1320's/1384) rendered the Vulgate into English around 1382: His version of נשקו בר is "take ye lore. The first complete printed edition of the Bible in English is credited to Miles Coverdale (c. 1488 - 1568), which marks the first appearance of "kysse the sonne" as a translation for נשקו בר. This rendering was carried forward in the: Great Bible (1539/1541), in the Geneva Bible (1560), and in the Bishop's Bible (1568). The Douay-Rheims translation was the first English language Bible used by the Roman Catholic Church: It followed the Vulgate of St. Jerome and so rendered נשקו בר as "embrace discipline."

Some additional variants of translations: "kiss his feet", "kiss the king," "kiss the mighty one," "bow down in homage," "bow down to him," "kiss the chosen one," "do homage to the son," "do homage purely," "lay hold of instruction." "pay glad homage to the king," "kiss the rod" and "embrace purity."

In his work published in 1917, Charles A. Briggs translates: "Kiss sincerely." He posits that translations such as "kiss the son" or "lay hold of instruction" are either based on misinterpretation because of Syriac or Aramaic influences, or that the writers of the Septuagint possessed a different text. John Calvin (1509-1564) says. 'All this ... contains a prophecy concerning the future kingdom of Christ.'

A. F. Kirkpatrick writes of St. Jerome's inconsistency for translating; «*Worship purely* (adore pure) in his Psalter, though he had written *Worship the son* (adore filium) in his commentary." He goes on to quote Jerome from his treatise *against Rufinus*, which gives some insight into the thought process of this important translation. He cites, "Why am I to blame, if I have given different translations of an ambiguous word? (emphasis added) and while in my short commentary where there is an opportunity for discussion I had said *Worship the son*, in the text itself; to avoid all appearance of forced interpretation: and to leave no opening for Jewish cavils I have said *Worship purely*, or *choicely*; as. Aquila also and

Symmachus have translated It" Perhaps Sigal was not too far off the mark when he said some translations had been invented.

Jewish Commentators on 2:12-

According to A 1. Rosenberg, Ibn Ezra and Radak suggest "kiss the son," while Rashi; says, "Arm yourself with purity," avoiding the Christian interpretation of that phrase

Among contemporary commentators, Freehof translates it as 'do homage impurity and clearly states that the KfV has "mistranslated" this phrase. He points out that neither the Targum nor early Christian commentators use 'kiss the son' imerring Jesus. He also focuses on=g; being Aramaic.

Hirsch renders the phrase, "Gird yourselves with purity," Rozenberg. and Zlotowitz, following Rashi, translate it as "Bestir yourself with pure heart."

Whether Christian translations were first based on mistranslation, misinterpretation or different texts, whether originally deliberate or accidental, whether invented or unplanned, whether perpetuated by artifice or pure theology, perhaps the one only thing that is now clear is that, indeed, the true and original meaning of it is definitely obscure, unclear, clearly uncertain and, most likely; lost to us forever.

Appendix #2: The act of bowing in Aleinu

From the first two commandments in Exodus chapter 20 and the closing prayer Aleinu, which Jews pray every morning, afternoon, and evening service, there seem to be an inherited contradiction and paradox. It also includes the critical idea of how to foster a further distance between Jews and the outsider;

Exodus 20:2-4 tells us not to make any idols and not to bow to them and worship them.

ב אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים לֹא-יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פָּנַי.
ג לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאֶרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאֶרֶץ.
ד לֹא-תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנָּא פֶקֶד עוֹן אָבֹת עַל-בָּנִים עַל-שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים לְשֹׁנָאִי.

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”

“You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me.”

The wording of our Aleinu prayer further illustrates this contradiction.

שְׁלֹא שָׁמְנוּ כְּמִשְׁפָּחוֹת הָאֲדָמָה וְלֹא עָשׂנוּ כְּגוֹיֵי הָאָרֶצוֹת
שֶׁהֵם מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לְהֵבֶל וְרִיק וּמִתְפַּלְלִים אֶל אֵל לֹא יוֹשִׁיעַ
וְאֵנַחֲנוּ כּוֹרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים וּמוֹדִים לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא

“Who did not make our lot like theirs, or our destiny like all of them,

For they bow down to nothingness and emptiness, and pray to a god that will not save,

But we bow down low in grateful acknowledgement before the king over the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.”

This first paragraph includes an ethnocentric claim and a negative judgment of non-Jews; it is the claim that Israel was chosen for a special religious task in the world, therefore is superior. It also claims that the worship of all other peoples is worthless. There is a claim that one major difference between Judaism and the other religions is the kind of god that is worshiped. Indeed, there is no problem with this claim as it is

clear that deities are different in each religion. However, this prayer stresses the idea that other nations' god is no more than a "nothingness and will not save," while the God of Jews is the powerful, the creator, a savior, and a King. The problem is not only that Jews feel superior to others, but what is the paradox of all of this is that Jews are not different than others in the WAY they worship the divine. Jews bow to God just like the other nations bow to their gods. For example, in this particular regard, there is no difference between the Jewish practice and the way in which Nunda, a Hindu woman from Virginia, worships her deity. In her interview with me, Nunda explained that Hindus do not kiss any objects⁷⁹ and are not even permitted to touch the deity unless they are totally purified. But they do bow to the deity. The deity is not considered to be god, only the manifestation of god, but worshipers bow to it because of the love and respect for what it represents.

The Aleinu prayer as liturgy has evolved during history and has been changed, but in particular, its meaning has been challenged by the Reform and the Reconstructionist denominations. Today, their different prayer books replace the idea of choosiness and ethnocentrism with universal inclusiveness, but it is striking to see that the troublesome practice of bowing stayed intact. What is important to note is the challenge that these denominations tried to overcome. Their way of dealing with bowing is to change the nuance of it. The Reform denomination, in their *siddur*, The New Union Prayer Book, translates the Hebrew to: "**We bow the head** in reverence, and worship the King of kings, the Holy One, praised be He". And the Reconstructionist, in their *siddur* Kol Haneshamah, translates; "**We bend the knee** and offer worship and allegiance to the Supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He". Bowing the head or bending the knees might look different from the bowing others do during worship, but in essence, it only seems like a variation of the same act of bowing to a deity. The point of all this is to stress the thesis that the custom of kissing the Torah scroll is also a variation of a universal custom of worshipping, but what is needed an honest look of this custom and appreciate it in universal terms and not with superior ethnocentric attitude.

⁷⁹ When I was in India, I noticed that worshippers do kiss the ground when they enter their temple.

עלינו לשבח לאדון הכל We must praise the master of all,
 לתת גדלה ליוצר בראשית and render greatness to the creator of the universe,
 שלא עשנו כגויי הארצות Who did not make us like the nations of the lands,
 ולא שמנו כמשפחות האדמה and did not place us like the families of the earth,
 שלא שם חלקנו כהם Who did not make our lot like theirs,
 וגרלנו ככל המונם or our destiny like all of them,
שהם משתחווים להבל וריק For they bow down to nothingness and emptiness,
ומתפללים אל אל לא ירשיע and pray to a god that will not save,
 ואנחנו כורעים ומשתחווים ומודים But we bow down low in grateful acknowledgement
 לפני מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא before the king over the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.
 שהוא נוטה שמים ויסד ארץ For He spreads out the heavens and establishes the earth,
 ושכינת עזו בגבהי מרומים and his majestic abode is in the sky above ,
 ומושב יקרו בשמים ממעל and his mighty dwelling place is in the lofty heights.
 הוא אלהינו אין עוד He is our God; there is none else.
 אמת מלכנו אפס זולתו He is truly our King; none is like Him.
 ככתוב בתורתו: וידעת היום והשבת אל לבבך, As it is written in His Torah, "Know this day and reflect on it ,because the
 כי ה' הוא האלקים בשמים ממעל, ועל הארץ Eternal is our God in the sky above and the earth below. There is none
 מתחת, אין עוד. else." (Deut. 4:39)
 על כן נקוה לך ה' אלקינו, Eternal our God, we therefore hope
 לראות מהרה בתפארת עזך, soon to see Your majestic glory;
 להעביר גלולים מן הארץ To remove idols from the earth,
 והאלילים כרות יכרתון. so that the false gods will be destroyed;
 לתקן עולם במלכות שדי, To perfect the world under the Almighty's kingdom,
 וכל בני בשר יקראו בשמך. so that all will call on Your name;
 להפנות אליך כל רשעי ארץ. To turn all the wicked of the earth toward You
 יכירו וידעו כל יושבי תבל, so that all the inhabitants of the world will realize and know
כי לך תכרע כל ברך That to You every knee must bow down,
תשבע כל לשון. every tongue swear allegiance .
לפניך ה' אלקינו יכרעו ויפלו. Eternal our God, before You they will bow down and fall,
ולכבוד שמך יקר יתנו. and honor Your glorious name .
 ויקבלו כלם את עול מלכותך, And they will all accept the yoke of Your kingdom,
 ותמלך עליהם מהרה לעולם ועד. that You might rule over them soon and forever,
 כי המלכות שלך היא, For the kingdom is Your,
 ולעולמי עד תמלוך בכבוד. and to the ends of eternity You will rule in glory .
 ככתוב בתורתך: ה' ימלך לעולם ועד. As it is written in Your Torah, "The Eternal will rule forever" (Exodus 15:18).
 ונאמר: והיה ה' למלך על כל הארץ, ביום ההוא It has been said, "The Eternal will become King over the entire earth. On
 יהיה ה' אחד, ושמו אחד. that day, the Eternal shall be One and His Name shall be One" .

Appendix #3: Questionnaire

Ziona Zelazo
Rabbinic Student
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QUESTIONNAIRE: Objects we kiss during worship

This questionnaire is designed to help me with my senior project for my rabbinic ordination. I will be so grateful if you take a little time to answer the best you can. With your consent, I would like to use your name in the paper. But if you prefer otherwise, do not put your name down.

1. Your name (optional):
2. Your profession:
3. Your religion:
4. What is your denomination?
5. Place of worship: church ____ / synagogue ____ / mosque ____ / home ____
nature ____ / other ____
6. Gender: Male ____ Female ____ Other ____
7. Your Age group is:

During prayer or any time you are in the place of worship –

8. Give me the names of 2 objects you kiss during worship or prayer. If you are Jewish, exclude the mezuzah;
(1) _____ (2) _____
9. Can you explain what these objects represent or what they mean to you?
10. What is your reason you kiss these objects?
11. Can you describe what kinds of feelings come to you when you kiss these objects?

Appendix #4: A blog for Frum Women

"Imamother.com – Connecting Frum Women"

#112: re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah

Author: **Motek**, ▢Posted: Tue, Oct 17 2006, 6:48 pm

I started a thread long ago on the topic of women touching/kissing a Sefer Torah. Please see the first two pages of this (now merged) thread for more posts on this topic.

In some shuls, women are able to touch/kiss the Sefer Torah. When I've had that opportunity, I have not done it. Just don't feel I can/should (nothing to do with nida).

What about you?

#2: re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah Author: **proudmom**, Location: RBSA

▢Posted: Thu, Nov 03 2005, 7:54 pm

if I have a chance to kiss it then I do.

#3: re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah Author: **youngmom**, ▢Posted: Thu, Nov 03 2005, 8:24 pm

why not, motek?

#4: re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah Author: **Tefila**

what can I tell u..... ▢Posted: Thu, Nov 03 2005, 8:42 pm

Yes ther r some shuls that do but I find it more then strange ☺and to tell u the truth if it was women passing it to me in a womens shul so too speak I would kiss it. But otherwise not.

#5: re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah Author: **shayna82**, Location: pittsburgh
▢Posted: Thu, Nov 03 2005, 9:22 pm

I def. would kiss the torah, and actually just did this passed simchas torah while my husband was holding it. I dont see any reason not, I am not less qualified than a male .

#6: re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah Author: **hey its me**, ▢Posted: Thu, Nov 03 2005, 9:22 pm

what's wrong with touching kissing the torah? I think its nice when we get a chance 2

#8: Author: **hisorerus**, Location: Atzilus □Posted: Fri, Nov 04 2005, 1:19 am

—
We are ALLOWED to (they do it in 770 also), it seems that Motek feels uncomfortable doing so and would like to know if any others feel the same.

I vaguely remember seeing something from the Rebbe indicating that by a Hachnosas Sefer Torah, women and children should make a point of kissing the Torah.

#9: **re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah** Author: **Meema2Kids**, Location: the show-me state □Posted: Fri, Nov 04 2005, 8:21 am

—
They do this in my shul, I never kiss the torah. My husband said I'm not supposed to but I'm not sure why? I guess I'll ask him.

#10: **re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah** Author: **chen**, □Posted: Fri, Nov 04 2005, 12:18 pm

—
There is no halachik issue with a woman's touching a sefer torah. The torah was given to and is the property of all am yisrael, distaff side included. Furthermore a sefer torah is not mekabbel tum'ah so even in niddah it's not a problem.

it's not unusual to feel funny about doing something you never did before, or that your family and friends don't do, especially if you are a fairly conservative person. Few people really want to be the "first one on the block" to do something. Don't let that hold you back.

#11: **re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah** Author: **ElTam**, Location: Ohio □Posted: Fri, Nov 04 2005, 2:01 pm

—
At our old shul, women were able to. They brought the Torah past the women's section when they were returning it to the ark. Most women touched their prayer books to it.

The rabbi of our shul now stresses that the point of the mechitza is for separation, not the issue of not seeing, but the issue that there should be no touching, passing, etc. So I imagine that is why they do not do it in our shul. I do not think it is done in any shul in my community.

I have to say I miss the opportunity. I felt very good about being able to get close to that much kedusha and have it give me chizuk in my mitzvot and teffilot.

#12: **re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah** Author: **hardwrknmom**, □Posted: Fri, Nov 04 2005, 3:10 pm

—
When they bring the Torah to the womans side, I always get up to kiss it.. Motek is there a reason you don't "feel you should"?

#15: **re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah** Author: **Rivka**, Location: In the nut house.
▢ Posted: Sat, Nov 05 2005, 4:56 pm

Chen I learnt that you can't look at the torah when it is brought out when you are niddah. So how can you touch it when you are niddah? (and niddah I mean when on your period, not incl the 7 clean days).

I like to kiss the torah if I get to be near it and manage to do so.

#16: **re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah** Author: **sarahd**, Location: Europe
▢ Posted: Sat, Nov 05 2005, 5:19 pm

I once found myself in a shul where they brought the sefer Torah through the women's section during hotzaa and hachnasa. The women mostly kissed it with their siddurim. I didn't and neither did my (modern) cousin - both of us felt very uncomfortable doing it; I think because it's something that (AFAIK) was not done previously. I don't like being a "poretz geder" (I hope this expression doesn't offend anyone) or innovator when it comes to Yiddishkeit.

#17: Author: **elisecohen**, Location: Maryland ▢ Posted: Sat, Nov 05 2005, 6:15 pm

Like Rivka, I was taught that a woman who is menstruating should not even look directly at the sefer Torah, and one who is niddah should not touch it (to which a friend commented, "Another tzorris for the unmarried girls!"). It's discussed in R' Ellison's book, *Serving the Creator*, p. 236-8, Chapter 12, Section 6.

#23: **re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah** Author: **shanie5**, Location: pa ▢ Posted: Sat, Nov 05 2005, 10:15 pm

we daven in the Jewish home (nursing home) and they always bring the torah thru the ladies section and stop by everyone who wants to kiss the torah. for some, its the only way they can/know how to participate in the services. I never heard of a woman not being allowed to kiss it. I think its *kavod hatorah* to do so when it comes by. usually I use a siddur to touch the torah, but not always.

Am I being disrespectful if I don't approach the Torah and touch it if I have the opportunity to do so?

#32: **re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah** Author: **roza**, Location: Phoenix ▢ Posted: Sun, Nov 06 2005, 8:45 pm

I might be ok with touching sefer Torah with a siddur, just don't see an inyan to do it as I never learned that I have to; and I felt uncomfortable [subconsciously] to approach a man and then kiss something (even a sefer Torah) in his hands.

well, what do you call modern? they were doing this in my shul 45 years ago and presumably it was already an established custom by then.

#35: **re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah** Author: **shanie5**, Location: pa ▢ Posted: Mon, Nov 07 2005, 2:02 pm

—
same here. I grew up w/ it. so I was surprised to learn that people had a question about it. 🤔
u learn something new every day- especially on imamothers

#36: **re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah** Author: **supermom**, Location: Up Up and away!!! ▢ Posted: Mon, Nov 07 2005, 3:03 pm

—
never realized it was a problem either 😊 every chance that I have I try to kiss the torah it feels holy and why not touch something that feels holy and makes you feel good. now if it were wrong then why haven't I heard of this until now? 😊

#37: **re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah** Author: **roza**, Location: Phoenix ▢ Posted: Mon, Nov 07 2005, 3:46 pm

—
don't get us wrong.
it's perfectly OK thing to do! in fact it's a shows love for the Torah.

we are just disscussing what Motek said about feeling uncomfortable to kiss it and why. these are just personal feelings, some ppl grew up with the ezrat noshim on the second floor, that's all.
please do as you always did.

#45: **Re: re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah** Author: **Motek**, ▢ Posted: Thu, Jan 05 2006, 1:03 pm

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merpk wrote:

Why is a woman who's nidda not allowed to look at or touch a sefer Torah?

first of all, like many things in halacha, it's not as clearcut as you make it. Many shuls allow women to kiss the Torah and it's halachically acceptable.

I asked someone for more info. on this and he gave me the sources but I didn't feel like looking it up.

If you are serious about wanting to know more, then look up Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, chapter 8 and the Rama there and you will see that although some hold that a woman cannot

even go to shul (!), others say differently and halacha l'maaseh (practically speaking): women go to shul, look at the Torah, and kiss it in those shuls where the Torah is brought around to the women.

#119: re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah

Author: **GetReal**, ▢Posted: Mon, Sep 21 2009, 10:56 am

Growing up someone brought the Torah to the back of the women's section and women kissed the Torah. This is a very right-wing shul so I am curious about the issue with kissing the Torah. Can someone clarify?

#120: Re: re: Women Touching/Kissing Sefer Torah Author: **JC**, ▢Posted: Mon, Sep 21 2009, 11:13 am

I have never been in a shul where this was NOT done.

Mishneh Torah, Avoda Zarah, Chapter 1**הלכה א**

בימי אנוש טעו בני האדם טעות גדול ונבערה עצת חכמי אותו הדור ואנוש עצמו מן הטועים היה, וזו היתה טעותם, אמרו הואיל והאלהים ברא כוכבים אלו וגלגלים להנהיג את העולם ונתנם במרום וחלק להם כבוד והם שמשים המשמשים לפניו ראויין הם לשבחם ולפארם ולחלוק להם כבוד, וזהו רצון האל ברוך הוא לגדל ולכבד מי שגדלו וכבודו, כמו שהמלך רוצה לכבד העומדים לפניו וזהו כבודו של מלך, כיון שעלה דבר זה על לבם התחילו לבנות לכוכבים היכלות ולהקריב להן קרבנות ולשבחם ולפארם בדברים ולהשתחוות למולם כדי להשיג רצון הבורא בדעתם הרעה, וזה היה עיקר עבודת כוכבים, וכך היו אומרים עובדיה יודעים עיקרה, לא שהן אומרים שאין שם אלוה אלא כוכב זה, הוא שירמיהו אומר מי לא ייראך מלך הגוים כי לך יאתה כי בכל חכמי הגוים ובכל מלכותם מאין כמוך ובאחת יבערו ויכסלו מוסר הבליים עץ הוא, כלומר הכל יודעים שאתה הוא לכדך אבל טעותם וכסילותם שמדמים שזה ההבל רצונך הוא.

הלכה ב

ואחר שארכו הימים עמדו בבני האדם נביאי שקר ואמרו שהאל צוה ואמר להם עבדו כוכב פלוני או כל הכוכבים והקריבו לו ונסכו לו כך וכך ובנו לו היכל ועשו צורתו כדי להשתחוות לו כל העם הנשים והקטנים ושאר עמי הארץ, ומודיע להם צורה שבדה מלבו ואומר זו היא צורת הכוכב פלוני שהודיעוהו בנבואתו, והתחילו על דרך זו לעשות צורות בהיכלות ותחת האילנות ובראשי ההרים ועל הגבעות ומתקבצין ומשתחוים להם ואומרים לכל העם שזו הצורה מטיבה ומריעה וראוי לעובדה וליראה ממנה, וכהניהם אומרים להם שבעבודה זו תרבו ותצליחו ועשו כך כך ואל תעשו כך וכך, והתחילו כוזבים אחרים לעמוד ולומר שהכוכב עצמו או הגלגל או המלאך דבר עמהם ואמר להם עבדוני בכך וכך והודיע להם דרך עבודתו ועשו כך ואל תעשו כך, ופשט דבר זה בכל העולם לעבוד את הצורות בעבודות משונות זו מזו ולהקריב להם ולהשתחוות, וכיון שארכו הימים נשתכח השם הנכבד והנורא מפי כל היקום ומדעתם ולא הכירוהו ונמצאו כל עם הארץ הנשים והקטנים אינם יודעים אלא הצורה של עץ ושל אבן וההיכל של אבנים שנתחנכו מקטנותם להשתחוות לה ולעבדה ולהשבע בשמה, והחכמים שהיו בהם כגון כהניהם וכיוצא בהן מדמין שאין שם אלוה אלא הכוכבים והגלגלים שנעשו הצורות האלו בגללם ולדמותן אבל צור העולמים לא היה שום אדם שהיה מכירו ולא יודעו אלא יחידים בעולם כגון חנוך ומתושלח נח שם ועבר, ועל דרך זה היה העולם הולך ומתגלגל עד שנולד עמודו של עולם והוא אברהם אבינו.

הלכה ג

כיון שנגמל איתן זה התחיל לשוטט בדעתו והוא קטן והתחיל לחשוב ביום ובלילה והיה תמיה היאך אפשר שיהיה הגלגל הזה נוהג תמיד ולא יהיה לו מנהיג ומי יסבב אותו, כי אי אפשר שיסבב את עצמו, ולא היה לו מלמד ולא מודיע דבר אלא מושקע באור כשדים בין עובדי כוכבים הטפשים ואביו ואמו וכל העם עובדי כוכבים והוא עובד עמהם ולבו משוטט ומבין עד שהשיג דרך האמת והבין קו הצדק מתבונתו הנכונה, וידע שיש שם אלוה אחד והוא מנהיג הגלגל והוא ברא הכל ואין בכל הנמצא אלוה חוץ ממנו, וידע שכל העולם טועים ודבר שגרם להם לטעות זה שעובדים את הכוכבים ואת הצורות עד שאבד האמת מדעתם, ובן ארבעים שנה הכיר אברהם את בוראו, כיון שהכיר וידע התחיל להשיב תשובות על בני אור כשדים ולערוך דין עמהם ולומר שאין זו דרך האמת שאתם הולכים בה ושיכיר הצלמים והתחיל להודיע לעם שאין ראוי לעבוד אלא לאלוה העולם ולו ראוי להשתחוות ולהקריב ולנסך כדי שיכירוהו כל הברואים

הבאים, וראוי לאבד ולשבר כל הצורות כדי שלא יטעו בהן כל העם כמו אלו שהם מדמים שאין שם אלוה אלא אלו. כיון שגבר עליהם בראיותיו בקש המלך להורגו ונעשה לו נס ויצא לחרון, והתחיל לעמוד ולקרוא בקול גדול לכל העולם ולהודיעם שיש שם אלוה אחד לכל העולם ולו ראוי לעבוד, והיה מהלך וקורא ומקבץ העם מעיר לעיר ומממלכה לממלכה עד שהגיע לארץ כנען והוא קורא שנאמר ויקרא שם בשם ה' אל עולם, וכיון שהיו העם מתקבצין אליו ושואלין לו על דבריו היה מודיע לכל אחד ואחד כפי דעתו עד שיחזירהו לדרך האמת עד שנתקבצו אליו אלפים ורבבות והם אנשי בית אברהם ושתל בלבם העיקר הגדול הזה וחבר בו ספרים והודיעו ליצחק בנו, וישב יצחק מלמד ומזהיר, ויצחק הודיע ליעקב ומינהו ללמד וישב מלמד ומחזיק כל הנלוים אליו, ויעקב אבינו למד בניו כולם והבדיל לוי ומינהו ראש והושיבו בישבה ללמד דרך השם ולשמור מצות אברהם, וצוה את בניו שלא יפסיקו מבני לוי ממונה אחר ממונה כדי שלא תשכח הלמוד, והיה הדבר הולך ומתגבר בבני יעקב ובנלוים עליהם ונעשית בעולם אומה שהיא יודעת את ה', עד שארכו הימים לישראל במצרים וחזרו ללמוד מעשיהן ולעבוד כוכבים כמותן חוץ משבט לוי שעמד במצות אבות, ומעולם לא עבד שבט לוי עבודת כוכבים, וכמעט קט היה העיקר ששתל אברהם נעקר וחזרין בני יעקב לטעות העולם ותעותן, ומאהבת ה' אותנו ומשמרו את השבועה לאברהם אבינו עשה משה רבינו רבן של כל הנביאים ושלחו, כיון שנתנבא משה רבינו ובחר ה' ישראל לנחלה הכתירן במצות והודיעם דרך עבודתו ומה יהיה משפט עבודת כוכבים וכל הטועים אחריה. +/השגת הראב"ד/ ובן ארבעים שנה הכיר אברהם את בוראו. א"א יש אגדה בן שלש שנים שנאמר עקב אשר שמע אברהם בקולי מנין עקב. /השגת הראב"ד/ והיה מהלך וקורא וכו' עד שהגיע לארץ כנען שנאמר ויקרא שם בשם ה' אל עולם. א"א ותמה אני שהרי היו שם שם ועבר איך לא היו מוחין, ואפשר כי מוחים היו ולא אירע להם שישברו את צלמיהם לפי שהיו מתחבאים מהם עד שבא אברהם ושבר צלמי אביו+.

Appendix #6

Brookline, MA - H1N1 Prompts Modifying Kissing Of The Torah



File Photo

Brookline, MA - On this Jewish New year a centuries old tradition is adjusting for the H1N1 virus.

"There is a custom that the Torah, when it is walked around, removed from the arc that people kiss the Torah. Someone asked me if that's sanitary, I said, well if you have a problem with it, you can wave at the torah, I think the Torah will understand," said Rabbi Moshe Waldoks at the Temple Beth Zion in Brookline, Mass.

Beth Zion Temple in is recommending hand sanitizer and dropping the handshake, reports CBS News correspondent Hari Sreenivasan.

"I'm proposing a pleasant Buddhist bow which acknowledges the person in front of you or the good old fashioned Obama fist bump," Waldoks said.

These are just some examples of the changes taking place in religious services this year. The CDC estimates there have been more than a million cases of H1N1 across all 50 states. Twenty-one states have already seen widespread outbreaks.

Regardless of faith, the CDC says if you have any flu like symptoms is best to avoid large gatherings altogether.

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Credit for the Photos:

-Photo of front page: Jewish men reach out to kiss a Torah scroll at the Western Wall.
http://blogs.franklinnow.com/this_just_in/archive/tags/Photos+of+the+Week/default.aspx

-Pages 13, 14

Woman kissing the Cross www.jesus-is-savior.com/

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