



MORASHA 3

The following excerpt is taken from The Kuzari written by Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi (1075-1141) who lived in Spain. The Kuzari was completed circa 1140. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi is one of the most well-known Spanish Hakhamim. In addition to his philosophical works he wrote poetry. Many of which we, the Sepharadim, include in our prayers to this day.

In this excerpt he discusses the concept of Avoda Zara (foreign worship) and what the difference was between the Golden Calf which was seen by God as a terrible transgression of idol worship, and the golden cherubs that sat atop the Ark of the Covenant which was housed in the Bet Hamikdash (Holy Temple) in the Holy of Holies. Why is the former considered a transgression and the latter housed in our holiest place on earth? Both seem to be golden, graven images.

THE KUZARI

Passage 97:

Their transgression was in the image that was prohibited to them, and that they associated God to what they made with their own hands and intentions, without the commandment of God... They should have waited, and not made for themselves something to pray before and an altar and sacrifices...although their intentions were not to be rebellious, rather they imagined that they were being righteous and they therefore approached Aaron, and Aaron's intentions were to prove the good intentions of the nation, so he agreed, and he was chastised for helping them actualize their transgression. This story is strange and obscure to us, as most peoples in our day do not worship images however, it was typical for them because most of the then nations had statues. Had their transgression been instead, that they built -of their own

וְחִטָּאתָם הִיְתָה בְּצִיּוֹר אֲשֶׁר נֶאֱסַר עָלֵיהֶם
וְשִׁיחֲסוּ עֵינֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֵל מַה שֶׁעָשׂוּ בְּיָדָם
וְרִצּוֹנָם מִבְּלֵי מִצְוֹת הָאֱלֹהִים, ... וְהָיָה לָהֶם
לְהִמָּתִין, שְׁלֹא יִקְבְּעוּ לְעִצְמָם דָּבָר שִׁיקְבִּילוּהוּ
וְיִמְשְׁכוּ אַחֲרָיו, וְמוֹזִיבָה וְקִרְבָּנוֹת... עִם שְׁלֹא
הִיְתָה כּוֹנֵת הָעַם לְצִאת מֵעֲבוֹדַת הָאֱלֹהִים,
אֲדָ הָיוּ חוֹשְׁבִים שֶׁהֵם מְשַׁתְּדְּלִים בְּעֲבוֹדָה,
וְעַל כֵּן בָּאוּ אֶל אַהֲרֹן, וְאַהֲרֹן חָפֵץ לְגַלוֹת
מִצְפּוֹנָם, וְעַל כֵּן סִיעַ בְּעִשְׂוֹת וְנִאֲשַׁם
בְּהוֹצָאתוֹ מֵרִים מִן הַכַּח אֶל הַמַּעֲשֶׂה. וְהַדָּבָר
הַהוּא הוּא מֵרַחֵק וּמִגִּנָּה אֲצִלְנוּ, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁאֵין
בְּזַמֵּן הַזֶּה צוֹרוֹת נֶעֱבְדוֹת בְּרַב הָאֲמוֹת וְהָיָה
קָל בְּזַמֵּן הַהוּא, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהָיוּ עוֹשִׂים כָּל הָאֲמוֹת
צוֹרוֹת לְעֲבֹד אוֹתָם. וְאֵלוֹ הִיְתָה חִטָּאתָם
שֶׁעָשׂוּ בֵּית בְּרִצּוֹנָם לְעֲבוֹדָה, לְכוֹן אֵלֵינוּ
וְלִהְיוֹת בּוֹ הַקִּרְבָּנוֹת וְלִכְבְּדוֹ, לֹא הָיָה דָּבָר
גָּדוֹל בְּעֵינֵינוּ, מִפְּנֵי מַה שֶׁאֲנַחְנוּ נוֹהֲגִים בּוֹ



accord- a house for worship, that they would pray toward, and within which would hold service and honor, it would not seem so severe, as this is our practice nowadays, to take a house/building - on our own accord - respect it and pray in it, there are even those that we claim have God's presence residing in them and his angels are found there, and if it weren't necessary to organize and unify our community [within a building], this would seem odd, just as when we had a monarchy (and a temple) it would be disgraceful to do such a thing, and the righteous kings would destroy them so that the only house of worship to be honored would be the Temple that God chose in the fashion that He commanded it to be. The making of an image was not alien, as He Himself commanded to make the cherubs, and regardless the worshippers at the time were punished and killed.

היום, מעשות בתים בבחירתנו וגדלנו להם והתברכנו בהם, ואפשר שנאמר שהשכינה חלה בהם והמלאכים חונים סביבותיהם וללא הצורך להתחברות קהלנו, היה הדבר הזה נכרי, כאשר היה בימי המלכים, שהיו מוחים באנשים משתדלים, שהיו עושים בתים לעבודה, היו נקראים במות, והיו חסידי המלכים הורסין אותם, כדי שלא יגדלו זולתי הבית אשר בחר בו האלהים והתכונה אשר צוה בה. ולא היה הדבר נכרי בצורות, אשר צוה הוא בהם מהכרובים. ועם כל זה נענשו האנשים אשר עבדו העגל ביום ההוא ונהרגו

Questions to consider:

1. What is the problem in Torah with foreign worship?
2. How are we to relate to icons?
3. Are all graven images problematic?
4. Do human beings need tangibles in order to worship an invisible God?