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CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

What is Modern-Day Idolatry? (Lies About Power)



DEVELOPED BY RABBI DEBRA SMITH • BASED ON THE BOOK IN GOOD FAITH: QUESTIONING RELIGION AND ATHEISM BY SCOTT A. SHAY

Welcome to **Critical Conversations**, a five-part curriculum based on the book [In Good Faith: Questioning Religion and Atheism](#) by Scott A. Shay, founder and Board President of Chai Mitzvah. Each topic is designed to spark open and meaningful discussion that will encourage students to think critically. We have found that these discussions work well in both Jewish and multi-faith groups.

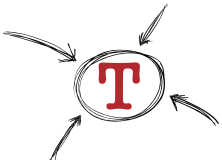
Each text has a corresponding slide in the annotated PowerPoint presentation.



INTRODUCTION:

Monotheism is the concept that there is only one God who is the creator and ultimate power and authority over our world. Monotheists argue that belief in God is the opposite of belief in idols. But what is idolatry and is it even relevant today? Idolatry is not an obvious concept for most of us today, especially if associated exclusively with non-monotheistic cultures.

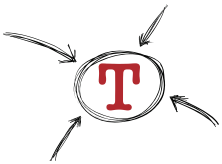
We all have our own beliefs about God. Some of us may believe in God and some of us may not. We're not here to change anyone's opinion or belief, but to enjoy an open discussion and sharing.



TEXT 1: *Scott A. Shay, In Good Faith: Questioning Religion and Atheism*

IDOLATRY deifies or falsely attributes superior and inexplicable powers to finite natural processes, animals, and people. It also bestows the authority – that is, falsely attributes the right to these finite beings to use those powers as they choose, simply because they have them. Idolatry can refer to science, technology, or anything that you elevate to a unique status of power or authority.

Idolatry has always been and continues to be the most divisive and dangerous ideology in the world. It promotes lies about power and relationships in society.



TEXT 2: *Exodus 20:3-6 and Deut. 5:7-10*

You shall not have other gods in My presence. You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness which is in the heavens above, which is on the earth below, or which is in the water beneath the earth. You shall neither prostrate yourself before them nor worship them, for I, your God, am an impassioned God, Who visits the guilt of the fathers upon the sons, upon the third and the fourth generations of those who reject Me, and perform lovingkindness to thousands of generations, to those who love Me and to those who keep My commandments.



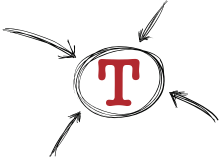
CONVERSATION:

- What practices do you consider idolatrous?
- The Torah says there will be retribution to future generations when parents engage in idolatrous practices. Our sages have limited this concept to cases when children follow in their parents' ways. Are there other ways that the sins of the parents are visited upon their children?



INTRODUCTION:

One of the most common idolatrous practices is glorifying and ascribing excessive power to money, and authority to those who have it.



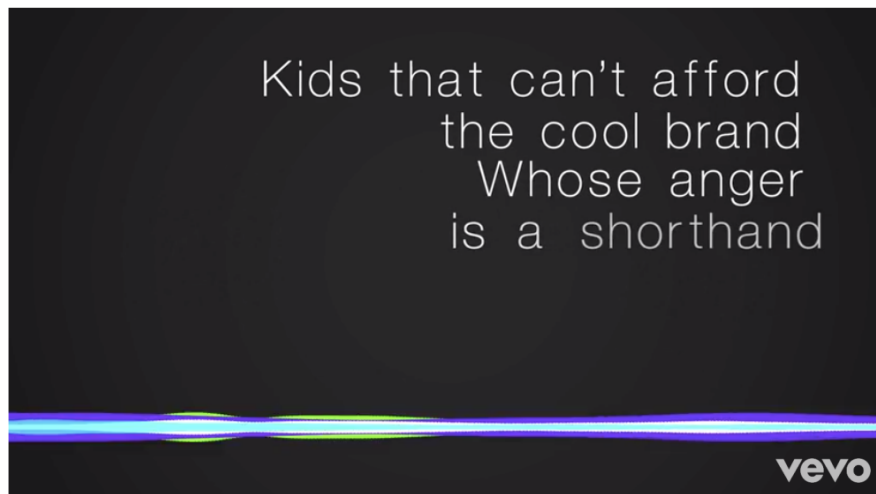
TEXT: *Rav Nachman of Breslov*

When the Messiah is revealed the lust for money will be eliminated. As it is written, "On that day man will throw off his idols of silver and his idols of gold."



CONVERSATION:

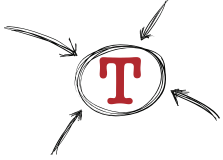
- What priority should money play in our lives?
- Listen to the song [Wristband](#) by Paul Simon. What is the relationship between money and power?





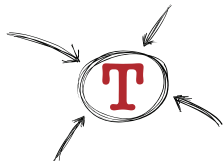
INTRODUCTION:

The Bible initiated a profound political revolution. Whereas idolatry pointed to mythology to justify continued dominance by the elite, the Bible painted a picture of a society where all Israelites became equally bound to an extended covenant with God. There were no exceptions made for kings or priests, blue bloods or VIPs. To emphasize this point, the Bible required every monarch to own a Torah scroll and read from it daily.



TEXT 1: *Scott A. Shay, In Good Faith: Questioning Religion and Atheism*

Unlike the imagined gods that idolatry draws on to justify the subjugation of populations, the one true God expresses power through justice. God demands that we humans follow suit.



TEXT 2: *Psalms 146:2-4*

Put not your trust in princes, or in mortal man who cannot save. His breath departs; he returns to the earth, on that day his plans come to an end. Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob whose hope is in the Lord, His God."



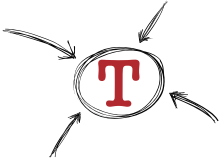
CONVERSATION:

- Think about Slavery, Nazism, Communism, Apartheid... From a historical perspective, what ideologies have leaders used to control and harm their nations and others?
- What makes an idolatrous leader?
- What are the main idolatries of the world today?



INTRODUCTION:

We have explored the concept that God is the strongest power and the highest authority but that does not mean that there are not other powers.



TEXT: *Spiderman*

With great power comes great responsibility.



CONVERSATION:

- How can the attainment of power be kept in balance with the responsibility that comes with it?



Chai Mitzvah was originally created as a way to engage adults in a Jewish journey throughout their lives. **Chai Mitzvah** teen program materials provide teens, who are in a time of personal discovery, with a way to move forward with their personal Jewish journeys.

It is our hope that **Chai Mitzvah** will serve as a catalyst and ignite deeper Jewish engagement and continued growth.

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