

1

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

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



DEVELOPED BY RABBI DEBRA SMITH & NINA FONDILLER WOLDIN
WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM SISTER ELEANOR FRANCIS AND DR. SHABIHA SHEIKH
BASED ON THE BOOK IN GOOD FAITH: QUESTIONING RELIGION AND ATHEISM BY SCOTT A. SHAY

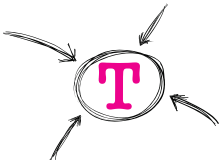
Welcome to **Community Conversations**, a four-part curriculum based on the book [In Good Faith: Questioning Religion and Atheism](#) by Scott A. Shay, founder and Board President of Chai Mitzvah. Each topic is designed to spark open and meaningful discussion that will encourage critical thinking and interfaith community building.



INTRODUCTION:

Monotheism is the concept that there is only one Source of All Life 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.

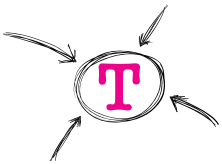
We all have our own beliefs about God. Some of us may believe in God and some of us may not. We're not here to change anyone's opinion or belief, but to enjoy an open discussion and sharing.



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

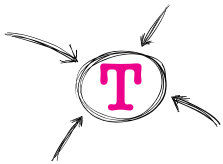
"IDOLATRY deifies or falsely attributes superior and inexplicable powers to finite natural processes, animals, and people. It also bestows the authority – that is, falsely attributes the right to these finite beings to use those powers as they choose, simply because they have them. Idolatry can refer 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."



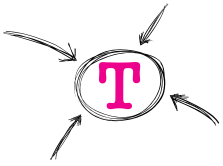
TEXT 2: *Exodus 20:3-6 and Deut. 5:7-10*

"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."



TEXT 3: *1 Corinthians 8:4*

"As to the eating of foods offered to idols, we know that no idol in the world really exists, and that there is no God but one."



TEXT 4: *Dr. Shabiha Sheikh*

“The greatest and gravest sin in Islam is the practice of idolatry, or **shirk* in Arabic, as it goes against the first, and most important pillar of the Islamic faith: the belief in one eternal God, who is indivisible and has no partners, spouses, or offspring. Islam also teaches that God is not in need of any helper. Conversely, idolatry is the belief that God has partners, helpers, rival gods, offspring, or that He is divisible.”



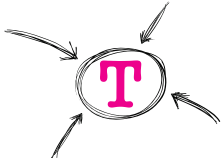
CONVERSATION:

- 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?



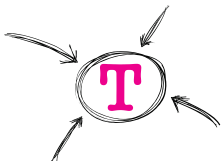
INTRODUCTION:

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



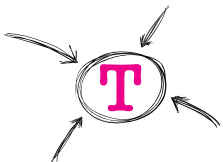
TEXT 1: *Rav Nachman of Breslov*

“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.’”



TEXT 2: *Sister Eleanor Francis (excerpt from a sermon)*

“During the period when cell phones were becoming popular, I was walking down the street one day when I noticed two young women ahead of me, who appeared to be having a conversation with each other. When I looked more closely, I realized that they were not talking to each other at all. Each was having a separate conversation by phone with someone else at a distance. When we give priority to our electronic gadgets over actual people who are with us, I see that as a form of idolatry. When we give undue importance to anything other than God – money, possessions, status, that is a form of idolatry.”



TEXT 3: *Dr. Shabiha Sheikh on Q30:31*

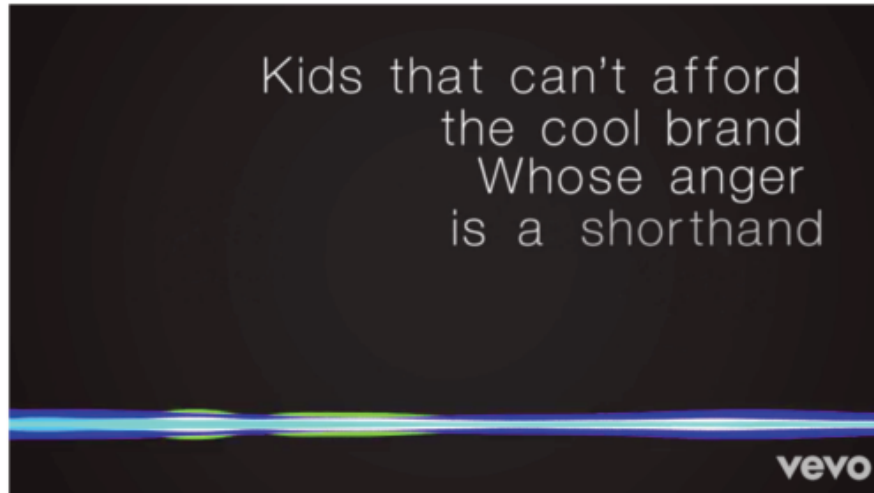
“Praying to and worshiping anything other than God is idolatry in Islam. Committing idolatry without repentance, and dying as one who believes in it is the one unforgivable sin in Islam. We find multiple references to idolatry in the Qur’an and prophetic tradition of Muhammad. We learn that idol worship may come in different forms. We could easily idolize money. Our ego may become an idol. If we give priority to anything over God, and we feel that anything or anybody beside God can benefit or harm us, we fall into idol worship.”

**shirk* refers to idolatry or paganism, which means worship of deity, gods, or anything other than Allah. Islam preaches strict monotheism embedded in the concept of oneness of God.



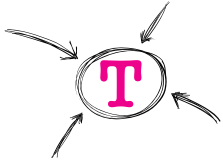
CONVERSATION:

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



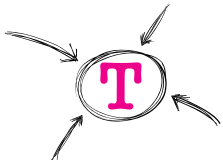
INTRODUCTION:

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.”



TEXT 3: *Scott A. Shay, In Good Faith: Questioning Religion and Atheism*

“Most criminal states of the twentieth century were secular, and they adopted practices common to ancient idolatrous regimes. Tyrants such as Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, and present-day Kim Jong-un not only seized power, eliminated justice, and started wars, but, to varying degrees, they outlawed religion. Yet, like the idolatrous leaders of old, they all had fetishes for building statues of themselves everywhere. Stalin famously ordered the Soviet space agency to project an image of his face into the sky. Kim Jong-un accused his uncle of corruption and, as punishment, claimed to have had him stripped naked and fed to hungry dogs. The Kims fostered the belief that their patriarch, Kim Il-sung, actually had something to do with the creation of the world. This explains the need to erect 40,000 statues in his honor and an additional 3,200 obelisks, which are called Towers of Eternal Life.”



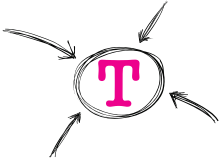
CONVERSATION:

- 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.



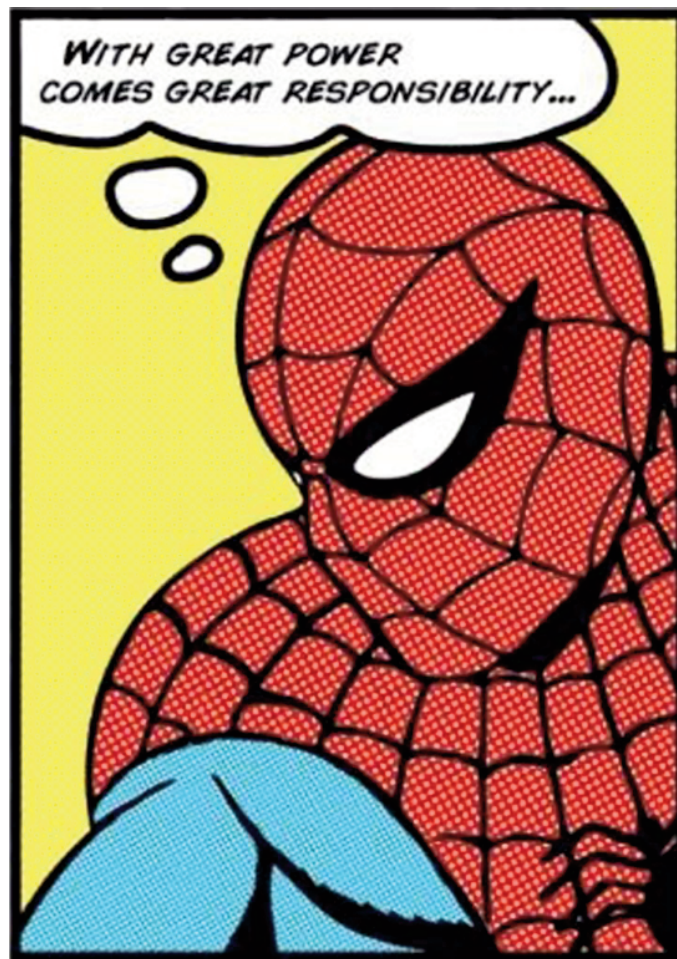
TEXT: *Spiderman*

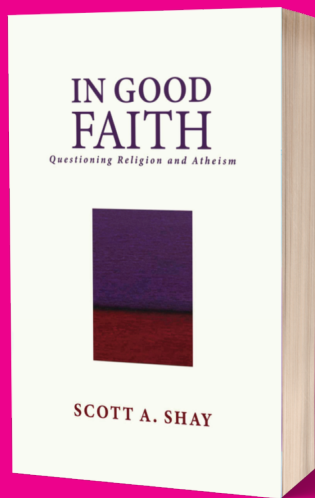
"With great power comes great responsibility."



CONVERSATION:

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





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Chai Mitzvah is an unaffiliated, non-profit independent 501(c)3 corporation, funded through donations and grants. Chai Mitzvah's mission is to serve as a resource center to foster deeper Jewish engagement and community building and to encourage dialogue and understanding among faith communities.

Please visit our website, www.chaimitzvah.org, to view all the resources that Chai Mitzvah provides.

