



SERMON T'RUMAH:ⁱ CHERUBIM, CHERUBOM

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 17 February 2024
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

1 In 1846, a wealthy Hindu merchant named Mutty Lal Mullick died in Calcutta.ⁱⁱ He left everything he owned, along with three Hindu idolsⁱⁱⁱ he had consecrated, to his wife Ranganmoni. When she died, it all passed to her son Jadulal, who spent a vast sum of money constructing a thakurbari – a domestic temple building – for the idols, in the centre of his estate. When Jadulal died, it all passed to his three sons.

2 Tending a Hindu idol is a complicated business. It requires clothing and washing, and food and drink must be left for it at regular intervals. The three brothers were instructed to take turns, for one year each on rotation, at being the idol's shebait, or guardian. That worked well enough for the eldest and youngest, who both lived on the same site as the thakurbari, but the middle son lived about a mile away, so the arrangement was less convenient for him. He decided to move the idols to his house during his year. His brothers objected strongly.

3 The dispute ended up in court, and, this being the heyday of the British Empire, the appeal process eventually reached the Privy Council in London. And Lord Shaw of Dunfermline, a Scottish judge, delivered a quite extraordinary verdict:

A Hindu idol is [recognised as a person in law]. It has a ... status with the power of suing and being sued. [...So in a case like this] the will of the idol in regard to [its] location must be respected [...I]t has to be pointed out that the idol [has not been] represented in the[se] proceedings, though the result might conceivably vitally affect its interests ... Their Lordships are

ⁱ Exodus 25:1-16

ⁱⁱ *Mullick v Mullick* (1925) LR 52 Ind App 245

ⁱⁱⁱ Although the word 'idol' may seem judgemental, I am going to use it here as it is the word used in the contemporary documentation (including documents prepared by Mutty Lal Mullick himself).

accordingly of opinion that it would be in the interests of all concerned that the idol should [be represented by a barrister].

Well, that was unexpected. As Seymour Vesey-FitzGerald, a law professor at the time, said: “[T]he spectacle of [a bench of British judges] professing its official ... belief in the personality of an idol is one which cannot often have been paralleled.”^{iv} And he raised an important question:^v

[I]f the idol is God, if it is even a vehicle for the grace of God, then surely we are paying Divinity a very poor compliment in supposing that it needs the aid of the Privy Council or of a human [barrister] to protect its rights.

4 It’s actually a question which seemed to confuse the ancient Israelites. In our haftarah portion this morning,^{vi} we read the story of the Philistines bringing back the Ark of the Covenant. According to the rabbis, when the Philistines wheeled it into Jerusalem – along with the golden haemorrhoids, but we won’t go too deeply into that – the Israelites shouted at the returning Ark: “*Who angered you [so much] that you didn’t save yourself from being captured?*”^{vii}

5 In other words, they seemed to have been expecting the Ark to mount some sort of supernatural, *Indiana Jones*-style defensive ploy, instead of allowing itself to be taken away by the Philistines as passively as if it were, erm, an inanimate golden cabinet.

6 Of course, the obvious difference between the Ark and a Hindu idol is that the Ark is not supposed to be God. It really is an inanimate golden cabinet. Yet, at the same time, we have to admit that we do idolise certain Jewish artefacts in strange ways. We’re told that the Philistines, when first they seized the Ark, paraded it around Jerusalem, pointing at the figures of cherubim on top of it and sneering: “*Here is proof that the Israelites worship idols!*”^{viii} And they had a point. Muslims wouldn’t be caught dead with depictions of anything at all, let alone heavenly angels. Yet the Israelites adorned their most sacred object with such things.

^{iv} S G Vesey-FitzGerald, “Idolon fori” (1925) 41 LQR 419

^v Ibid: 420.

^{vi} 1 Samuel 6:1-15

^{vii} Rashi to b.Sotah 35b, sv ‘Man am-r’yach’

^{viii} Somewhat adapted from Pesikta d’Rav Kahana 19:1



7 However, my teacher Professor Melissa Raphael makes a strong case to argue that the statues of cherubim are not idolatrous: they “*metonymic representations of God [which] cannot become substitutes for God but are associated with God*” in the same way that “*cloud [and] fire ... do not presume to resemble God [but] are ... legitimate representations of Divine presence*”.^{ix} Just as the crowned letters ‘CR’ symbolise the King without actually depicting him, so too Jewish artefacts symbolise God without purporting to be actual images of the Almighty.

8 But there’s another important difference as well, and that is the difference between worship and affection. The ancient Israelites did not worship the cherubim. They simply had feelings for them and were sad when they were taken away. Similarly, those whose custom it is to kiss the Torah scroll when it comes round are not worshipping the Torah scroll; instead, they are inheritors of a tradition that shul-goers should kiss all those who are more learned than them.^x

9 In fact, Professor Raphael argues that the Jewish people themselves – ourselves – are a metonymic image of God in the same way as the cherubim. We are associated with God. We symbolise God. Yet we are:^{xi}

[A] non-idolatrous image because [we are] not static [...but] living, moving, volitional [and] can never be seen in [our] entirety but only from an infinite number of perspectives and moments.

We ourselves are volitional, but it’s also not unreasonable to imagine the Ark – an undoubtedly static image – as being volitional as well. Why didn’t it save itself from the Philistines? It’s frustrating when we pour our emotions into something and then it seemingly betrays us!

10 Our relationship with God runs through holy objects. We have no direct, communicative relationship: we pray, but are not answered in words. So our connection with the Divine is mediated by the objects we encounter in a Jewish context. Our deep affection for

^{ix} Melissa Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image: a Jewish theology of art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009): 48.

^x Rashi to b.Avodah Zarah 17a, sv ‘Avi y’dai-hu’

^{xi} Raphael, *ibid*: 153.



them will undoubtedly lead us to treat them with a certain reverence, and there is nothing wrong with that.

11 In fact, the same may well be true of Hinduism. Even though Hindu idols are supposedly depictions of gods, there is also an undercurrent of understanding that – firstly – the objects themselves are not gods, and – secondly – even that which they represent may not literally be a god but simply a representation of something which denotes spiritual attainment.^{xii}

12 So no wonder two of Jadual Mullick’s sons wanted their idols kept respectfully, rather than being dragged through the streets twice every three years. And no wonder we stand for the scroll. Some of us might also feel a tear coming to the eye when viewing a beautiful sunset or a rainbow, or hearing a child speak their first word. All of these are manifestations of the Divine, all of them enable us to build a connection with our lives’ spiritual dimension, and as such all are, in their own way, holy – except for the golden haemorrhoids, of course.

^{xii} See eg Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, other god: Judaism, Hinduism and the problem fo idolatry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 157ff.

