

## Re'eh 5775

If you go online it is easy to find any number of mugs, T shirts or bumper stickers celebrating non-traditional identities. Among them are proud, and sometimes funny, sayings about paganism. Among those I found this week: “Thank God for pagan rituals,” “You pray, I dance naked in the forest,” and “Put the drunken pagan debauchery back into Christmas.”

One of the Torah's most consistent features is its abhorrence of paganism. On numerous occasions the Torah makes clear that pagans and pagan rituals are not to be tolerated, and here in parshat Re'eh it details how to deal with those within the community who take on idolatrous practices. The Torah's ultimate victory over pagan religion in western civilization is so total that we have a hard time even understanding what paganism is and why the Torah goes to such lengths to prohibit it.

The Torah's problem with paganism is that it lacks a moral center. Paganism is based on the worship of the natural world and on the attempt to manipulate the world by appeasing the fickle gods of nature. If you want rain, make a sacrifice to the god of rain. If it doesn't work, do it again and again until it does. The Torah has a different set of assumptions and therefore a different mindset about our place in the world. While Judaism recognizes nature's beauty, the meaning it ascribes to that beauty is that it is evidence of God's hand in creation. God created the world and placed us in it to perfect that world through a set of moral commands. If we desire rain, the Torah says, pray to the God who makes it rain, and behave righteously toward God and people; then your needs will be met. Where pagans see nature's power, Jews see God's power; where pagans praise the sun, the river and the trees, Jews praise the God who created them, and promise to live the moral life which God demands.

By infusing life with a moral purpose, the Torah makes a claim that remains at the center of our lives, despite the almost total absence of pagans. Modern pagans may not bow down to the sun, river or trees, but placing the pursuit of power, beauty or money at the center of their lives, instead of the moral demands of God, they tread the same paths as their ancient predecessors. Yes, there is a bit of the pagan in each of us, to the extent that we allow ourselves to forget the ethical dimension of our lives in favor of our daily pursuit of getting by, keeping up or getting ahead. To the extent that we ignore or deny a moral dimension in life, we dabble in the pagan.

The difficulty that the Torah faces is that the pagan is not always apparent. Parshat Re'eh warns against the secret idolator who prays to false idols in private. It seems that even those who do and say all the right things before others are still suspect when it comes to their inmost thoughts and beliefs, which are impossible to police. That is also a warning to us: We have to be vigilant with ourselves, constantly recommitting ourselves to a life focused on righteous behavior, on helping other people, of repairing the world's imperfections, over and above the struggle to make a living, not because these are nice things to do, but because they are the will of the God who demands we live by a moral code. The danger in our time is not the lure of pagan worship - sacrificing to the gods of the sun or river - but the threat of pagan thoughts. When we focus exclusively on the superficial, the financial, on manipulating the system to best benefit ourselves, yet forget to be kind, or grateful, or compassionate, we are letting our inner pagan overcome the monotheism which is Judaism's greatest gift to the world.

As an example, I sometimes fear that the modern Jewish emphasis on bar/bat mitzvah is an essentially pagan exercise. At a time when there is little or no expectation of most American Jews observing Jewish law, the meaning of the day when our children are recognized as b'nei

mitzvah, as beholden to Jewish law, is easily lost. How many of our students reach the age of obligation to Jewish practices without ever taking on those obligations? In their place remains only the scaffolding of ritual on which should rest commitment to the community, to ongoing learning and ritual practice, to prayer, to advocacy for the poor and the mistreated in our society. We derive those values from the commanding presence of a loving God. When bar/bat mitzvah is a celebration of those things, and leads to more of them, then it exactly symbolizes our continuing devotion to that God. When it is not, it is tinged with the idolatrous. Reaching Jewish adulthood means seeing ourselves as having responsibilities to other people and to God; it is the rejection of the pagan's superficiality, their desire to root all of life in working the system, in favor of depth of feeling and engagement with the world.

I invite your responses. What are some modern examples of pagan thought and behavior?

When is social or political behavior pagan? [Discussion]

Shabbat shalom