

## THE STATUS OF CHRISTIANITY IN HALACHAH

### IS CHRISTIANITY *AVODAH ZARAH*?

*Meseches Avodah Zarah* opens with various restrictions to a Jew's commercial trading with idolaters prior to their festivals. At that time, the idolater is already focused on the upcoming religious service, and as Rava explains on *Avodah Zarah* 6b, the idolater is likely to pay homage to his deity for any business gains. The Jew will be indirectly causing the idolater to praise the name of his alien god (*Rambam, Peirush HaMishnah*). The subsequent Mishnah cites the opinion of Rabbi Yishmael that three days after the festival are also restricted and Shmuel states that accordingly it is always forbidden to do commerce with idolaters who observe every Sunday as a festival, as three days before and after Sunday covers the whole week (*Avodah Zarah* 6a). In the light of this discussion, *Tosafos* wonders what people rely upon nowadays when they transact business with non-Jews on their holidays (*Tosafos, Avodah Zara* 2a, s.v. *assur*). This question is significant to our subject since it identifies their Christian neighbors with idolaters mentioned in our *sugya*. Rabbeinu Tam offers a solution that the Christians in his day lacked religious devotion and treated all financial gains for their personal pleasure, but that indicates that he held that Christian belief in principle is idolatrous.

### TRINITY PARTNERSHIP

It is therefore surprising to find that Rabbeinu Tam in *Tosafos* (*Sanhedrin* 63b, s.v. *assur*) appears to suggest that even though Christians worship a Trinity (three persons constituting the unity of their god) called *shittuf*, "co-sovereignty", that is not forbidden to them as one of the seven *mitzvos Bnei Noach*. It is important to understand the context within which Rabbeinu Tam's statement was made. The issue being discussed in *Sanhedrin* was if it was permissible to enter into a partnership with a non-Jew, seeing that a dispute at some stage may give rise to the partner being required to swear that he is not liable in connection with a financial claim against him. Since he will inevitably swear in the name of the Trinity, the Jew would be responsible for having caused that utterance. In proscribing the worship of foreign gods, the Noahide Code binds gentiles to the acceptance of a monotheistic belief. That concept, however, entails only the rejection of multiple powers, each capable of independent action. The doctrine of *shittuf* involves belief in the Creator of the heaven and the earth, but links a belief in the Creator with a belief in some other entity. However, in accordance with the second of Rambam's Thirteen Principles, Jews are required to have a higher level of belief in Divine Unity. It is not a collective unity and it is not a composite, divisible into its component parts. Thus, although *shittuf* may be permitted under the Noahide Code, it is absolutely forbidden as *avodah zarah* to Jews. This is the opinion of a large number of Acharonim, including the Rema (*Orach Chaim* 156:1).

### ONLY SWEARING IS PERMITTED

However, there are a number of Acharonim who understand *Tosafos* in a different manner. The Noda Bi'Yehudah interprets *Tosafos* as distinguishing between *shittuf* as a professed religion and swearing an oath in the name of the Trinity. He declares the former to be idolatry even under the Noahide Code, forbidden to Jews and gentile alike. A basic definition of *avodah zarah* is the worship as G-d of an entity which is not G-d. Christian worship of Yeshu as part of the trinity must therefore be *avodah zarah*. Swearing in the name of a foreign deity does not constitute an act of worship or adoration but is forbidden by the Biblical prohibition of *פְּרִקְדָּן* you shall not cause (the name of other gods) to be heard (*Shemos* 23:13). That commandment, however, is only addressed to Jews, with the result that gentiles are not forbidden to make such an oath (*Noda BiYehudah, Tinyana, Yoreh De'ah* 148). This view is shared by a number of eminent authorities and some argue that this was the Rema's understanding of *Tosafos* as well.

### RESTORING UNCENSORED TEXTS

Rambam states explicitly that Christian religious service is idolatry (*Rambam, Hilchos Maachalos Asuros* 11:7, *Hilchos Avodas Kochavim* 9:4). It should be noted that the Frankel edition of the Rambam restored the word "*notzri*" in the text which had been changed to "*akum*" by censorship. The practice of censoring Jewish books arose already in the time of the Baalei *Tosafos*. It was a preferred option to have any objectionable words expunged from the text rather than have *sefarim* burnt because of heretical statements against Christianity. Very often it was self-censorship, which meant that printers like Soncino would replace references to *notzrim* with *akum*. Where the censors were appointed by the Inquisition, they were often ignorant baptized Jews – I once saw an old volume of *Talmud Avodah Zarah* where every mention of the words "*avodah zarah*" had been carefully crossed through, including all the page headings. The



Censored copy of Semag dealing with sales to non-Jews

original readings of the Rambam leave us in no doubt that he held Christianity was idol worship for non-Jews as well. The uncensored text of *Avodah Zarah* 6a with Rashi is shown alongside, and Shmuel's reference to Sunday includes the word "notzri" in the Gemara as idolaters and Rashi's uncensored commentary as printed in the Venice 1523 Talmud reads: "Notzri, those who follow in the error of that man (אָתוּ אֵישׁ) who instructed them to make each Sunday a holiday." Rashi clearly understood Shmuel as referring to the Christian Sunday.

## MEIRI'S UNIQUE APPROACH

Unique among all the early authorities is the approach of the Meiri. Even before the Meiri's commentary on our *sugya* was published in more recent years, his comments were cited by *Shitah Mekubetzes*, *Bava Kama* 38a and 113a. The Meiri notes the uncensored text as above but disagrees that "notzri" refers to Christians and declares that the reference is to an ancient people mentioned in *Yirmiyahu* 4:16: נִצְרִים קָאִים מֵאָרֶץ הַפְּרָקָן וַיַּעֲלֵוּ עַל יְהוּדָה קֹזֶלֶם – Besiegers are coming from a distant land; they raise their voice against the cities of Yehudah. Rashi there explains that Notzrim, the besiegers, refers to the Babylonians who besieged Yerushalayim. R' Saadia Gaon and the Radak explain that Notzrim refers to Nebuchad-nezer's soldiers, named after the second half of his name. Interestingly, the *Mesorah Hatorah* catalogues seven different ways of spelling Nebuchadnezer in Tenach. In a version of this *mesorah*, the name is usually split into two words. Meiri suggests that Shmuel is referring to this ancient "Netzer" cult of sun worshipers who called the first day of the week after their sun-god.

A GNOSTIC CULT

We find a similar situation in *Taanis* 27b which relates that the members of the *mishmar* in the Holy Temple would observe a series of fasts but would not fast on Sundays. Rabbi Yochanan explains that Notzrim observe Sunday as a holiday and would take offense if the Jews fasted on it. Rashi understands this as a reference to the Nazarenes, the Christians, but the Meiri again explains that these Notzrim were Babylonians, followers of Nebuchadnezer, who revered the sun and observed Sundays as special days. Academics identify this cult with the gnostic Mandaeism, a religion in the vicinity of Babylonia which celebrated Sunday as their holy day. They regard John the Baptist as their prophet and are also known as Nazorenes, so they are effectively a Christian sect. Meiri's singular understanding of the Christian doctrine is reflected in his statement: they believe in G-d's existence, His unity and power, although they misconceive some points according to our belief (*Beis HaBechirah*, *Gittin* 62a). Nowhere does the Meiri suggest a distinction between idolatry as prohibited to Jews and to non-Jews. The Chasam Sofer, referring to the above-mentioned comment to *Bava Kama* 113a writes: It is a *mitzvah* to erase it for it did not emerge from his holy mouth (*Kovetz Teshuvos Chasam Sofer* 90). Since he repeats his comments in various locations which have since been published, it is likely to have been his considered opinion. However, Rabbi J David Bleich is convinced that Meiri was misled in his understanding about Christian theology, possibly based on being supplied information in a manner that might seem acceptable (Contemporary Halakhic Problems, vol. 7, p.177). Surprisingly, Artscroll adopt this irregular comment as basic interpretation of our *sugya*, despite Rashi saying otherwise, although the Hebrew Artscroll edition concedes to indicate Rashi in a parenthetical reference to the uncensored Venice print.

## **ABARBANEL'S RESOLUTION**

The Abarbanel (in his commentary to *Yirmiyahu* 4:16 and *Mashmia Yeshuah* 4:4) cites the Meiri's explanation but rejects it. He reasons that it is implausible that Nebuchadnezer's followers would be known by the latter half of his name but not the former. He also asks why Yirmiyahu would say that the Babylonians come from a faraway land if Babylon is not so far from Jerusalem. Instead, the Abarbanel explains that Notzrim were the Romans. While a casual reading of Tenach suggests that Yirmiyahu prophesied the destruction of the first Beis HaMikdash, he was, in fact, foretelling the destruction of the second Beis HaMikdash. The Romans – who destroyed the second Beis haMikdash – are prophetically called Notzrim by Yirmiyahu because they were destined to collectively adopt the Christian religion, which is named after Yeshu of Nazareth – a Notzri (Rav Reuven Chaim Klein in his book, G-d versus gods, p.340).

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