

the God of creation and covenant: Whereas, as we saw above, the former prohibits even a moment of Shabbat, the latter actually mandates and regularizes it. If, in serving Pharaoh, the Israelites were stripped of their dignity, in serving God, they will have it affirmed. Moreover, they will be charged with affirming it themselves. God commands them to take their own dignity seriously.

Is Shabbat about affirming that God, and God alone, is God, or is Shabbat a testimony to human dignity and the importance of rest? The biblical answer is that it is both. The Bible sees no contradiction between a day aimed at affirming God as sovereign over the entirety of creation and a day aimed at insisting that everyone, including slaves male and female, is entitled and obligated to rest. (Exodus 20:10) Observing Shabbat is a claim about who the Israelites serve, but also, and crucially, about how the One they serve understands and treats them. Therein lies a key difference between service to God and enslavement to a human pretender: Whereas the latter systematically dehumanizes his subjects, the former values and cherishes them. Work and service come in dignified and degrading versions; the Bible is, in part, about a

journey from the latter toward the former.

It is critical to emphasize that the journey the Israelites take — from one building project to another — transforms them from slaves of an earthly ruler to servants of a Heavenly One. Freedom, as imagined by the book of Exodus, is decidedly not about casting off the burdens of service altogether. In fact, it says a great deal about our secularized society and its often-impoverished conceptions of freedom, that while we often cite the demand that Pharaoh “let my people go!” we omit the *telos* of that call, “that they may serve Me.” Perhaps we should make the point differently: The Torah is passionately concerned with a journey from slavery to freedom, but it imagines freedom in ways that are different from (one is tempted to say antithetical to) the ways freedom is commonly spoken of in contemporary terms, in capitalist, consumerist America. Doing whatever I want whenever I want, is arguably not freedom at all, but enslavement to impulse. The depths of freedom are discovered not in self-assertion but in rare moments of authentic self-transcendence. Authentic freedom, Jewish theology insists, is found in service to something (and Someone) greater than oneself.<sup>2</sup>



Shima | שׁימָה  
S H M A . C O M

<sup>2</sup> It should, though, be noted that we must tread carefully here, because, as Isaiah Berlin famously warned, invocations of positive liberty are a favored tool of totalitarians — and, we ought to add, of religious bullies of all stripes. Once some people presume to know who other people really are deep down, and thus to have greater insight than they into what they truly want, the very real danger of political oppression in the name of “self-mastery” or some purportedly higher freedom emerges in full force. This sobering fact, all too often ignored by religious apologists, points to a crucial line we moderns ought to uphold: Invocations of self-transcendence and of more authentic, deeper, truer selves must rely on persuasion rather than force. We should allow people the freedom to discover what we insist is their true freedom.

## Breaking Idle

RACHEL BRODIE

Here is a definition of *avodah zara* (idolatry): any behavior that needs its own 12-step program.

The pathological dimensions of workaholism are signaled in the word itself: taken from the lexicon of addiction, the word is meant to convey the sense that a normative behavior — in this case, the commitment to one’s job — has tilted into the realm of compulsion. Whatever one’s impetus to work hard; whatever one’s pleasure in feeling that one makes a difference to the project or the world; whatever one’s satisfaction in meeting expectations, completing tasks, and achieving goals — all of this is overtaken by the obsessive urge to be working.

The Torah describes the Israelites’ time in Egypt and their transformation from workers to slaves as a slippery process. Because Pharaoh’s manipulation was deliberate, the slave may not have known exactly when work, *avodah*, became enslavement, *avdut*.

Today, the transition from work to workaholism may also be blurred. Since the

“master” is internal, the manipulation is unconscious. Workaholism generally includes specific consequences to the behavior: deterioration of relationships with family and friends, decreased attention to “outside interests,” and diminished self-care. Self-imposed (though often experienced as involuntary) enslavement to one’s work seems to offer an illusion of some “freedom” from the challenges presented in those other realms.

The dangers of *avdut* — literal or metaphorical enslavement — can be measured in the diminishment of the worker’s body, mind, and soul. The cycle is vicious; the physical toll, the reduced mental space, and the existential angst that fills the limited downtime all serve to reinforce the distorted worldview of the enslaved. When one is confined in a narrow place, *mitzrayim* (the biblical name for Egypt that also means “narrow straits” or “distress”), the tunnel vision that comes from such a severe imbalance of life’s experiences supports the feelings

*continued on next page*

Rachel Brodie is the Chief Jewish Officer of the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco.

of inevitability that accompany all “choices” that are made. The slippery slope where *avodah* becomes *avodah zara* is but a few steps away.

The Hebrew word “*zara*” literally means “foreign” or “strange,” but in the rabbinic idiom, “*avodah zara*” — usually translated as “idol worship” — is shorthand for the beliefs and practices of “the other.” (Any “other,” but in the rabbinic era, this primarily referred to pantheists, polytheists, and early Christians). Biblical caricatures of idolatry aside, we need look no further than initial attempts to serve the God of Israel to uncover the fault line between *avodah* and *zara* in the realm of Israelite worship.

### The object lesson of the golden calf makes clear that anything — even worshiping the God of Israel — can become idolatrous.

The object lesson of the golden calf makes clear that *anything* — even worshiping the God of Israel — can become idolatrous. After Moses (their one tangible link to God) disappears atop the mountain, the Israelites — in their desire to find God’s presence in their midst — concretize their yearnings in the form of the golden calf.

How does the construction of the calf differ from the Israelites’ next great building project — the *mishkan* (the portable sanctuary used during the years of wandering)? Both are attempts to concretize the same abstract concept — to locate God’s presence in their midst. Both make use of *avodat yad*, literally, the work of the hand: artisanship for the purpose of worship. Both provide opportunities for creative expression to function as a spiritual practice. Both seem like communal labors of love. And

yet, only the golden calf was considered *avodah zara*, idolatrous.

Certainly, the creation of the *mishkan* at God’s command, as opposed to the human initiative behind the golden calf predisposed God toward the *mishkan*. But divine initiation is not enough to warrant the distinction. More significantly, the *mishkan* served as a container for the people’s projections without conflating the symbol with its referent, God. And the solid mass of metal that comprised the golden calf could only reflect what those who surrounded it projected onto it, inverting and perverting both the understanding of God and the concept of *avodah* by desiring God to be of service to them. We can easily dismiss as primitive the excessive literalism of locating God in an object (as in the calf) or even in a particular space (as in the *mishkan*). From our perspective, it all seems so obvious — the God of Israel cannot be reduced to any one thing or contained in any one place

Neither can our lives. The workaholic — or anyone who struggles at times with a serious lack of balance in life — may perceive the world as a narrow place affording few choices, offering but a single way to survive amidst an existential emptiness. Just as the physical slavery of the ancient Israelites in Egypt and the individual’s experience of addiction are both described as *avdut*, both the *avodah zara* of idol worshippers and the *avodah zara* of obsession are also analogous. An obsessive focus on people, objects, ideas, ideals, and even deeply held values may lead us into the proverbial tunnel of tunnel vision, where the tunnel becomes a *mishkan* for good intentions that ultimately serve no one. 

## My Body, My Self: Avodah Be’gashmiut

OR N. ROSE

As the High Holy Days approach and I engage in the process of *heshbon ha’nefesh*, soul accounting, among the sources I turn to are the teachings of the Hasidic masters, particularly those of the founders of this great spiritual revival movement. I was introduced to the sermons and stories of these masters as a child, and they continue to nourish and challenge me today.

One of the elements of this popular mystical tradition that I find especially helpful is the focus on spiritual integration. The Hasidic masters insist that we seek to fashion a life of holiness

in which we carefully consider how to serve God, not only in the synagogue or study hall, but also in the marketplace, in the fields, and at home. The Hasidim lived within the framework of traditional halakhah (Jewish law) and sought to extend their religious activities into those areas not included in the already wide-ranging system of mitzvot. The ultimate challenge, as they saw it, was to try and create a continuous connection with God (*devekut*) in all times and places. This spiritual aspiration is based on a theological worldview that stresses the radical immanence of God in all of

Rabbi Or Rose, a member of the *Sh’ma* Advisory Board, is director of the Center for Global Judaism at Hebrew College in Newton Centre, Mass., and co-director of CIRCLE: The Center for Inter-Religious & Communal Leadership Education. He is a contributing editor to *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from Around the Maggid’s Table* (Jewish Lights).