

CHAPTER TEN

Creeping Paganism

For the first few centuries after creation, the human race flourished. The population of the world grew exponentially, but it was still very small and concentrated in Mesopotamia, the land between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Life was uncomplicated. There was not much competition for food and resources. Disease was unknown. Longevity was common. The world recognized the Creator and worshipped Him.

About seven hundred years after the creation of the world, however, things began to change. The leading figure of that time was Enosh. He convened a council of the elders to consider what must have been an important issue in society. According to the Rambam, this council made an exceedingly grave error that had a profound effect on the world for thousands of years and continues until this very day.

The people of that time were familiar with the movements of the heavenly bodies, and they believed these heavenly bodies controlled the forces of nature on the earth. They understood that God was too high to manage the crops and the rain and the winds directly. He had undoubtedly relegated the control and power to the sun, the moon and the constellations

of the Zodiac and to the angels in Heaven. They were His royal ministers.

It made sense, they said, to worship God by worshipping His royal ministers. When they would pay homage to the heavenly bodies, they would by extension be honoring the Creator. In fact, after much discussion, they decided that this was exactly what God expected of them. The decision was made, and the council decreed that this was the form in which God should be worshipped. And so they built temples and brought sacrifices to the sun and the moon and the stars, and they prayed to them to fulfill their duties well, confident that by doing so they were fulfilling the will of God.

It was not long before false prophets assured them that they had made the right decision. God had spoken to them, they claimed, and He had expressed His satisfaction with the new modes of worship. These prophets proceeded to establish themselves as the conduit between God and the terrestrial population. The people were still under the impression that they were worshipping God in the way He wanted to be worshipped, but the class of false prophets was growing and becoming more powerful. Most probably, they were profiting in all sorts of ways from their supposed special connection to God, but they had still not told the people to turn their backs on Him.

The prophets gave the people increasingly elaborate instructions about which stars to worship and which particular rituals to perform for which particular star or angel. They taught the people how to make idols that would represent the stars. A class of charlatan priests arose to guide the people in their worship, to show them how to achieve financial success or find mates and have children. Everyone was making profit, the prophets, the priests, the craftsmen, the merchants that served the temples. The idols and the temples that housed them proliferated. They were everywhere.

Little by little, a new class of false prophets arose. They did not claim

that God had spoken with them. They claimed that they were in direct communication with the stars themselves. The stars knew what they wanted, and they were communicating their preferences to the people through their trusted prophets. The people completely forgot about the Creator. They no longer had Him in mind when they worshipped in the pagan temples. Eventually, even the intelligentsia, the prophets, the priests and the leaders of society, came to believe in their own ideology. The generations that grew up in this pagan world knew nothing but the idols and the stars and the pagan temples.

This is the story of the birth of paganism according to the Rambam. He concludes with the following statement, “In the fullness of time, the honorable and holy Name was forgotten by all of civilization ... and only a few individuals in the world, such as Chanoch, Mesushelach, Noach, Shem and Ever, still knew the Creator of the universe.”

Many questions come to mind, but first let us consider the concluding statement of the Rambam. Through his long narrative, the Rambam talks about recognizing God, remembering God, worshipping God and so forth, but at the end, He speaks about the honorable and holy Name that was forgotten. And then He again goes back to talking about God rather than His Name. What is the message he is trying to convey?

Now, let us consider the story itself. What motivated the council of ancient elders to propose this novel method of worshipping God by worshipping His royal ministers? Did they really think a king would be content to have his subjects honor his royal ministers instead of him? He might like it when people honor his ministers, but would he agree to be replaced by his ministers as an object of worship and admiration? Would he be content that the gratitude of the people be directed to his ministers and not to him? Probably not. Why then would they think God would find this

new mode of worship acceptable? Moreover, why would they think God actually preferred to be worshipped indirectly through His royal ministers rather than directly? And finally, why did the intelligentsia eventually come to believe in their own fabrication?

The Rambam in the *Guide* points us to the answers.

People often have mistaken ideas. For instance, someone may think that an elephant is deaf. That is an incorrect opinion about an elephant. But the Rambam makes a distinction. If a person thinks an elephant has one leg, three wings, a face and form like a man, that it speaks like a man, that it sometimes flies through the air and sometimes swims like a fish, it cannot be said that he has described the elephant incorrectly. The animal he described is a mythical creation of his own imagination. It is not an elephant.¹

So, what do we know about God that is correct? Does He have a body? No. Is He alive? We know that He is, but we don't know what that means. His life has no resemblance to ours. Is He wise? Of course, but His intellect is not like ours multiplied to the nth degree. It is something else, and we have no way of understanding what it is. Does He feel anger? Not in the human sense. When we say God is angry we mean that He does what a human would do if he were overcome by the emotion of anger. So, what do we really know?

The Rambam gives an illustration. A person is told that something called a ship exists, but he knows nothing about it. A second person is told what the first person was told, but he is also given another piece of information. He is told that a ship is not a feature of some other thing. A third is given even more information. He is told that a ship is not a mineral.

¹ *Guide for the Perplexed*, Part I, Chapter 60.

A fourth is told that a ship doesn't grow from the ground. A fifth is told that a ship isn't assembled by nature. A sixth is told that a ship isn't a flat disk. A seventh is told that a ship isn't a sphere. An eighth is told that a ship isn't conical. A ninth is told that a ship isn't a cube. A tenth is told that a ship isn't solid.

This tenth person, in possession of everything his predecessors have learned, has arrived at a certain notion of a ship. He has more knowledge about a ship than any of his predecessors, but he still has no idea of what it is. He only knows what it is not.

All we can really know about God is what He is not. We do not understand His existence, but we know that He is not non-existent. We cannot understand His life, but we know He is not dead. We cannot understand His wisdom, but we know He is not ignorant.

If we think of God in any other way, we are thinking about something that bears no relation to Him. Even to think of Him as a Supreme Being is problematic, because is He really a being in the sense that we understand the word? A being has contours, a shape, but God has no contours or limitations, not physical nor spiritual. God is existence. *Ein od milvado*. Nothing exists outside of God. It is very difficult to get your head around these concepts.

The ancient elders, I believe, found it difficult to relate to an unknowable God. Even if they themselves could worship an unknowable God, they certainly thought that the growing numbers of ordinary people who were not theologians, philosophers or scholars, would have no way of relating to God. It required too much sophistication.

Judaism allows us to worship God, even if we do not have a real concept of Him. By performing His mitzvos and learning His Torah, we are able to develop a strong connection with Him and to pray to Him even

though we have no concept of what He is. In later antiquity, Christianity was successful by offering people a relatable form of God.

In deep antiquity, however, the people wanted to pray to God and serve Him, but they couldn't relate to Him at all. Therefore, the elders surmised that God didn't expect them to interact with Him directly. He wanted people to interact with His ministers. So, they built temples to the stars, convinced they were doing God's will. But it was a slippery slope, and the world did indeed slip into the dark abyss of paganism, and they forgot about God.

Of the ten people that had information about ships, nine of them had negative information. They knew what a ship was not. Only the first one had positive information. He knew it was called a ship. He knew its name. Even though the people knew nothing about God, they knew His Name, but as they slipped into the dark abyss of paganism, even "the honorable and holy Name was forgotten by all of civilization."