

For Harold Kasimow—  
A great soul whose life is a testimony to the God of life  
And a resistance of the idolatry of death.



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# Preface and Acknowledgements

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I am delighted to present to thinkers, educators, and the educated Jewish public the latest, and final, installment in a series of publications in the area of Jewish theology of religions. Articulating a present-day view of other faiths is a theological-educational, as well as social-political, need. I give thanks to God for having contributed to this area of reflection through several publications. Some of these feature my voice as author; in others, my role has been that of convener of a conversation, to which a broad range of Jewish scholars and thinkers have contributed. The present volume, dedicated to the subject of idolatry and to its contemporary theological-religious relevance, expresses recognition of the group process in its subtitle: “A Contemporary Jewish Conversation.”

This conversation follows on from several other projects. The first book that set the stage for later projects was the 2012 *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, co-edited with Eugene Korn and published by the Littman Library. My introductory essay in that publication identified several key issues that a Jewish theology of religions must tackle. Subsequent volumes each focused on one of those issues. Littman Library published in 2020 *Religious Truth: Towards a Jewish Theology of Religions*, dedicated to one of the issues identified. Academic Studies Press published, also in 2020, *Judaism’s Challenge: Election, Divine Love, and Human Enmity*. That collection reflected on how Jewish belief in election may be reconceived, as part of a statement or restatement of this dimension of Jewish belief, considered while maintaining awareness of the broader horizons of Jewish relations with other faiths.

The present volume completes the series by focusing on the question of idolatry and its contemporary meaning. This, I believe, is the most important and most challenging conversation. Idolatry is the primary lens through which Judaism sees other religions and is therefore the most challenging topic to consider, in theological and contemporary terms. The question this volume tackles is not whether other religion(s) should be viewed as *avodah zarah*, but rather what *avodah zarah* or “idolatry” means for us today as a theological, moral, and educational category.

There are two particularities to this project, compared to the others referred to above. All the other projects grew out of team projects that had an in-person component. A conference or one or more in-person meetings served as foundation for each of those volumes. This also defined, and to a certain extent limited, the choice of authors for each project. The present volume was carried out using a different methodology. A call for papers was issued and disseminated broadly, and the authors featured here responded to it.

This approach is related to the more prominent role I had in this volume, compared to the previous volumes. In addition to serving as editor, which involved engaging authors in conversations, leading to multiple iterations of almost all the papers, I was also responsible for the conceptual framing of the volume. This project is largely shaped as a follow-up to a volume on idolatry that I published in 2015: *Same God, Other god: Judaism, Hinduism and the Problem of Idolatry* (Palgrave Macmillan). That volume reviewed strategies for viewing other religions in light of the category of *avodah zarah*, and in the process opened up this very category to novel examination. That novel examination lies at the core of the present volume. Having pointed to the challenges, limitations, and need to rethink the category in *Same God, Other god*, I invited scholars and thinkers to reflect on what “idolatry” or *avodah zarah* should mean for us today. This took the form of a concept note, shared with project participants. The concept note summarized some of the key findings of *Same God, Other god*, and set the stage for revisiting the concept.

The present volume opens with the original concept note, which summarizes some of the theses of *Same God, Other god*, and which serve as background to the present project. My overview of the present project and the answers it offers to the question of what is idolatry today follows. It identifies the most important moves made by our authors, and therefore provides the overall orientation for grasping the project’s import. This is then followed by Essays by participants follow, grouped into subsections, in light of their specific emphases. Some authors’ work is relevant to more than one of the sections of the book, and I had to make a decision relating to the optimal, but by no means exhaustive, classification. The volume concludes with methodological reflections, where I look at some of the processes and dynamics of the book and reflect on the discourse that is featured in it.

Looking at the book as a whole, I am greatly satisfied with the outcome. After several years of working with the authors individually on their essays, while I was engaged in other projects, I only saw the project in its entirety when preparing the volume for publication. A review of the project as a whole made me realize just how significant its outcomes are. There is much research, knowledge,

and reflection in these pages. There are significant and original insights throughout. But above all, the project as a whole injects new life into the discussion of idolatry, making it far more relevant as a theological concept with more consequences for our everyday life than the typical application of the category to designate the status of other religions. This, to me, is a major theological achievement, and one that could only be attained by means of group effort. It is, in fact, a way of validating the procedure of convening broader conversations on theological matters. The significant distance and advances that the present project makes in relation to *Same God, Other god* point to the importance and benefits of broader conversations on theological issues. As Paul Mendes-Flohr affirms in his essay in this volume, Talmud Torah is a communal process. I would add that theologizing as a whole is a communal process.

Recognizing that this work is a group process leads me to thank all those who have made it possible. First and foremost, I express my gratitude, friendship, and profound partnership with all contributors to the volume. Only they know how much they have had to put into their essays and what a “difficult” project leader I have been. It has been a privilege for me to have the trust and collaboration of so many important thinkers and scholars, who have allowed me to collaborate with them, even as they collaborated with the project. To all of them, thank you.

Thanks go also to the team at Academic Studies Press. I begin with Kira Nemirovsky, whose communication skills and emotional intelligence have turned many dreary moments of book production into lovely moments of human encounter and friendship. I repeat my gratitude to Gregg Stern and Alessandra Anzani for recognizing the value of these conversations and signing me on to the press. Matthew Charlton has been dependable in driving things forward, as has Kate Yanduganova. A final word of thanks goes to Ivan Grave for the fantastic graphics of the cover.

In conclusion, what do I wish for this book and for the entire series of group conversations? My prayer is that not only is this, and the other volumes, well received by readers, but also that this book and its sister volumes serve to enliven a present-day conversation on matters of Jewish theology, in and of itself and as it relates to other faiths. The issues discussed go to the heart of our faith. May that heart be expanded by means of these conversations.





## INTRODUCTION

# I Understanding Idolatry: An Invitation to a Contemporary Conversation

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Alon Goshen-Gottstein

Rabbi Johanan teaches that whoever rejects idolatry is a Jew (BT *Megila* 13a). Indeed, for Maimonides, the foundational reason for the commandments is the rejection of idolatry. The prominence of the prohibition on worshipping other gods in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:3) provides biblical foundation for the idea that such worship (idolatry, in other words) is a key tenet of Judaism. Indeed, the rabbis consider *avodah zarah* (idolatry) to be one of the three sins from which one should refrain, even at the cost of one's life.

We take the importance of idolatry, *avodah zarah*, for granted. Yet, it is in fact one of the least considered commandments in contemporary thought and education. On the whole, the category serves as a means of rejecting and invalidating other religions and their adherents. Because it functions mainly as a means of excluding others, the attention paid to its significance within, to the reasons for the very prohibition, and to its theoretical and conceptual centrality is minimal. For all its importance in principle, idolatry—quite remarkably—is consigned to secondary place in contemporary religious thought. A number of key sources and rulings are cited time and again. Other religions are pronounced as idolatrous or non-idolatrous, and that is about the extent of the application of the category. Without entering here into the reasons for this situation, the point at hand is that *avodah zarah*, idolatry, is not a significant, generative, creative category that either lends meaning to our religious life or allows us to better grasp Judaism's uniqueness. To a large extent, idolatry has become frozen in a series of rulings and attitudes towards other religions, and for the most part plays no significant role in religious thinking and imagination. For all the

theoretical significance attached to it, it is one of Judaism's most inactive theoretical categories.

My own work on idolatry, or *avodah zarah*, grew out of the context of evaluating other religions from a Jewish, primarily halakhic, perspective. In 2015 Palgrave Macmillan published my *Same God, Other god: Judaism, Hinduism, and the Problem of Idolatry*. The book sought to achieve two goals. These were to both evaluate Hinduism in light of *avodah zarah* and, at the same time, to rethink *avodah zarah* in light of a new contemporary dialogue partner—Hinduism. This work was the subject of a discussion panel at the 2017 World Congress of Jewish Studies. Gregg Stern, who attended the session on behalf of Academic Studies Press, suggested doing a volume based on those discussions and, more broadly, on the vital issues raised by my work and by the panel. The result is the present project.

While *Idolatry: A Contemporary Jewish Conversation* has developed out of my earlier work, it has a different and distinct focus. I concluded the body of the discussion of idolatry in *Same God, Other god* with the following statement:

The common approach to *Avoda Zara* sees it as something cut and dry, easy to define, demanding unequivocal response. For such a view, *Avoda Zara* is not much of a challenge. Once it is defined, it simply has to be avoided. Once it is avoided, it is out of sight and out of mind, no longer challenging the religious system in any meaningful way. The proposed calculus leads to a dynamic view of *Avoda Zara*, where neither practices, nor faith, let alone an entire religion, can be globally defined as *Avoda Zara*. According to the possibility here developed, *Avoda Zara* would apply variously, according to context, need and the spiritual understanding of the performer. This seems to have the disadvantage of confusion and lack of clear categories. But its disadvantage may also be its great advantage. Rather than relegating *Avoda Zara* to the margins of our consciousness and our religious observance, leading us to focus only on the center of our religious life, *Avoda Zara* becomes an ongoing presence. The battle against *Avoda Zara*, both within and without, is a constant one, as we continually seek to improve our spiritual lives. Static definitions of *Avoda Zara* leave us only the option of avoiding it, thereby making it meaningless in our lives, at best an identity marker. An active engagement with *Avoda Zara*, seeking to articulate its meaning, categories, presence and boundaries, makes

*Avoda Zara* into a meaningful category that intersects with other major categories of meaning—intentionality, morality, spirituality, and more. *Avoda Zara* and going beyond it thus help define our spiritual lives internally, orienting them towards the highest ideals. In this way we do greatest justice to this formative category, by engaging it seriously and giving it the recognition and attention it deserves.<sup>1</sup>

This book picks up where the previous one ended. I consider *Same God, Other god* to have provided various options and possibilities for thinking through what *avodah zarah* is. My concern in that work was to develop a more nuanced application of *avodah zarah* with reference to other religions. The challenge and invitation of what *avodah zarah* means to us as Jews, other than a category for evaluating other religions, is where the present project takes forward the work of *Same God, Other god*. That project sought to move beyond a yes/no answer to the question of how another religion is evaluated and to present more nuanced ways of thinking of other religions and of the category of *avodah zarah*. It therefore seems appropriate that in moving forward in a reflection on what idolatry could or should mean to us today we should maintain the nuance and multivocality that informs Jewish thinking on *avodah zarah*, and that I sought to bring to light. Accordingly, the task of thinking through the contemporary meaning of idolatry should be a matter for a broader Jewish conversation, engaging multiple thinkers across the Jewish spectrum, rather than a position, an opinion, let alone a *pesak* issued by one person. This understanding informs the present project that seeks to stimulate a contemporary Jewish conversation on idolatry, thereby revitalizing the category of *avodah zarah* as an important category for Jewish theological reflection, Jewish spirituality, as well as Jewish identity and self-understanding.

Before I move on, a word is in order regarding the apparent confusion of categories. I have thus far used the terms “idolatry” and *avodah zarah* interchangeably. Are they really the same? What if any is the distinction between them? Which of them is the more authentic Jewish expression? I prefer to leave this question unsettled. Naturally, consideration of *avodah zarah* may be more relevant for Jewish theological thinking, inasmuch as it is a native category. However, if we seek to bring life to a discussion, one possible strategy for doing so could be identifying tensions and theoretical opportunities that arise out of

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1 Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other god: Judaism, Hinduism, and the Problem of Idolatry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 203.

the different perspectives that are opened up by the use of different categories. Openness to multiple categories would not be possible were it not for the fact that the term *avodah zarah* itself is also a secondary development, even though it has taken a strong hold in Jewish thinking for two millennia. Still, the Bible does not know this category and speaks of “other gods.” “Other gods” have become “foreign worship” (*avodah zarah*), which in turn has been commonly rendered as the worship of idols in other languages. All of which is to say that we should be thinking of the semantic field covered by these different terms. It is a field that brings together approaches to god, true and false religion, otherness and the attitude to the other. The present volume assumes that all these discussions, to which I refer in shorthand, for the sake of convenience, as “idolatry,” are relevant for Jewish self-understanding and that therefore there is room for fresh reflection and articulation of what they mean for us today. The invitation issued to participants to join this project is an invitation to engage the broader area and its contemporary theological relevance. I hope that the creative tension between the different expressions by means of which we can refer to this field will open up a creative space for reflection and therefore leave it to each individual to frame his or her contribution with reference to idolatry, *avodah zarah*, or other related expressions.

I would like to now offer an initial overview of some of the possibilities of understanding *avodah zarah* that came up in *Same God, Other god* and that could be relevant to the present project.<sup>2</sup> I will consider here, in brief, what these possibilities could mean for an internal understanding of *avodah zarah* and also introduce some additional theoretical possibilities I did not engage in that project. I offer these as conversation starters for contributors to this volume, who may reference some of this material and build on it, though they need not be circumscribed by these suggestions and may prefer to develop entirely different approaches to what idolatry means.

1. Idolatry as the worship of anything other than God. I believe this is the key definition of *avodah zarah*, formulated clearly by Maimonides, and one that can be harmonized with most others, which in turn can be viewed as means of discerning whom one is worshipping. Accordingly, the prohibition of idolatry is a demand for exclusive worship. The demand for exclusive worship makes most sense in a polytheistic or henotheistic theological framework. What does it mean once we declare there is only one God? Moreover,

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2 Another important conceptual resource is Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

what do we mean by worship, and how strictly do we use the term? These two questions could open doors to multiple contemporary applications of the category. There are strategic choices involved. We can pitch worship narrowly (prayer, prostration, ritual acts) and consider the object of worship narrowly (the understanding of some other being as divine). A narrow application will keep the category of *avodah zarah* mostly in the service of evaluating other religions. Or we can apply the terms broadly, in which case serious engagement with certain realities, at the expense of a living relationship with or submission to God, would constitute idolatry. Such broad application could include any form of making something more important, central, value-giving, than God. It could be extended to the state, to ideology, to money, to power—to anything that detracts from the centrality of God as the core of faith and religious life. The difference between narrower and broader application is in part related to whether we remain within the linguistic framework of *avodah zarah*, which favors a narrower application, or speak of idolatry, which may lend itself more readily to broader applications.

2. Idolatry as a fundamental error in relation to God, especially such an error that manifests in wrong worship or intentionality in worship. Maimonides's influential description of the evolution of *avodah zarah*, in *Mishneh Torah*, chapter 1 of the Laws of Idolatry, sees error, even error committed with good intention, as the root of *avodah zarah*.<sup>3</sup> In this view, intention is not key. It is the result, the position that is upheld and the religious life that is practiced as a consequence that count. At various points in Jewish history this approach has been used internally, especially in the context of debates between different and competing schools. Certain practices, like adulation of individuals, are from time to time critiqued as *avodah zarah*. Do we wish to uphold a view of *avodah zarah* that is primarily based on a view of *avodah zarah* as error? Error is the correlate of truth. Are we sure enough of our understanding of truth to ascribe error to another, and if so, within what parameters? What are the broader moral, political, and social implications of emphasizing error as the defining element of idolatry in an age that seeks to overcome divisions, to increase understanding, and to reduce the violent potential of religious difference? How can error as a defining feature of *avodah zarah* be upheld, while containing some of its potential negative consequences? I invite thinkers who are inclined to understand *avodah zarah* in this light to also reflect on these challenges.

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3 See chapter 6 of Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other god*.

3. *Avodah zarah* as a negative and undesired energetic connection. The champion of this possibility is Nachmanides, who considers the possibility of *avodah zarah* as a means of bonding with harmful and destructive forces.<sup>4</sup> This view assumes the reality of good and bad forces, and the possibility for real influence by these forces, for good and for bad. It assumes our thoughts and actions have consequences, upon ourselves and possibly beyond ourselves. It assumes energy as something real, beyond belief, theology, morality, and the ordering of society. It approaches *avodah zarah* with a measure of objectivity, inasmuch as it is the real contact and its consequences that are the concern of *avodah zarah*, rather than false opinion or action. I am curious if this view will find an echo among participants in this project. It is likely that thinkers who are either kabbalistically attuned or who share so-called new-age sensibilities might be drawn to this understanding. According to this approach, we would have to define what in our life today, both inside religion and in life in general, leads us to God and what makes an opening for something that could be described as non-God, possibly even anti-God.
4. Another tack for understanding idolatry is to associate it with morality. This approach is typically associated with Rabbi Menachem Meiri and has many biblical prooftexts that tie the worship of other gods with moral abominations.<sup>5</sup> The moral criterion could replace the theological criterion. It could also be seen as pointing to the identity of the god that is worshipped, thereby ensuring one is worshipping God and not another. Meiri's approach has been applied mainly in the context in which he used it, namely in the view of contemporary religions. What are its implications if we consider what is wrong with idolatry? At what point can this understanding also furnish an internal understanding of idolatry? And how do we distinguish any number of moral transgressions from the qualitative leap that would lead us to consider a given lifestyle as idolatry? It is likely that this view should be combined with other understandings presented here, especially as we seek to make it work within and to have contemporary relevance. Given the central role that Meiri's view has played in modern Jewish views of other religions, there is room to continue developing the moral criterion as the defining feature of idolatry and to ask about its broader implications for Jewish life, understanding, and spirituality.
5. *Avodah zarah* and affirmation of identity. *Avodah zarah* and its application certainly function as a means of affirming Jewish identity. The strangeness

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4 See chapter 7 of Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other god*.

5 See chapter 10 of Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other god*.

of the other god and the other religion help set “us” apart from “them.” The need for affirming identity and establishing boundaries of otherness are important drivers of the discourse of *avodah zarah* and for the ease, and at times lack of consideration, with which it is applied to other faiths. But perhaps we ought to give more thought to *avodah zarah* as a means of constructing Jewish identity rather than contextualizing or even dismissing this dimension, as we might be inclined to do when *avodah zarah* is viewed purely in relation to other religions. That *avodah zarah* is tied to the relations of self and other comes through very strongly from the halakhic positions that distinguish between how *avodah zarah* applies to Jews and how it applies to non-Jews.<sup>6</sup> According to a central halakhic school, a construct known as *shituf* has been developed, which permits the worship of another being alongside God for non-Jews. Jews alone have the obligation of exclusive, or fully correct and true, worship of God. If so, true worship is deeply tied to the “us” vs. “them” approach. If we uphold this view in relation to others, what does this mean about how we use *avodah zarah* internally. Is there simply a dispensation for non-Jews who are allowed a lower standard in their approach to God or is there something fundamental about the relationship of *avodah zarah* and Jewish identity? Could *avodah zarah* really constitute a means of identity construction? If so, what would this mean for how we apply it internally? Happily, this category has not figured (yet) in contemporary debates between different streams of Judaism, though the potential to do so seems embedded there. Should the close nexus between identity construction and idolatry be upheld, limited, controlled or perhaps deepened, justified, and made a foundation of a contemporary view of *avodah zarah*?

6. Spiritual understanding of *avodah zarah*. Perhaps because of the centrality of the category, or because Judaism for hundreds of years has not had to face out-and-out idolatry (even if some religions were labelled *avodah zarah*), and perhaps for other reasons—there is a history of spiritual application of the category. Spiritual applications are aimed mainly at the individual, apply less to the community, and are rarely if ever applied to another religion.<sup>7</sup> If we seek to keep the category of *avodah zarah* alive and for it to proffer meaning

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6 See chapters 8 and 9 of Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other god*.

7 The following possibility for a study arises. Can we identify a relationship between spiritual understandings and halakhic views? Are they more predominant in Muslim countries, where the challenge of the religious other as idolatry is lower? Do authors who apply the term spiritually also take up halakhic positions that would reduce the scepter of *avodah zarah* from other religions?



on our lives, then a spiritual view of this category is an important approach. There are two primary spiritual understandings that come to mind. Both of them hark back to the understanding of idolatry as an alternative to God.

- A. The first views ego, vanity, and the human person holding himself in high esteem, at the expense of proper appreciation of God and man's position before God, as idolatry. There are biblical precedents for such an understanding (Isa. 2:7–22), but the idea was most fully developed in Hasidic thought.<sup>8</sup> This view draws on the very real experience of the human person and the human ego being the greatest obstacles to knowledge of God and to having a relationship with Him. The spiritual testimony, I submit, is universally valid and applies today as it did ever. Is it sufficient for developing a contemporary notion of idolatry?
  - B. The second view considers money and attachment to it and to material wealth in terms of idolatry. Once again, biblical precedent is amplified in later pietistic literature. And once again, this idea has enormous appeal in an age of globalization, materialism, and consumerism. How can this understanding be put in service of contemporary moral and spiritual needs? Can it exhaust the meaning of idolatry, or must this emerge from the association of this application of idolatry with other ideas, presented above?
7. Political understandings of idolatry. The roots of association of the political with the idolatrous go back to the Ancient Near East where kings of neighboring states and cultures were considered divine and came under prophetic critique. Rabbinic opposition to Roman emperor worship similarly points to the nexus of idolatry, power and politics. If our starting definition is the worship of anything other than God, then contemporary political applications could grow out of historical objections to when power becomes more central than God. Anti-Zionist critique of the State of Israel resorts to such rhetoric. Are these precedents sufficient for developing a contemporary political understanding of idolatry? Does it need to be related to other understandings spelled out above, to give it greater depth and credibility?
  8. Some other possibilities came up in the discussion in *Same God, Other god*, and I will mention them in passing. One suggestion saw fixity of ideas and the thought that we can attain knowledge in any stable and final way as an idolatrous approach to religion.<sup>9</sup> Another notion that came up considered

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8 See Zipi Koifman, "Avoda Zara in Hasidic Thought," *Akdamos* 19 (2007): 65–86 [Hebrew].

9 See in particular the discussion with reference to Herzl Hefter's work in Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other god*, 178 ff.



mental boundaries and limits, whether placed on God or informing one's negative and at times violent view of the other, as forms of idolatry. I leave the elaboration of such possibilities for contributors who are inclined to this line of thinking.

I would like to conclude with some words on what I see as the invitation to the writers. What I have presented above is not meant as the final word and does not seek to be an exhaustive list of understandings of idolatry or *avodah zarah*, even if the list is fairly comprehensive. The list is offered as a way of appreciating the complexity and the scope of possibilities that are already out there. With this broader awareness, authors are invited to state their own understanding of what idolatry is, why it matters, and what it means to our religious thinking today. Put differently, if idolatry is a major dividing point between Jews and non-Jews and, in part, what accounts for Jewish particularity, then we need to understand what we mean by idolatry, why it is problematic, and what it is that Jews avoid when they avoid *avodah zarah*.

Contributors are invited to provide their answers to these questions. The answers should reflect their own theological view, informed as it surely is by their historical research, contextual and theoretical understanding. The more a contributor can not only account for an understanding of idolatry but also relate it to some or most of the possibilities and precedents presented above, the more the position will be grounded in tradition and resound with the authority and credibility for others. It is unlikely that a view of idolatry can be formulated that will affirm all the rich, and at times contradictory, possibilities outlined above. But we can at the very least ask contributors to not only state what idolatry means to them but also how it relates to the history of *avodah zarah* and the Jewish view of other religions.

Perhaps it is not an accident that many thinkers have stopped working with the notion of idolatry. In the process of reaching out to potential contributors for this volume, I had many responses, including by some leading Jewish thinkers, that the category simply does not mean much to them. In addition to the historical reasons alluded to above, there is also a cost for upholding the value of *avodah zarah*. It is a category that comes with a cost; according to tradition it is the cost of life itself. What is the cost we are willing to pay for the use and for maintaining the vitality of the category? The cost may be legal or moral. It may involve willingness to exclude others, perhaps even to uphold violent approaches within tradition to other religions. How do we calculate our understanding of idolatry in relation to the cost it exacts? Do we tailor our understanding of *avodah zarah* in light of the cost we are willing to pay? Does the cost, which in turn touches upon

our moral sensibility, provide the boundaries for upholding and developing the category? Where does a contemporary view of idolatry stand in continuity or in discontinuity with some aspects of a traditional view of idolatry?

If I have succeeded in the task of this introductory invitation, then the prospective contributor and the future reader will have become aware of the complexity associated with idolatry, *avodah zarah*, and the othering of gods and their adherents. This complexity has likely deterred many thinkers from deeper engagement with the category. The present volume seeks to bring together multiple voices of thinkers and scholars who are willing to tackle the challenge. They are willing, it is hoped, to not only state what is their understanding of idolatry but also how it relates to the history of tradition, to other views of idolatry, to contemporary reality, and to the price this category exacts.

The present volume promises to be an exciting moment of communal theological reflection, tackling a fundamental theological category and looking at the difficulties and challenges associated with it. I pray that through this collective effort the category of idolatry will receive some of the attention I believe it deserves and that the fruits of this group exercise will be not only an enrichment of our collective theological resources but also the opportunity for self-conscious spiritual deepening of individuals, as they seek to give meaning and to apply to their lives one of Judaism's most formative and fundamental categories.

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