

# The Puppet Pitfall.®

unorthodox **shul decorum**

*forces of Friendship  
remnants of Idolatry*

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Francis Bacon, the founder of the scientific method, believed that the pursuit of knowledge was blocked by conventional ways of thinking and weaknesses in human nature and perception, *which he attributed to*: “the idols and false notions which are now in possession of the human understanding”.<sup>i</sup>

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# Introduction

Many Jewish Orthodox houses of worship suffer from a chronic disorder referred to here as 'unorthodox shul decorum', more commonly known as inappropriate talking during ritual services. There is no dispute that this disorder exists or that it is wide spread throughout the Orthodox Jewish world. But like many chronic behavioral disorders and the human condition itself, no remedy has yet been discovered and there is a great debate about its cause and origin.

This paper is not an indictment of the talkers, nor is it intended to be a rebuke though justifiable. The concern is that intractable unorthodox shul decorum is symptomatic that practitioners of traditional Judaism have lost their way. To be intellectually honest, one must dare ask:

**Given the power of Torah, why has our collective Torah knowledge been insufficient to rectify this disorder which has inflicted many of our sanctuaries for centuries?**

How can it be we Orthodox Jews, the most traditional Torah observers, are unable to correct our own kind? How can it be so many of us lack respect for our Rabbi who kindly asks for so little more than silence during the ritual service. How can it be so many lack proper reverence for the Torah and the Sanctuary, while the rest sit by tolerating it?

It is no secret people pray about their most troubling personal problems, such as their health, the recovery of their sick loved ones, financial security, the welfare of their children or grandchildren, etc. Inexplicable is the disregard for our fellow congregants who want to pray in silence and hear the Torah reading undisturbed, hoping for insight, holiness, salvation or mercy.

How can Judaism, proud to be the religion of the highest ethical order, sustain such ethical disorder in such large numbers in the modern era? Could this be a sign we are unintentionally worshipping a false G-d as did our ancestors, misunderstood until it was too late? It can't be the Torah is insufficient, G-d forbid. It must be us – something essential to Jewish authenticity is missing. The gap between what is supposed to be Jewish verses what actually occurs in many of our sanctuaries is disappointing to say the least, and deeply unsettling given we believe Judaism is the best humanity has to offer.

The purpose of this article is twofold: 1. at least to raise unorthodox shul decorum to the level of importance it deserves, and 2. to lay the philosophical groundwork needed to understand the nature of chronic unorthodox shul

decorum toward finding a remedy. This article is divided into two sections. The first section titled ***symptoms*** describes the problem in terms of false belief and the forces of friendship. The picture painted in section I is insufficient because it only describes the symptoms of the disorder, not its hidden origin or mechanism.

Section II explains the mechanism of mistaken decisions that cause the talker and his/her accomplices to violate the Halacha of proper shul decorum. Idolatry is used as a working model for understanding the pernicious and enduring nature of this disorder and as a basis for crafting a remedy. Unorthodox shul decorum is not halachic idolatry, however, given the human nature to worship false gods, underlying principles of idolatry help explain the unorthodox decorum found in our orthodox sanctuaries.

## Section I

### *symptoms*

Before we begin to get philosophical, we must first adequately describe the disorder so we know what we are dealing with.

### **The Unorthodox Shul Decorum Disorder**

A Jewish synagogue, temple, shul or *shtieble* are buildings that are constructed primarily for the purpose of religious worship and secondarily for Jewish community activities. There are three categories of activities that occur in most Orthodox Jewish houses of worship: prayer, Torah study and social. The holiest and most frequently attended religious activity each week is the ritual service that occurs on the morning of the Sabbath in a special room called the sanctuary. The sanctuary, G-d's house, is supposed to be the holiest place in the building.

The practice of Judaism is governed by a rich body of spiritual laws; every religious Jew knows this. In the same vein that the physical world is governed by the laws of physics, according to Judaism the human world is governed by Torah laws. Religious Jews believe G-d is the author of the Torah and therefore, Torah law is G-d's law – referred to in Hebrew as 'Halacha', the way. In Judaism, every aspect of human conduct is governed by Halacha including how a congregant must behave inside a sanctuary especially during ritual services.

The Halacha for proper shul decorum dictates that during all ritual services when prayer or Torah readings occur, talking is prohibited. Exceptions are few and are well understood by the vast majority of congregants. The Halacha governing shul decorum is not difficult to understand. Even though Rabbis ensure that the congregants are well informed of the legal prohibitions and exceptions, large numbers of congregants habitually violate the laws for shul decorum by talking

during times of communal prayer (service of the heart) and communal Torah learning (Torah recitation). The noise volume is so severe at times, Rabbis are forced to interrupt the service until the congregants quiet down.

The same talkers would not dare risk disturbing the ambiance of a cultural arts center during the performance of a public concert – surely they wait till the intermission to chat. In order to comply, a congregant must simply sit quietly after they finish praying and during Torah readings, no longer than the duration of a major motion picture. Nevertheless for many congregants, the personal, communal and sacred importance of a religious service elicits no more respect, honor, reverence nor duty than a secular theatrical performance.

A shul talker always has an accomplice, and the couple fits one of two models: 1. the 'peer-peer' model or, 2. the 'client-server' model. Peers are two people who equally share the talking and listening roles. In the 'client-server' model, one is more dominant; one talks or listens more. The listener is the enabler who fuels the flame while gladly watching the talker shoulder all the blame.

The most severe case is the talker who has no allegiance to one listener over another – they swing in all directions. They are happy to be a peer, a client or a server, depending on the inclination of their immediate accomplice.

Everyone else falls into two categories of compliance, those who consider the decorum disorder unorthodox and those who don't. Those who do object to unorthodox shul decorum, tolerate the problem in resignation. Those who don't object, consider the behavior normal, acceptable and consistent with Jewish nature, rationalized by the fact that inappropriate talking during ritual services is centuries old.

No one I ever engaged on this topic attempted to use Torah perspectives as a means of understanding the religious disorder of unorthodox shul decorum. The behavior is so egregious and its strength and endurance so great, it defies reason. Since all attempts at reasoning with the violators have failed, perhaps the theories that derive such reasoning are flawed. Let's first briefly examine two prevailing secular theories, then introduce for consideration a new theory based on Torah principles.

## **Two prevailing theories for unorthodox shul decorum:**

The most popular theory is sociological, that talking at inappropriate times during shul services is a function of a deep need to socialize. Congregants frequent the synagogue both to worship and socialize, however this notion alone does not explain why congregants ignore the law that governs proper decorum needed for an orderly and holy service. The talkers have opportunities to socialize in the synagogue other than during communal prayer and Torah readings and the

majority of congregants do. However, in many shuls a large proportion of the congregation cannot contain themselves when silence in the sanctuary is mandated during ritual services. Later we will refer to our sages for a Torah perspective on social pitfalls.

The other popular theory is based on psychological principles. Because dues-paying Orthodox Jews spend a lot of time in their synagogue each day, the dwelling takes on the personality of a second home, losing the spiritual sanctity for which it stands. The theory suggests familiarity lulls talkers into casual chit chat that distracts and detracts from the respect, discipline and consideration for others required for an orderly and holy service. To test this theory we ask: do the talkers treat guests in their own home with the same lack of consideration? We know the answer is 'of course not', then why as a matter of course does such behavior persist in our home away from home, in our sanctuaries? The psychology of familiarity is inadequate to explain this discrepancy.

Given everyone knows nothing is more important to a religious person than what they pray for, this mystery begs to be solved. Ironically, the talkers are kind, intelligent, highly educated, charitable members of the community - some are former officers and/or highly learned in Torah. That disgraceful shul decorum is tolerated by the rest of the congregation including its leadership suggests the disorder is systemic, meaning everyone is contributing to the disorder, if not by talking then by tolerating the talking. The fact that people of such good character and intelligence act so antithetical to their own faith renders both the sociological and psychological secular theories insufficient. Perhaps a faith-based theory that comports with Torah, will have greater explanatory power.

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For the sake of efficiency, the term, 'our disorder', will be used here as shorthand for chronic unorthodox shul decorum. To begin laying the philosophical groundwork required for observing our disorder more accurately, we will use the following story, The Mirror God, as a point of reference.

## **The Mirror God**

Imagine you are an anthropologist researching the religious behavior of primitive peoples. You discovered a remote tribe who live deep in the jungle where the only water supply is in the ground. You are the first human being from the modern world they ever met. You studied their language and know how to speak it. You embark on a field trip to study the tribe in their native habitat.

You erect a small laboratory within walking distance of the tribe's camp. After a few weeks of building trust, you invite a tribesman to visit your lab. Your first experiment is to observe how the tribesman reacts when he sees himself in a mirror. You know the tribesman has never seen a mirror and therefore has never seen himself. You constructed a 'mirror' room where all the walls, floor and ceiling are mirrors. You ask the tribesman to wait for you in the 'mirror' room until you return from the 'rest' room. The tribesman walks into the 'mirror' room and you close the door behind him. You stand by the door to listen.

What did you observe?

About 30 seconds later you hear the tribesman trying to open the door but can't because he doesn't know how to use a door knob. For the next 30 seconds he calls out your name several times with increasing anxiety – then abruptly stops. After a minute of silence you open the door and you see the tribesman on his knees crying, bowing and muttering something to himself. You have the following conversation with the tribesman:

A – Anthropologist

T - Tribesman

A: What's wrong – what are you doing?

T: I'm praying for mercy.

A: Who are you praying to?

T: God.

A: What god.

T: The mirror god.

A: Where is the mirror god?

T: Look at the wall - see your mirror god – he looks exactly like you.

A: That is not a mirror god, that's me.

T: You crazy. You are not in the wall, you are here in the room beside me. Your mirror god is in the wall.

A: Why are you calling what you see in the wall a mirror god?

T: My mirror god knows my every move. Look, my mirror god is able to do exactly what I do when I do it. Therefore, my mirror god must know what I'm going to do before I do it. Only gods know the future.

A: No. That is not a mirror god. The walls are covered with mirrors.

T: What is a mirror?

A: A mirror is a special kind of glass that shows you what you would see if you were standing where the mirror is.

T: Only a god can do that.

A: No. The light from the light bulb reflects off of your body then into the mirror then back into your eyes...

T: What is a light bulb?

A: A light bulb makes light.

T: Only the sun and fire gods make light.

A: No. There is no sun or fire god. Electricity flows through the wires ...  
T: Is electricity a god?

(You are beginning to see what you are up against. The tribesman is an intelligent articulate person who thinks logically. But because he has no insight into the power of science, technology and modern industry, divine power is his only way to account for the powerful being he sees in the mirror. You realize that Avraham Avinu must have faced a very similar challenge when attempting to convince a pagan their god is not really a god.)

A: No. You need to attend one of our schools to learn about electricity.  
T: When I see someone in the wall doing exactly what I'm doing exactly when I'm doing it, he must know in advance what I am about to do, otherwise he wouldn't be able to copy me exactly. As your friend, I advise you to stop believing in bulbs and electricity, and start worshipping the mirror god before he gets angry at you.  
A: I see what you mean. Thank you for the warning.

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To further your research, you decide to bring the tribesman back with you to civilization in order to observe him in what he will experience as 'the wild'. Your next experiment is to have the tribesman experience a modern religious service, so you bring him to shul with you on Shabbat. Instead of sitting in your regular seat in the front, away from the talkers where it is quiet, you decide to sit further back so the tribesman can more easily observe the congregation and the service. You tell the tribesman not to worry, that he only needs to wear a yarmica and sit quietly for approximately three hours. If he needs to use the restroom or leave the sanctuary, you will escort him. He is welcome to stand whenever the congregants stand, but not to talk even if others are talking unless you indicate to him otherwise.

The services end after about three hours. As you escort the tribesman out of the sanctuary, you notice a look of confusion on his face. The tribesman asks you:

T: How many gods do Jewish people worship?  
A: Only one.  
T: In my tribe, we all worship our gods the same way. Why do Jewish people worship the same god in different ways?  
A: What did you see that was so different?  
T: Most of the people showed reverence and paid very close attention to the recitations and the speakers. The others appeared not to care nor did they appear concerned their god might disapprove. You told me not to talk, but I saw a lot of other people talking – is that because some gods permit talking during the service and others don't?

A: No. They believe they are worshipping the same god as everyone else, but they forgot that G-d is watching them at all times.

T: How can they forget that? Don't they know all gods have that power?

A: Good question. I don't fully understand what they are thinking.

T: Doesn't your G-d punish?

A: Yes. Reward and punishment is a fundamental Jewish principle.

T: Why doesn't your G-d punish them?

A: He is punishing them.

T: Then why don't they stop talking?

A: They don't recognize how they are being punished. But if you look closely, you can see the suffering in their faces.

T: Why don't they know this?

A: You must follow the laws and practices of the religion properly in order to learn how G-d operates. Unfortunately, too many of my people wait until tragedy strikes before they take G-d seriously.

T: Doesn't your book, that you call Torah, explain this?

A: Yes. As a matter of fact, we read that part today – it is called Bechukosai. G-d says if a person does not take him seriously, he will not take them seriously, and they will suffer as a result. G-d says they will develop skin disease, anxiety, paranoia, that their children will become unrecognizable and eventually they themselves will no longer be Jewish.

T: But you told me Jews study the same book every year. How is it possible they don't know this by now?

A: They know what is written in the Torah, but they must not believe or understand it.

T: Why don't the people who do believe and understand help the others who don't? As your friend, I keep telling you to worship the mirror god even though you refuse to. I haven't given up on you yet.

A: It's not that we don't want to help them – we just don't know how yet, just like I tried to explain why there is no mirror god but you still don't believe me, right?

T: Right, I don't believe you; I'm sure you are wrong.

A: If I had enough time to teach you about electricity and light bulbs, then you would stop worshipping the mirror god. You need the right knowledge before you can understand why there is no mirror god. The same is true for my people. They will stop transgressing as soon as they realize the god they now worship is actually their enemy.

But instead of paying attention during times for Torah learning, the talkers are spending their time talking to their friends about other subjects. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the talking disorder prevents them from acquiring the knowledge required for recognizing their downfall.

T: Aren't they more afraid of their G-d than their friends?

A: Apparently not; their friends seem to be more important to them.

T: Are you suggesting they worship their friends?

A: No, they worship themselves and honor their friends for helping them do so. During the service, instead of listening to G-d they listen to their friends who pay attention to them. You observed like-minded friends who mutually support each other's need for self-worship, self-devotion and self-service.

T: They must be very confused.

A: It certainly looks that way. This kind of confusion is called hypocrisy. They call themselves friends even though they are helping each other violate the law of their own religion, in their G-d's house no less - and they have no clue this is what they are doing. It is truly remarkable.

T: We don't have this problem in my tribe. If I were you, I would find a god who won't allow this to happen to his people.

A: Thank you for caring so much about me, but instead of abandoning my G-d and my people, I am trying to find a way to help them.

T: G-d help you.

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The next day you are in your office at the university reviewing your notes. You realize that until the tribesman learns the science of mirrors, he will resort to the worship of idols (false gods) in order to cope with the strange and scary ways of the modern world. You begin to wonder whether the behavior of the tribesman in the mirror room and the behavior of the talker in the shul sanctuary are both caused by the same flawed spiritual foundation.

In both cases we are dealing with behavior in a religious context inconsistent with monotheism. Even though the tribesman is intelligent, his ignorance of mirror science makes him a naïve idol worshiper of the mirror god. However unlike the tribesman, intelligent shul goers are not ignorant of the laws governing proper shul decorum. Clearly, ignorance of the law, the halacha, is not the cause of unorthodox shul decorum. To the contrary, congregants are consciously violating their own religious beliefs, a classic case of hypocrisy and folly.

In Overcoming Folly, Rabbi DovBer Schneersohn explains:

... the misconception that sinning will not separate one from G-d, eventually leads to actual sin. The truth is, however, that the experience of sin does separate one from G-d. Instead of residing in the realm of holiness, where godliness is revealed, the act of sin puts the person in the realm of the other side – a realm that opposes godliness, where godliness is concealed. It is from this impure realm that the sinner receives his vitality and sustenance - but only briefly, for inevitably this too will cease. Since he is a Jew, he must receive his sustenance only from the realm of holiness, and it is Torah and mitzvot that elicit the sustenance for the Jew from the realm of holiness.

What leads a person down this destructive path? It is the yetzer hara, the “spirit of folly,” which persuades a person into thinking that his sin will not separate him from G-d.<sup>ii</sup>

Worshiping the mirror god sustains the tribesman, and shmuzing during services sustains the intransigent talker and their accomplice. Unaware of the spiritual damage, they amuse each other by exchanging kovod. Given the time, place and to whom they appear devoted, the talkers behave as though their friends are more important than the Almighty. You wonder what the common denominator is. The idolatrous tribesman alleviates his fear by seeking the approval of his mirror god. Perhaps the fear of loosing the approval of their friends causes the shul goer to pay more attention to each other than the Creator, a clear victory for the “spirit of folly.”

## Section II

### *cause*

In the previous section, we described the outward manifestation of chronic unorthodox shul decorum. Now let’s attempt to understand, in terms of Torah principles, what might be causing our disorder. Is it possible severe cases of unorthodox shul decorum have an idolatrous component? An understanding of idolatry may help us to better see our disorder for what it really is?

The one thing you know with absolute certainty is an idolater never knows he is one, because normal<sup>iii</sup> people would never intentionally worship a false god. Therefore, when a normal person realizes they’ve been behaving idolatrously, you would expect them to stop immediately, as would any ethical person who discovers they are doing something unethical, and as would someone who realizes they are causing their own pain. However, spontaneous conversions are rarely the case because idolatry like alcoholism and mania, are nearly impossible to self-diagnose and the remedy requires unpleasant self-imposed measures.

By their nature, these disorders corrupt the perceptual system which in turn causes the sufferer to grossly misjudge their condition. Alcoholism self-medicates, relieving symptoms of anxiety and stress; mania generates wonderful feelings of elation, a false sense of self-confidence and personal power; and idol worship causes pleasure and pain that are misidentified as divine reward and punishment, reinforcing the belief in and service of a powerful idol. What these sufferers have in common is the inability to accurately perceive the forces controlling their behavior.

If chronic unorthodox shul decorum has attributes of idolatry, then its cure becomes possible only when others who can observe the disorder are able to help the sufferers who can’t. Because idolaters, alcoholics and maniacs are

blind to their own infliction, those who care enough to save them must intervene. Well defined intervention strategies have been developed for alcoholism and mania. Avraham Avinu invented the first intervention for idolatry. On our watch, we must make a wholehearted attempt to intervene in our communities for the sake of our sanctuaries.

Idolatry is the most severe and difficult spiritual defect to correct. Avraham Avinu faced the challenge of converting idolaters and was ultimately successful. One would think 3000 plus years would have been enough time to remedy unorthodox shul decorum. Could it be that we have all become a part of the problem and therefore cannot see it for what it is. Since an idolater never knows he is one, we all may be idolaters but just don't know it yet, G-d forbid – as the *pusik* at the beginning of parshas Re'eh (11:28) suggests,

And the curse: if you do not hearken to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, and you stray from the path that I command you today, to follow gods of others, ***that you did not know.***"

This begs the ultimate question: **can one ever be certain your god is the one and only true G-d?**

Perhaps my conception of G-d is so off or my Torah knowledge so weak, I am actually worshiping a false G-d, an idol, by mistake. Is referring to G-d with the name 'Hashem', sufficient? Is being a member of an Orthodox shul sufficient? Is walking into shul once per week on Shabbos morning sufficient? Is the only time I don't talk inappropriately in shul is during my personal Amida, sufficient? Is just knowing the first commandment sufficient? Does it make sense to worship G-d on a part time basis?

It should go without saying, at least the second commandment, the prohibition against idolatry, the worship of images, is required. At Sinai, the nation only heard G-d speak the first two commandments. But for some strange reason, rarely do Rabbis or congregants give D'var Torah on the second commandment, the topic of idolatry. Could it be everyone already understands idolatry or thinks idolatry unimportant because the ancient forms are extinct? The prohibition of idolatry is the negative commandment that subsumes all other negative commandments. This reason alone ought to behoove us to fully understand idolatry to protect ourselves from innocently succumbing to its forces in the modern era.

The high rank of importance G-d gives to its prohibition suggests idolatry is human nature, thus the second commandment is informing us of our worst natural inclinations. In case this is true, we must invest a full effort to understand idolatry; otherwise we run the risk of doing something idolatrous without realizing it. But because we believe idolatry is no longer relevant, we fail to learn about it sufficiently; so when it rears its ugly head and stares us in the face, we ignore it,

tolerate it or succumb to it in disgrace. Surely we can agree chronic unorthodox shul decorum is a disgrace.

If chronic unorthodox shul decorum is indeed idolatrous, the remedy might simply be to realize it. R. Bachya expresses the same notion in Duties of the Heart<sup>iv</sup>,

Whoever knows of the various afflictions that undermine right conduct will know how to avoid them; but he who knows only the good will not retain any of it, because of all the ills that beset it.

One of the pious used to instruct his disciples: "First learn what is evil, in order to avoid it, and then learn what is good and do it, "as Scripture says, "Plow up your unplowed field! Do not sow among the thorns!"

R. Bachya's guidance is clear, in order to ensure right conduct, our first priority is to first understand the evil forces that undermine it. We already know, by definition, nothing is more evil than idolatry.

This leads you, the anthropologist, to the following hypothesis:

If chronic unorthodox shul decorum is shown to resemble idolatry, then our disorder might begin to correct itself naturally, because **normal, ethically minded people naturally try to correct themselves.**

Unfortunately, you see another major obstacle. If the talkers are so disinterested in listening to the Torah when it is being recited during the ritual service, they are likely to be less interested learning why they should? Perhaps they might listen if it came from a Rabbi, however they already lack respect for what their Rabbis have been saying on this subject. Futility may be what we should fear most, that the problem is beyond repair, that nothing will get the talkers to listen and the rest of us just need to wait in gullas until they all die off, as Hashem did with the generation of the Spies.

## understanding Idolatry

Now that we have described unorthodox shul decorum and gained an appreciation for the corrupt nature of the problem, we realize a band aid solution will not work. Rearranging the order of the service or getting a chazzan with an operatic voice to make the service more entertaining hasn't worked. We must discover the underlying mechanism, or better, the origin of the mechanism in order to cure the problem.

We begin by asking, what do all forms of idolatry have in common? If we can answer this question successfully, then we will understand the fundamental and

essential nature of idol worship. Once we understand its nature, then perhaps we can observe other forms of idolatry we never noticed before, such as the unorthodox shul decorum disorder perhaps.

As in any serious scientific quest, you must first define your terms and method.

### Terms

1. A god – a being that appears to have the power of free will, specifically to create or destroy, reward or punish, help or harm, forgive or condemn; has the attributes of perfection and non-corporal (not physical); has no source or origin thus answers to no one and no-thing, i.e. is free to do whatever it wills or wishes.
  - a. Hashem – the one and only infinite undifferentiated true god – true because Hashem has no origin or source; Hashem is the source of everything.
  - b. All other gods – many finite differentiated false gods; false because all other gods have a source, namely the human being who worships them; eg. Hashem created the sun, and human beings created the sun god.
2. Worship – extreme devotion, characterized by loyalty, submission, chronic repetitive behavior, as in the life-long ritual service to a deity. (In psychology, worship-like behavior is symptomatic of neurotic<sup>v</sup> disorders such as gambling, OCD, narcissism, stalking, etc.)
3. Submission – the giving-over of one’s will to another; aligning one’s will with another in deference; characterized by the willingness to lower one’s status in relation to another.
4. Service – the act of providing benefit to another before oneself.
5. Duty – the necessity to act out of reverence for the law.<sup>vi</sup>
6. Idolatry – worship of images; worship of false gods; worship of intermediary powers.
7. Idol – an object of extreme devotion; a false god
8. Image – a non-physical, faithful representation of reality
9. Reality – anything or everything that exists

10. Power – the ability to do; capacity to act; capability of performing or producing.<sup>vii</sup>
11. Loyalty – faithful adherence; opposite of betray; resists the inclination to stray or switch.
12. Voice – the person or other agency by which something is expressed or made known.
13. Good – consistent with the will of G-d
14. Evil – inconsistent with, in opposition to, the will of G-d

Before Avraham Avinu's monotheism the world was ignorant of idolatry, because at that time nothing else existed, rendering idolatry indistinguishable and unrecognizable. By the same token idolatry was not a subject for dialogue, making the word 'idolatry' unnecessary. In service to Hashem, Avraham Avinu brought the language of idolatry and monotheism into public discourse as an assertion that all other gods are false. Consequently, we find only two kinds of people in the Torah, those who worship Hashem, the one and only G-d, versus everyone else, all of whom are portrayed as idolaters.

Our tradition teaches that a god is "an entity that at least has a free will to make independent choices and the governing power to implement them."<sup>viii</sup> Orthodox Jews believe only Hashem and human beings have free will. Therefore, if an Orthodox Jew was suffering from a form of idol worship, the idol must be human in nature. This begs the question: what human forces could be powerful enough to tempt an Orthodox Jew away from Hashem into some other form of worship during the ritual services inside G-d's house, no less?

The Rambam explains mitzvah 5, 'the exhortation bowing down to idolatry' really means idolatry is the worship of anything other than Hashem,

It is clear that whenever we speak of "idolatry," we refer to everything worshipped aside from the L-ord. (Exodus 20:5): "Do not bow down to them and do not serve them." The intent here is not bowing down alone, exclusive of any other form of worship; it is just that one mode of worship – bowing down – was mentioned.<sup>ix</sup>

More specifically, he says idolatry is the worship of powerful entities created by Hashem for which He is no longer given credit.<sup>x</sup> The Rambam teaches that people originally worshiped Hashem, but over time started to pay more attention to His luminaries, other powerful entities created by Him, until He was eventually forgotten – out of sight, out of mind. For example, when a pagan stared at the sun too long, in anger the powerful sun god would punish the pagan with

blindness. Instead of attributing the punishment to Hashem, pagans mis-identified the sun god as a powerful judge and punisher, which caused people to fear the sun for a good but false reason.

It is human nature and often reasonable to become extremely devoted to and even worship a feared object especially when there is no escape from it. Slavery (forced servitude) and money (an intermediary, a form of exchange) are the two classic examples. The slave, in utter confinement and in fear of his master's wrath, becomes extremely devoted to his master. Likewise, given no escape from its necessity, people worship money, fearing the pain of not having enough and longing for the pleasures fancied by the wealthy. Like the pagan who ascribes god-like powers to the sun, modern man mis-identifies money as a source of power over their lives, causing them to suffer from obsessive worrying, hoarding, overspending or overworking – workaholics and compulsive gamblers are two classic disorders characterized by this extreme idolatrous devotion to money.

However, money and forced servitude are not the underlying forces driving the shul decorum disorder. Yes, the chronic noise level in the sanctuary during Shabbos morning services is characteristic of a market place, but clearly, our disorder does not involve financial exchanges. Upon closer examination when the talkers are in high-gear, you find there is another exchange taking place and you notice Hashem is almost always left out - a corruption in loyalty. What are the talkers so devoted to such that they so easily forget about G-d in His own house? What is their medium of exchange and what are they sacrificing?

## forces of Friendship

the inclination to curry favor

*What constitutes wholehearted devotion of all acts to G-d? It is the **intention**, in public and private acts of worship, for the sake of His Name, to do His Will alone – and not to win the favor of human beings.<sup>xi</sup>*

On its surface, friendship always appears to be a good thing. Even when two drug addicts become friends then help each other shoot-up, we call the drugs evil but we call them good friends. Likewise in shul, when the talker and listener engage each other during the service, we tolerate their transgression in the honor of friendship. No matter how good the concept of friendship sounds, friendship like most anything else has the potential for both good and evil. In the news we are often reminded how cronyism can lead to corruption in business and in public service, where the ethic of duty is displaced by the exchanging of favors. Apparently, religion is no exception.

For the sake of understanding this idea of friendship, you distinguish three types of friends starting with the most common and least loyal: 1. Good friends, 2. Best friends, and 3. True friends. Good friends trade the goods, primarily jokes,

invitations, gifts, complements and pats on the back. Best friends do the same except more often and out of favoritism they save the best trades for each other. True friends are the rarest because the relationship is based on honor for its own sake (lishmoh). True friends are honored to be the other's friend and can be trusted to defend the other's honor. True friends rely on each other for the truth even if it is unpleasant, whereas good friends and best friends are in it for the exchange, to make each other feel good, the reciprocal fulfillment of mutual temptations and inclinations. True friends have a higher purpose beyond self-interest, beyond serving the other in order to get served in return. So you ask yourself, are the talkers and listeners who disrupt the Shabbos service, true friends with a higher purpose or are they just in it for the exchange, to curry favor?

In Duties of the Heart, R. Bachya uses the following exchange to show how to combat the tempter, the yezer hara, when it entices a person to find favor in the eyes of others:<sup>xii</sup>

**Yezer Hara:** "I am so happy that you have reached such a state, that your faith is strong and your heart is undivided toward G-d... You should also conduct yourself so as to fulfill some of your obligations to human beings. For, as you know, they can further your interests or bring you harm; and, as you have found out, if they are pleased with you, you will have honor, but if they are angry with you, you are headed for oblivion.

You should therefore try to do what will please them, so as to win their favor. As our Masters, of blessed memory, said: 'Anyone in whom the spirit of his fellow creatures takes pleasure, the spirit of the Omnipresent takes pleasure' (Avos 3:10).

**Answer it this way:** What good will it do me to find favor with one who is as weak as I am, who does not have the power either to help or to harm me, as Scripture says: 'Forget about man whose breath is in his nostrils, for of what account is he?' (Yeshayahu 2:22). Even if such a debt did exist, how could I satisfy all my contemporaries, when I cannot satisfy the members of my household, much less other people?

As to what you quoted from the sayings of our masters, of blessed memory, it does not imply an obligation to attempt to please all people. Rather, its meaning is like what one of the wise men said to his son in his will: 'My son, it is impossible for you to win the favor of all people. Try, rather, to win G-d's favor, and He will make you pleasing to people, as it is written: When God is pleased with a man's ways, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.'

Beware, therefore, of this and other such attempts of the evil inclination to entice you, for it seeks to lead you along on this road until it has brought you down into the trap of hypocrisy. When it praises you answer it as

follows: What is it that you commend me for – that I am aware of my obligations to G-d? On the contrary, this is a claim that G-d has against me, since I fail to act in accordance with my awareness.”

Do the talkers and listeners ‘fail to act in accordance with their awareness’ or are they so deeply distracted by the act currying favor from their friends such that they become unaware of what is going on around them during the ritual service?

Society promotes the virtues of a well-developed social life, social networking and the high art of politics where favor reigns supreme. In complete opposition is the advice found in our tradition as R. Bachya explains:<sup>xiii</sup>

Solitude and separation from others save one from all the transgressions we have mentioned and are among the strongest factors in the development of positive character traits. It has been said that the mainstay of purity of heart is a love of solitude and a preference for isolation.

Therefore beware, my brother, lest your evil inclination deceive you and make socializing and mingling with people seem attractive to you; [lest it] tempt you, when you are alone and secluded, to yearn for their company.

In Path of the Just, the Ramchal expresses the same sentiment about the detrimental effect social inclinations have on the virtue of holiness,

The factors that lead to the loss of this virtue [holiness] are the lack of true knowledge and continued social intercourse; for corporeality finds like company and revives and revitalizes itself, while the soul remains in captivity within, unable to escape its prison.

However, when he detaches himself from people, and remains alone and prepares himself for His holy inspiration, he is led along the path that he desires to travel.<sup>xiv</sup>

The following true story illustrates how friendships play out in a typical social situation where the reverence for the law, Halacha, is missing. There was a man who on Shabbos morning always sat next to his good friend, among the rest of his chevra (like-minded people) in shul. On two separate occasions over the course of their friendship, the friend told the man that he considers him his **best** friend. Because talking disturbs him while praying, the man asked his friend many times to refrain from talking until he finishes praying, a small request for a few minutes of silence. However, the friend could not resist the temptation to talk to the others in his chevra even while his ‘so-called’ **best** friend was still praying. After two years of frustration, the man reconciled that his friend was certainly not a true friend, hardly a best friend and at most a good friend, so he removed

himself from the chevra and chose instead to sit permanently on the other side of the sanctuary with like-minded people who have reverence for the law pertaining to proper shul decorum.

And so it goes, the talkers and their listeners exchange words whenever it suites them, hoping their so-called “friends” will favor them, while their eyes scan the sanctuary, looking out to see if anyone notices. If it was once in awhile, an infrequent mistake, so be it. But when the transgression occurs unabated throughout the Shabbos service every Shabbos morning by a significant portion of the tzibor (congregation), you begin to wonder if what you are observing is something evil camouflaged in friendship.

## **Under The dark Hood**

of the evil inclination  
(yezer hara)

**the Sanctuary – a theatre for a personal holy war**  
**Tefillah (prayer) – the offensive**  
**Free Will – the weapon**  
**the Battle – good versus evil**  
**the Strategy – Torah**

Understanding good (tov) versus evil (hara) is the most essential lesson of the Torah. As important is the problem of free will, the ability to distinguish a free choice versus a choice determined by inclination. You will see how misconceptions about these principles can lead a person to unwittingly stray down an unethical path and ends in suffering.

Like idolatry, I never heard anyone give a D’var Torah about the yezer hara, the evil inclination versus the yezer tov, the good inclination. People must think everyone already knows the difference, even though there are volumes written on the subject. But unlike idolatry, the yezer hara is considered relevant today by religious Orthodox Jews, as described by our sages in an excerpt from Duties of the Heart,

I say, then: O man, you should know that the greatest enemy you have in the world is your own [evil] impulse [yezer hara], which is interwoven with the powers of your soul and intertwined in the character of your spirit, associated with you in governing your senses and spiritual faculties, privy to the secrets of your soul and to what is hidden deep inside you, your counselor in all your willful movements, whether observable or **concealed**.

It lies in wait to entice you at your every step. You are unaware of it, but it is aware of you; you are unmindful of it, but it is mindful of you.

It clothes itself in the garb of **friendship** for you, adorns itself with the adornment of love for you. It joins the circle of your confidants, counselors, and choicest friends, and seems eager to do your will, as indicated in its outward movements and gestures. But in fact it is shooting deadly arrows at you, to uproot you from the land of the living, as Scripture says of someone of this nature: "Like a madman who shoots firebrands and deadly arrows, so is the man who deceives his neighbor [fellow congregant] and says, 'I did it only in sport'" (Mishlei 26:18-19)<sup>xv</sup>

Over the years, you've noticed that people often confuse good versus evil with the concept of positive versus negative. Many people mistakenly think positive is always good and negative is always bad; that good is never negative and evil is always negative. Since evil's *motis operandi* is to conceal itself by appearing 'good', if a person can't tell the difference they may choose evil by mistake. Our talkers may be saying very kind words to each other, they may be discussing important topics such as the economy, politics, Israel, Iran or our national pastime, baseball. They may even be discussing Torah, all of which are positive. However, if the conversation detracts from or interferes with someone else's sacred attempt to connect with G-d, it is evil by definition. When the collective transgression rises to a noise level that causes the leadership to stop the service pre-maturely, how can this be seen as anything other than evil?

According to Judaism, Good is G-d's will. Evil is simply the antithesis of Good, in opposition to G-d's will. Good is not necessarily something we like. For example, despite the pain of a needle, a doctor does good when injecting a vaccine into a patient's arm. War by definition is negative and appears evil on its surface, however when Hitler needed to be stopped, it was good the US declared war and the war was just.

Like a snake in the grass, evil conceals itself so its prey does not notice and run from it. If evil conceals itself with a cloak of goodness, how can a person know if what seems good is really evil in disguise? This problem is the reason an Orthodox Jew relies on Halacha, the moral law, for guidance and protection, in order to avoid falling into an evil trap. Torah is the Jewish antidote and our obligation is to be vigilant in its observance.

Our challenge is compounded by the difficulty in knowing the difference between an act of free will versus an act of inclination. If a person does not fully understand the difference, they may think they are exercising free will when in fact they are not, in which case something else is controlling them without their knowledge, like a puppet. *Being a puppet is far worse than being a slave, because at least a slave knows he is one.* To avoid **the puppet pitfall**, it behooves everyone to learn the logic of free will.

An inclination is a force of habit which occurs automatically, that has the potential to undermine one's free will. Immanuel Kant presents the problem of inclination succinctly in his monumental work, "Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone",<sup>xvi</sup>

Natural inclinations, *considered in themselves*, are *good*, that is, not a matter of reproach, and it is not only futile to want to extirpate them but to do so would also be harmful and blameworthy. Rather, let them be tamed and instead of clashing with one another they can be brought into harmony in a wholeness which is called happiness. Now the reason which accomplishes this is termed *prudence*. But only what is opposed to the moral law is evil in itself, absolutely reprehensible, and must be completely eradicated; and that reason which teaches this truth, and more especially that which puts it into actual practice, alone deserves the name of *wisdom*. The vice [transgression] corresponding to this may indeed be *termed folly*, but again only when reason feels itself strong enough not merely to *hate* vice as something to be feared, and to arm itself against it, but to *scorn* vice (with all its temptations).

According to Kant, there is nothing inherently wrong with natural inclinations until they cross the boundaries of moral law, at which point they are by definition evil and must be stopped. Understanding the tempting forces of one's own inclinations can free oneself from them and empowers judicious adherence to the moral boundaries set by the Torah. To avoid mistakes that end in folly, such as our shul decorum disorder, Kant suggests caution is required, especially for those who, as an act of free will, claim to live according to Torah. In other words, when a potential mistake could result in a moral transgression, we must err on the side of caution. Therefore, it behooves all of us to study the moral law so that we can see, to the best of our knowledge, where the moral boundaries are actually drawn. However, simply knowing what is moral is insufficient - good people act immorally at times with full awareness. Fear of G-d or reverence for His moral laws, is necessary for its adherence. When a so-called religious person knowingly violates halacha, it is a sign something is deeply wrong.

How does confusion between good vs. evil and free will vs. inclination, help us understand our decorum disorder? You decide to make some observations. You start by looking for the human forces at play during davening (prayer). Your observations identify the force of three voices, two of which are problematic. You observe,

1. yourself speaking to G-d privately in a freely chosen act of prayer,
2. your inclination to listen to your extraneous thoughts speak to you privately
3. yourself distracted by talkers speaking in public around the sanctuary.

You also observe you have one purpose in mind while praying, to communicate with G-d to the best of your ability by paying close attention to your prayers. However in opposition, you find yourself being attacked from two sides: you are externally distracted by the talkers and internally distracted by your own inclination to think about things other than the prayers. Whether it comes from within you or from someone outside of you, any distraction that tempts someone to stray from prayer is evil by definition, even if the distraction appears positive or good on its surface.

Since appearing 'good' is evil's method of deception, what better disguise is there than thinking about Torah when one is supposed to be praying? Likewise, there is no better time to observe the evil inclination than during prayer. Since praying to G-d must be extremely offensive to the yezer hara, it stands to reason the yezer hara would retaliate by distracting, enticing, tempting, interfering, intruding – in order to distance the person from G-d. Prayer naturally lures the yezer hara into action, exposing one's own evil inclination to oneself – an opportunity to observe and defeat G-d's enemy-within. From this perspective, prayer serves two reciprocal purposes: 1. To defeat G-d's enemy, and 2. To get closer to G-d, simultaneously.

During prayer, a friendly yezer hara approaches, disguised as extraneous thoughts or feelings which seem at the time more important than G-d, before whom we stand in prayer – thoughts or feelings that tempt us to stray, not pray. The difference between the talkers, their listeners and everyone else, is the talkers and their listeners have been completely enslaved by this yezer hara and don't know it. Like a puppeteer whose hand fully occupies and manipulates its puppet, so does the yezer hara hijack the mind of the talker who unwittingly lends their voice to their evil inclination. The pernicious nature of this yezer hara is so deep, hidden and corrupt, the talker is convinced he or she is violating the Halacha for 'good' reason, a condition of hypocrisy and folly. R. Yitzchok Isaac Sher, the Rosh Yeshivah of Slobodka explains,

The Sages also revealed the secret of the force of habit: One who transgresses and repeats, reaches the point where he views the transgression as being permissible. From the outset, habit is so strong that it deadens the restraining feelings that one had until he no longer feels that by transgressing he is divesting himself of the yoke of heaven.<sup>xvii</sup>

Everyone has this evil inclination, this yezer hara. Those who don't see it within themselves also do not see how it controls them. Fortunately, whether we see it or not, by observing the Halacha, thank G-d, we can protect ourselves against it. Being distracted by one's own thoughts and feelings during prayer is not in itself idolatrous, particularly if a person immediately returns to prayer as soon as they realize they've been distracted. However, if a person chooses, as an act of free will, to continue attending to the distraction instead of returning to their self-proclaimed duty to pray, we must ask, 'what is this' if not idolatry?

If it is idolatry what is the idol's name? If you suggest to the (t)alker they are suffering from idolatry they will either get offended or they will try to make the following argument for which yo(u) need to prepare:

**t: the talker**  
**u: you**

t: You fool, you have it all wrong. When I'm praying, if a thought about Torah pops into my mind distracting me from praying, it is my yezer tov (good) not my yezer hara (evil). You are confusing the two yezers.

u: My dear friend, I'm sorry to say it is you who is confused. You fail to recognize both the yezer tov (good) and the yezer hara (evil) have the name 'yezer' in common. 'Yezer' means impulse. Impulse is a synonym for inclination and by definition is NOT an act of free will. An impulse is automatic and machine-like. When you pray, why would you choose to pay attention to a machine instead of G-d?

t: I beg your pardon – are you saying human beings are machines?

u: No. A person is composed of a body and a soul. Only the body is a machine, a bio-chemical machine. The soul in which my free will resides is certainly not a machine. Machines do not have free will or a soul. A machine has no choice but to execute the will of its maker – this is self-evident.

t: You sound confused – don't you consider your body a part of you?

u: No my dear, in no aspect am I my body in whole or in part, but I do possess one, the one body the one G-d gave me to deal with. Who I am is the free will G-d assigned to my body.

Judaism teaches G-d created man in His image. Judaism also teaches G-d is infinite free will, the power to know, to do and to choose anything He so desires. Therefore, of all the human faculties, free will is the one faculty that most makes us resemble G-d. This is the reason I spend most of my time learning about free will.

If you consider yourself to be your body or that your body is part of you, I suggest you are operating under a false premise and is most likely the reason you are suffering.

t: Who said I'm suffering?

u: You must be suffering from something, otherwise you would not so cavalierly violate the halacha, the moral law, and be so inconsiderate to your fellow Jews

who need and have a right to pray in silence. That's not Jewish. You are transgressing both your relationship with G-d and your relationship with man. Isn't it hypocritical of you to violate the laws of your own faith?

t: People will not want to be your friend if you call them a hypocrite?

u: I don't come to shul to make friends, I come to shul to worship Hashem. If I develop one true friend in shul, I'll consider myself very fortunate.

t: Anyway, you can't stop people from talking if they need to talk.

u: I disagree and I'll show you why. Are you open-minded enough to hear me out?

t: Yes, but it better be good.

u: Did you ever stop to think what you would do if you discovered you are suffering from a form of idolatry that was causing you to talk at inappropriate times in shul?

t: Of course not. People believe idolatry is extinct and irrelevant, removing all reason to be concerned about it. Also, I love Hashem and I'm devoted to Him, therefore I can't imagine how I could ever end up suffering from idolatry.

u: But if someone could show you are mistaken, and idolatry was causing you to violate the halacha of shul decorum, would you try to stop?

t: Of course I would stop.

u: But what would you do if the idolatrous forces had a very tight grip on you making it very difficult to stop, would you give up trying or would you continue to fight against G-d's enemy, to do everything you could to stop?

t: I would fight to the death - not literally, but you know what I mean.

u: Ok, good. Now let's get started. By asking and answering two questions, I will show you why the decorum problem we have in our shul is similar to idolatry.

1. How can you tell the difference between your yezer hara versus your yezer tov? Another way to frame this question is, can you be sure your yezer tov isn't really your yezer hara in disguise? If a person is unable to recognize the difference, they may end up choosing evil without realizing it. I assert most normal people make this innocent mistake from time to time, but most certainly the talkers do more often.

2. When you think you are making a free choice, how can you be sure you aren't operating under the force of an inclination instead? If you don't know the difference between an act of free will versus an act of inclination, you may mistakenly perceive being in control of yourself when in fact something else is controlling you, like a puppet. A puppet is a slave who doesn't know he is one. I assert the talkers have innocently succumbed to **the puppet pitfall** because they don't understand the difference between the power of free will and the force of their inclinations.

t: What is an inclination?

u: An inclination is like an impulsive habit you may or may not know you have, that influences or controls you.

t: How does this pertain to idolatry?

u: An idol is a false god, and an idol worshiper perceives the idol is a real god, thus a god they do not know. The mistaken belief is not that the idol has power, such as the sun god for example; the sun is very powerful. The mistaken belief is that the idol, the sun god, has free will, the choice to reward or punish.

Don't you have a similar belief about yourself, about the source of your thoughts and feelings, that you have the power and choice to reward or punish yourself? For example, normal people sometimes put themselves down, get angry at themselves or feel guilty needlessly, and at times are unable to stop thinking about something that bothers them? Normal people don't freely choose to suffer. Therefore, in these examples the sufferer must be making a mistake of some kind.

The mistake is not the belief that our thoughts and feelings originate from a source of power within us— clearly our thoughts and feelings have a powerful effect on us. The mistake is believing the source of ALL our thoughts and feelings has free will. Because people mistakenly perceive they themselves are the source of ALL their thoughts and feelings, they honor all of them with their attention, including by mistake the thoughts and feelings that come from an evil inclination they do not know.

t: Please be more specific.

u: Remember I said a human being is the combination of a body and a soul, and the free will of the soul is who a person truly is.

t: Yes.

u: Thoughts that result from an act of free will are by definition self-controlled. All other extraneous, impulsive thoughts and feelings are inclinations that originate from the body over which a person does not have full control. Because most people consider themselves, in whole or in part, their body, they therefore assume by mistake they are the source of all their thoughts and feelings.

t: It is self-evident to me that I can freely choose to create a new thought or freely choose to think about a subject of great interest to me. It is also self-evident to me when I notice I am paying attention to an extraneous, impulsive thought, that I can freely choose to continue thinking about it or not, though difficult at times. On the other hand, I sometimes notice I was unintentionally thinking about something extraneous that grabbed my attention without me realizing until after the fact.

Not so self-evident is the logic and mechanism that determine my extraneous, impulsive thoughts. I'm very curious what causes the automatic, unintentional flow of thoughts that have so much influence over what we think about most of the time.

u: I was too. I spent a lot of time researching this and I would like to share it with you but I don't have enough time now to do it justice. Shall we talk later?

t: I would like that. But before you go, aren't you going to explain how unorthodox shul decorum is idolatrous? I won't let you get away with accusing me of idolatry without explaining yourself fully.

u: That's fair. I am suggesting a person is acting idolatrously if they pay more attention to their own automatic, unintentional, extraneous thoughts instead of attending to G-d during designated times for prayer. This is a form of self-worship and the idol's name is 'I'.

t: But how is self-worship a form of idolatry exactly?

u: Confusion can cause the talker to think they are worshipping G-d when in fact they are worshipping themselves. This is evident when a self-proclaimed religious person knowingly violates the laws of their own religion to serve themselves and it becomes very obvious when this disorder occurs in the sanctuary, the absolute last place a religious person would dare transgress. It is very mysterious but as the pieces of the puzzle come together, we can begin to understand how such hypocrisy and folly can happen.

When a person becomes extremely devoted to an object that appears to have the free will to help or harm them, the object can become an object of worship, i.e. an idol.<sup>xviii</sup> In our case, the object is the origin of extraneous, impulsive thoughts that distract the talker from prayer. People make decisions based on their thoughts, decisions which sometimes result in success or distress, i.e help

or harm. Most people assume their extraneous thoughts originate from themselves, and since everyone has a free will, they mistakenly perceive their extraneous automatic thoughts are freely chosen by them. Therefore when a talker demonstrates extreme devotion toward their extraneous thoughts during prayer, such devotion is analogous to the worship of an idol. Instead of focusing on the prayers, they focus on their thoughts; instead of worshipping G-d, the talkers unwittingly worship themselves.

Those who understand the pitfalls of good vs. evil and free will vs. inclination, can recognize idolatry when it rears its ugly head. Those who don't, perceive unorthodox shul decorum as a psychological or sociological problem, rather than a spiritual one.

t: I never thought about it this way and it certainly isn't something people talk about.

u: As my father, Yacov ben Yosef, always told me, it is never too late to begin.

## Conclusion

At each sacred moment during the ritual service, the talker and their listeners are bound by three *alternatives*, 1. to pay attention to G-d, 2. to pay attention to friends or, 3. to pay attention to the beautiful décor of the sanctuary. Choosing friends requires sacrificing the other two alternatives. Outside the sanctuary such friendship looks like normal healthy companionship and camaraderie of a close knit religious community. Inside the sanctuary where the legal halachic environment is spiritually pure, the pernicious forces of favor are visibly at play in the absence of reverence for the moral law, the halacha that governs proper shul decorum.

Some of the actors are visible and some invisible. The main actors are G-d and His enemies, the false gods that deploy the yezer hara to do their bidding. When the talker chooses to pay attention to an evil inclination he does not know, devotion switches from G-d to oneself and praying switches to pretending – a form of self-worship. This internal corruption of the mind in the sanctuary is addressed by the Ball Shem Tov in his commentary of Tzava'at Harivash,<sup>xix</sup>

“If I am not for myself, who is for me? [And if I am for myself, what am I?..].” (*Avot* 1:14)

When praying one must be like divested from physical reality, unaware of your existence in this world. That is to say, “When I reach the level that I am altogether unaware whether I am in this world or not, I will certainly have no fear of alien thoughts. For when I am divested of this world, alien

thoughts will not approach me.” This is the meaning of “who is for me?,” i.e., what alien thought will come to me?

But “If I am for myself,” i.e., when I regard myself as something substantial and real in this world, then I am really as of no value at all. This is the meaning of “what am I?,” i.e., of what significance am I, and of what value is my service before God? For then alien thoughts will disturb me and I am as nothing in this world. The principal purpose of man’s creation in this world is service [of God]; but I am unable to perform His service because alien thoughts disturb me.

The difference is the talker innocently gives their yezer hara a voice, enabling the yezer hara to have its way in the sanctuary. Like the hand and arm of the puppeteer that takes over the puppet’s body, so does the idol use the yezer hara to take over the mind and body of the talker. Like a puppet that does not know itself, the talker ends up serving themselves by becoming an unwitting accomplice to a friendly evil inclination. Unorthodox shul decorum is the back of this idol and is heard loudest in the back of the sanctuary, out of sight, where it engages as many as possible in *idol* chit chat until enough noise halts the divine service for everyone.

As good friends cross the threshold of the sanctuary, the blessing of an earthy friendship becomes a curse when friendships use the sanctuary for an alien<sup>xx</sup> purpose. Like in the case of an extreme addiction, they say there is little hope for curing unorthodox shul decorum. In a very real sense they are right, because nothing can stop this force of nature, the incessant stream of extraneous, impulsive thoughts and feelings in which the evil inclinations hide and ride. The only hope is if collectively, as an act of free will, we look inward and make a sincere attempt to outsmart the enemy-within. Only those who have reverence for the law will bother.

To avoid **the puppet pitfall** of unorthodox shul decorum, one need not know anything about good versus evil or free will versus inclination – one only needs reverence for Halacha, the moral law, as the Thursday Yom suggests,

Listen, My nation and I will attest to you; O Israel, if you would but listen to Me. There shall be no strange god within you, nor shall you bow before an alien god.<sup>xxi</sup>

Here Hashem confirms that false gods originate within us, and the antidote to idol worship is Torah.

## **u r the Remedy** remember Alice

Chaya bat Aryeh Lev haCohen is my mother, may her neshuma have an aliya. Her English name is Alice. My mother was vigilant in everything she did. In our home, she made a place for everything and she always knew her place, and when her sons strayed, she put us in our place.

Something is out of place in many of our sanctuaries where the disorder of unorthodox shul decorum is tolerated. Shushing doesn't work. Stopping the service doesn't work. Rebukes don't work. Knowledge is the Jewish remedy. Judaism claims one can know G-d, not merely believe in Him. If the talkers begin to suspect they are under the influence of idolatrous forces, then out of fear of G-d or perhaps some sense of obligation they may choose to correct themselves. We must have rachmanas, compassion for the talkers and their accomplices because they do not know what afflicts them. We are certainly justified in scorning and rebuking them, but perhaps there is a better way. If we can place a mirror in front of them such that they see their actions for what they really are, perhaps they can be reached.

This paper is intended to be a mirror. If you can convince your friend to read this paper, hopefully, like the tribesman who sees his G-d in the mirror, your friend will see the false G-d causing them to misbehave during ritual services. If you are not comfortable asking your friend to refrain from talking in shul, try using the following approach - simply ask them, "Do you remember Alice?" They will say, "Alice who?" Then say, "I don't know her last name, but I read about her in The Puppet Pitfall – she was a remarkable woman. I'll send it to you and when you're done reading it, I'd love to know what you think."

Praise G-d.

## **Post Script**

The spiritual forces that lie hidden in those who continually ignore the Halacha for shul decorum must be deep and powerful to cause a religious person to succumb to such blatant folly. For this reason, even for the most well intended, it will be very difficult for a talker or their listener to change their behavior on their own. They will need to do tchuva and will need support from those who care enough to remind them as they slip back into the old habit. But I am afraid this too may not be enough.

When the problem of unorthodox shul decorum rises to the level where the service is regularly interrupted, the problem has become systematic such that the entire congregation has been taken in. Perhaps this suggests a remedy will require the application of systems theory.

It is my hope that the issue of unorthodox shul decorum will rise to the level of importance needed for its correction. Not only is poor shul decorum itself a problem, I am afraid the problem is a symptom of something much worse, that Judaism has lost something essential for its authenticity. It doesn't require much objectivity to see unorthodox shul decorum is completely antithetical to Judaism, yet we allow it to persist in our holiest spaces. A solution will require the coming together of like-minded individuals who are no longer willing to tolerate it. Please send an email to [remedy4suffering@gmail.com](mailto:remedy4suffering@gmail.com) if you wish to be counted among those who helped eradicate unorthodox shul decorum disorder.

Thank you.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> John Langone, et.al., Theories for Everything, National Geographic, p. 251

<sup>ii</sup> DovBer Schneersohn, Rabbi Shalom, Overcoming Folly, Kehot Publication Society, 2006, p. 15

<sup>iii</sup> the term 'normal' in this context refers to the natural inclination to avoid suffering; this excludes masochists and sadists.

<sup>iv</sup> R.Bachya ben Joseph ibn Paquda, Duties of the Heart (1080), Feldman Publishers, 1996, vol.2, p. 505

<sup>v</sup> Neurosis (Webster) 2. Any of various psychic, or mental, disorders characterized by special combinations of anxieties, compulsions, obsessions, phobias, and motor or sensory manifestations, without apparent organic or structural change: it results in partial disorganization of the personality and is less serious both in form and prognosis than a psychosis.

(As in hypocrisy, a self-contradiction, the talker knowingly violates the laws of his/her own religion, specifically the Halacha governing shul decorum - like a compulsion appears to be unable to stop, causing the communal personality to become disorganized.)

<sup>vi</sup> Kant, Immanuel, Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals, Chapter I, (translated by H.J. Paton)

<sup>vii</sup> Webster's New World Dictionary, 1968

<sup>viii</sup> The Ten Commandments, the Klein edition, 2005, Taryag Legacy Foundation, Inc.

<sup>ix</sup> Maimonides, Sefer Hamitzvoth II, Mitzvoth Lo Ta'aseh (The Negative Commandments), Moznaim publishing Co., NY, 1993, p.5.

<sup>x</sup> Mishna Torah, Hilchus Laws of the Stars and their Worship (complete)

<sup>xi</sup> R. Bachya, p.477

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid, p.507

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid, p.727

<sup>xiv</sup> R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, The Path fo the Just, Felsheim Publishers, New York, 2004

<sup>xv</sup> R. Bachya, p.483

<sup>xvi</sup> Kant, Immanuel, Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, Harper and Row, NY, NY, 1960, p. 51

<sup>xvii</sup> R. Mendel of Satanov, cheshbon ha-Nefesh, Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem/NY, 1995, p. 9

<sup>xviii</sup> See Rivash cited by Kessef Mishneh, Hil. Avodah Zara 3:6 regarding idolaters' false belief that their gods can independently harm or benefit humans.

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<sup>xix</sup> R. Israel Baal Shem Tov, Tzava'at Harivash, Section 62,  
[http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/145482/jewish/62.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/145482/jewish/62.htm)

<sup>xx</sup> (void)

<sup>xxi</sup> Artscroll Transliterated Linear siddur (weekday), The Seif Edition, Nusach Ashkenaz, Mesorah Publications, NY, 1998, p. 271