



## Monotheism and the Problem of Truth

31.08.2016 | Reuven Firestone

*"You shall have no other gods beside Me!" This is the first of Aseret HaDib'rot, literally the "Ten Declarations" or "Ten Commandments" found in this week's parashah, Va-et'chanan (see Deuteronomy 5:2-18; we recited a slightly different version earlier in the year in Parashat Yitro, Exodus, chapter 20).*

*Aseret HaDib'rot* lays out the central terms of an exclusive covenant between God and Israel. After a brief prologue in which God self-identifies as the One who freed Israel from Egyptian bondage, the first declaration occurs in the form of a command that Israel take no other gods in addition to the God of Israel: "You shall have no other gods beside Me!"

Ancient Israel was not the only tribal community in the ancient Near East to have its own god. The Moabites to the east had a god named Kemosh (Num.21:29). South of the Moabites, the Ammonites' tribal god was named Milkom (I Kings 11:5). The god of Shechem to the north of Jerusalem was called *El Berit*, "God of the Covenant" (Judges 9:46). Many ancient peoples had tribal deities with whom they were in a covenantal relationship of protection and sustenance, but they made offerings to other gods as well. These other gods were often connected to some important aspect of nature, so proper offerings to them, it was hoped, would ensure that one's crops or flocks were fertile, that rain would come when needed, or that sick or injured family members would heal.

Like their neighbors, the Israelites had a unique tribal god whose name we no longer utter. At the same time, there is much evidence in the *Tanach* to suggest that many of our ancestors worshipped other gods in addition to the God of Israel (see II Kings 23:4-15 for an astonishing list of gods worshipped in Jerusalem!). The First Commandment forbids this practice, in all likelihood, precisely because so many Israelites persisted in it. We have supportive evidence in the repeated railing against idolatrous practices by prophets such as Zechariah as late as the sixth century BCE, even after the destruction of the First Temple (Zechariah 13:2).

Polytheism is portrayed as wicked in the *Tanach*, and it is depicted repeatedly as false. Deuteronomy 32:16-17 accuses Israelites who made offerings to other deities as worshipping "abominations . . . demons, no-gods . . ." The only true god, according to the *Tanach* and to all forms of monotheism, is the One-Great-Creator-God who brought forth the entire universe and watches over it. According to this perspective, all other deities are false.

This dichotomy between truth and falsehood, according to the great German Egyptologist and Bible scholar Jan Assmann, is the most influential notion that monotheism brought to the world, and it may not have been purely for good. It changed religion from being a matter of practice to becoming a matter of truth.

From the perspective of polytheism, many powers contribute to the function of the universe. Each contains an element of truth, but none has an absolute grip on any exclusive "Truth" (with a capital T). In his book, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford, 2010, p. 2) Assmann writes that the crucial element of monotheism ". . . is not the distinction between the One God and many gods but the distinction between truth and falsehood in religion, between the true god and false gods, true doctrine and false doctrine, knowledge and ignorance, belief and

unbelief."

In other words, before monotheism, religion was broad-minded and flexible regarding the notion of truth. After monotheism, religion had the tendency to be intolerant, even chauvinistic about it.

There is indeed a structural enigma associated with monotheism. If God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-benevolent, then why give three different revelations to three different communities with messages that seem to contradict one another? They disagree about theology (take the Trinitarian notion of God, for example), practice (Is the Sabbath day Friday, Saturday, or Sunday?), and future hope (Will a messiah come to redeem us? Did he already come? Will he return? Or is the messianic era something we humans must bring about ourselves?). What does God really teach about the afterlife, about the origin of life, about a "chosen people"? Does God privilege one community over others? Our scriptures seem to teach as much, but each scripture favors a different community.

If we take religion seriously, we cannot simply dismiss it all as "made up." If we take our scriptures seriously, even if as a human response to the Ultimate, we must grapple with the conflicting truths that our religious communities claim and that some have been willing to die for — and kill for — to this day. It's too simple and dismissive to say "we Jews (or Christians or Muslims) are right but everybody else is wrong." And it is also too easy to say, simply, "we're all right" (or wrong). If the question were insignificant, we would not have had the kinds of wars and violence between religions in the past and continuing to this day. The question of truth is important.

Is there one Truth (with a capital T)? Can there be multiple truths?

Jewish tradition grapples with this problem by declaring that we will not figure it out. That may seem strange, but we are not *expected* to figure it out. In the Jewish world, such enigmas can be answered with the word, *teyku*, a Talmudic Aramaic term that means, literally, "let it stand" or "let it be." The word is interpreted as an acronym for *Tishbi yitaretz kushiot uva'ayot*, meaning "Elijah the prophet (the 'Tishabite') will answer such questions (at the end of time)." In other words, some questions simply cannot be answered by us, though we are nevertheless expected to grapple with them and the implications they raise. The universe is just too overwhelming, and the greatness of God beyond imagination. Yet we are instructed to keep striving to understand.

Our Tanach includes many portions and stories that struggle with these issues without providing a final answer. Job, who suffers immeasurably, learns that no one is wise enough to give an account of the heavens (Job 38:37). And while Ecclesiastes considers it all a "striving after wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:14), the author continues striving nevertheless.

Our tradition does not expect us to find the answers to the riddle of Truth, but it does expect us to grapple with the questions. In Jewish tradition, the unity and oneness of God does not require a unity of opinion and belief. In fact, it teaches the opposite. Judaism stresses engagement in a process of struggling to understand, a process that ideally includes engaging in the quest with others. It will never provide "the" answer, but the very process of seeking and trying out answers, according to both Torah and Talmud, is in itself a spiritual act.

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