

Repair the World
Ezekiel 20:39-44
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What is the purpose of the covenant God makes with us?

In his marvelous book *What is Judaism?* Emil Fackenheim answers, that a central tenet of the covenant is to bear witness “against all the false gods—against idolatry.”

When Michael and I were moving from Oklahoma City to Omaha in 2010 there were multiple moments when friends and colleagues offered us their blessings. One of the most moving was when we received a blessing in a Hindu Temple.

Roshini Nambiar, the Vedic priestess, and I had worked together on the board of the Interfaith Alliance of Oklahoma for months before she realized that I was married to her college friend Michael Cich. So, she was sad to see both of us departing Oklahoma City and wanted to offer her prayers and a Hindu blessing.

This was our first visit to the Hindu temple. And I must confess that the Southern Baptist kid in me reacted a little to all the statues of the Hindu gods, which Roshini openly described as idols. Of course Hindus don't think the statues themselves are gods, but only representations of deity.

I don't believe that in the 21st century we should apply the Bible's proclamations about idolatry against Hindu worship, for instance. Because I believe the more corrosive forms of idolatry are something altogether different.

Idolatry is any commitment we make that prevents us from living fully into the way of goodness and truth that God has given to us. Idolatry includes all the big nasties like patriarchy, colonialism, homophobia, nationalism, militarism, conspicuous consumption, narcissism, etc. Political and economic ideologies can become idols. And more personal things can too. Being a workaholic. Sacrificing everything else to your personal ambition. Disordered love of self, objects, or others. Selfishness that damages the common good.

In other words, the kind of idolatry the biblical tradition denounces can be practiced at the shopping mall. Or the political rally. Or the sports arena. Or in some conversations with the financial planner.

The *New Union Prayer Book* of the Central Conference of American Rabbis 1975 edition includes this understanding of the mission of Judaism:

Long ago, our ancestors came to believe that they were a people appointed to be God's witnesses to the world. When all others were blinded by idolatry, they alone realized

that One God rules the whole universe and that He demands righteousness of all His creatures. And they felt themselves called to proclaim this faith to all nations.

The Jewish mystical tradition gave birth to a powerful concept—*tikkun olam*—the repair of the world. Scholar Lawrence Kushner writes:

The task of human beings and the purpose of the commandments—indeed, the meaning of life—is to free the trapped sparks of light and thereby restore things to their originally intended plan. . . . every deed contributes to the ultimate and sacred task of returning all things to their original place in God.

This Jewish mystical and theological idea which animates contemporary social justice work expresses a core truth of the text we are studying today from the prophet Ezekiel. We as the people of God are called upon to repair the world by testifying against the idols and to the good and true life that God has given us.

Sebastian's favorite book at the moment, and it changes every few weeks, is *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt De La Pena with pictures by Christian Robinson. I think the book is his current favorite because there is a bus in it, and Sebastian's in the middle of a fixation with all types of wheeled vehicles. He calls it the "bus book."

In this book CJ and his Nana leave church and travel by bus to a soup kitchen, where they serve lunch. CJ appears to be a preschooler, and he's rather whiny. He doesn't want to go to the soup kitchen, he doesn't want to ride the bus, he doesn't want to do a lot of things. I imagine he was modeled on some real life kid.

Every time CJ whines, Nana offers some wise or humorous observation that assuages CJ momentarily. For instance, when he asks, "Nana, how come we don't got a car?" Nana answers, "Boy, what do we need a car for? We got a bus that breathes fire."

Throughout the book Nana is always pointing out a different perspective on things, which consistently surprises CJ. For instance, when they depart the bus at Market Street CJ only notices the dirt, trash, and graffiti. When he asks about it Nana responds, "Sometimes when you're surrounded by dirt, CJ, you're a better witness for what's beautiful."

CJ ponders this wisdom. Here's what the book says:

He wondered how his nana always found beautiful where he never even thought to look.

May we be a people who always find beautiful where others never think to look. May we free the trapped sparks of light and restore all things to their original place in God. May we be witnesses to the world, directing others away from the corrupting idols of our time to experience the good, the beautiful, and true.