



# A College Student's Guide to Halacha

*the wiki-how of relevant Halacha for college students*



## **This week's question:**

When is learning about other religions for a humanities class avoda zara?

### **DISCLAIMER:**

*Please be aware every situation is different and this only shows a limited number of Halachic opinions. If unsure, ask your local Rabbi.*

### **Introduction by editor-in-chief Meital Hirschhorn**

This is one of the most highly requested editions of the Guide and a topic we have been meaning to cover since the creation of the Guide almost a year ago. Where is the line between studying humanities or similar topics and the ancient prohibition of avoda zara (See Definitions, S.D.)? Is there a concrete line? It seems to be that there are no concrete lines for this specific question, but instead a variety of opinions, as

Judaism tends to have. Moreover, people may have hashkafically (S.D.) different views despite the overall Halachic (S.D) opinions on the matter. As you read the following edition, please keep in mind that we have tried our best to provide the Halacha as best as we can. We hope to illuminate this issue for those embarking on their journeys in pursuit of knowledge while keeping true to their Jewish identities.

## ***Edot HaMizrach***

***Rav Kobi Gigi***

For overarching academic purposes, it is permitted.

לצרכים אקדמיים נטו, מותר.

\*translated by team

## Israeli Ashkenaz

## Rav Meir Nehorai

זאת שאלה מעניינת אני מעריך שאי אפשר ללמוד על דעת בלי להיכנס למפגש בכנסייה ואז יכול להיות בעיה אשמח כניסה. לגבי הכנסייה אני כותב שאם אפשר ללמוד בלי להכנס לכנסייה זה בסדר אבל הכסות למקום של עבודה זרה זה בעייתי. אני חושב שאין שום בעיה ללמוד עליהם (על הדתות) אבל אי אפשר לבקר לשם כך כנסיות או דברים כאלה.

\*translated by team

That is an interesting question. I assume that you cannot learn about a religion without entering a church [or a different place of worship] to meet with them, and then there can be a problem Esmach Knesia (See Definitions, S.D.). Regarding the church, if it is possible to learn without

entering a church, then it is okay, but entering a place of idol worship is problematic. I don't think it is a problem to learn about other religions but you cannot use that as an excuse to enter a church or similar.

## Sfaradi

## Rabbi Yosef Zarnighian

The issue of studying foreign religions during the course of one's humanities studies is certainly not a new question posed before Rabbis across the world. A careful analysis of the Halachic (See Definitions, S.D.) literature reveals to us three potential Halachic issues regarding our engagement in interfaith studies: 1. Bittul Torah (S.D.) 2. Bal tifnu (S.D.) 3. Keria bisfarim chitzoniyim (S.D.).

While the topic of Talmud Torah (S.D.) is quite expansive, the Rambam (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Talmud Torah: 1:8-9) rules that at a minimum, every Jewish man, without exception, must devote a set morning and evening period of every day to the study of Torah. Rambam relates how the great Talmudic Sages (S.D.) of the Jewish people would maintain their vast intellectual and analytical skills in Torah study, despite having day jobs, because they were devoted

and consistent in their learning. This illustrates the importance of consistent Torah study. It is worth noting that Rambam (ibid 3:10) famously rules that one must work to earn a living in addition to the time one must spend learning Torah—implying a person should be knowledgeable in areas beyond Torah. Only a few individuals in every generation could devote their entire day to Torah study, and they are required to have a sustainable pre-existing source of aggregated wealth or passive income (see Penei Yehoshua: Kiddushin 82b, s.v. Rabbi Nehorai).

Furthermore, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (Yesod Mora ve-Sod ha-Torah: Chpt. 1, subsec. 4) notes that the study of sciences and mathematics was common among the Sages of the Talmud, and likely a practice throughout Jewish history, due to the need to properly calculate weights,

measurements, time, and distances relating to Jewish law. Having a background in astronomy, anatomy, history, linguistics, and other disciplines is necessary for the sake of understanding every facet of our Torah that overlaps with these fields. How, then, does the study of other religions enhance our study of the Torah and enhance our lives as Jews?

Rambam (ibid: Laws of Sanhedrin 2:1; Laws of Avoda Zara 3:2) rules that one is normally forbidden by Torah law from admiring, investigating, benefitting, or even studying various forms of foreign worship and idols (per Lev. 18:4), known in Hebrew as Bal Tifnu. However, there are two notable exceptions to this prohibition. According to Maimonides, these restrictions were put in place by the Torah in order to prevent the Jewish people from assimilating into foreign forms of religious practice. Therefore, members of the Sanhedrin— Ancient Israel's highest court— were exempt from these restrictions when they studied foreign religions and their methods of worship, history, etc., as they were necessary for the judges to know, at least peripherally, in order to have the appropriate background to adjudicate cases relating to foreign worship and idolatry.

This is why, in part, Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura (commentary to Sanhedrin 10:1) identifies the prohibition to study apocryphal works (e.g. Sefarim Chitzoniyim (S.D)) as applicable only to subject matters of no utility, such as the works of Aristotle, idolatrous religious groups, erotic poems, etc. Rabbi Meir ibn Todros Halevi Abulafia (Yad Rama: Commentary to Sanhedrin 100b) narrows the scope of this restriction only to biblical commentaries that reject the axioms and principles of Rabbinical Judaism, or to any area of study that undermines Judaism's core tenets. Still, we are left wondering why many rabbinical figures throughout history, including Maimonides, Nachmanides, Rabbis Hasdai Crescas, Isaac

ibn Polqar, Joseph Albo, Joseph Delmedigo, Elie Benamozegh, Joseph Kafih, and so many others, not only studied a plethora of secular and philosophical subjects, but also indicate through their writings that they had fluency in the Christian Scriptures, Islamic religious texts such as the Koran and Hadith, and even familiarity with some Greco-Roman pagan religions.

In his monumental commentary to Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Simin b. Tzemach Duran (Magen Avot: chpt. 2, subsec. 14) carefully outlines the need for Jews to gain fluency in other religions, which brings us to our second exception. According to Rabbi Duran, not only is one permitted to study other religions to counter arguments against Judaism, there is a mitzvah (S.D.) to study other religions under such circumstances. Rabbi Duran allows the study of secular studies and philosophy to anyone, so long as it does not contain antithetical concepts to Judaism; he permits the study of foreign religions, so long as one is studying them to counter missionary work or to better understand idolatrous concepts that already appear in the Tanach, Talmud, or Midrashim. One of Rabbi Duran's contemporaries, Rabbi Isaac b. Sheshat (Teshuvot Harivash: res. no. 45) only permits one to study secular subjects in order to earn a living, and for one to study philosophy only after one has fluency in Tanach (S.D.), Talmud, Midrashim (S.D.), etc. It is unclear what Rivash holds regarding the study of foreign religions, but it appears that he would permit their study only after one gains fluency in biblical and rabbinic literature, and only on the condition that one studies such religions for the sake of enhancing concepts relating to them in one's Talmudic or biblical studies. I would like to end off by noting that despite the restrictive stance that Halacha places on studying foreign religions, it is also forbidden for us to be rude to anyone simply because of what they believe or who they are. As our Sages teach (Pirkei Avot 4:15):

"Rabbi Mathia b. Charash stated: 'be the first to greet every human being.'"

The study of other religions, be it in humanities courses or in one's private life, may be forbidden or permissible depending on one's personal circumstances and intentions. As a general rule, it is permissible to study foreign religions and religious texts for the sake of understanding these concepts as they appear in Jewish texts or in order to prevent other Jews from converting to them. For example, studying the rites of

Baal (S.D.) or Moloch (S.D.) in order to understand what constitutes forbidden worship of such deities, or to enhance our understanding of these idols as they appear throughout Tanach and rabbinic literature. Another example would be studying the Gospels in order to demonstrate their inconsistencies, or in order to better appreciate when and how our Torah transforms certain pagan concepts throughout human history through service to the Creator of the Universe.

## Philosophical Response

Rav Binyamin Shalom

\*not a pesika (See Definitions, S.D.)

Before bringing a weighted answer to such a question, we're kindly invited to review and maybe redefine some notions and concepts in order to make sure we will agree on what is in discussion. Our Rabbi and teacher often asked us using the French expression "de quoi s'agit-il?" when opening a matter before us, i.e. "what are we talking about?"

Avoda zara or idol worship has for us a broader definition than what's commonly understood nowadays. In Tanach (S.D.), a wide array of terms are to be found, such as **אלהים אחרים, עבודת כוכבים, אלילים, גילולים** and that's not all. To accurately address whether it is idol worship or not, we should take in account the idol worship according to

- the way it was conceived by their priests,
- the role it played among common people,
- how it was inherent to their local cultures,
- the fact it emanated from their national idiosyncrasies and
- how it was entangled with their collective cognition, their systems of thought

Unlike the commonly accepted image of the boneheaded, primitive man of the wilderness who sacrificed virgins in times of drought, the idolatrous cults were a remarkably colorful, captivating, and meaningful event. These were part of a broader cultural manifest, involving all realms of its people's collective awareness and strongly embroidered in the fabric of its people's heritage.

Keep in mind, for example, that most ancient Greek and Roman philosophers recognised as men of great wisdom were idol worshipers, from Anaximandros to Sophocles to Homer— from Pamprepius to Gaius to Zeno— among so many others. The same rich cultures that brought forth such people of wisdom were the fertile cradle that nurtured their idols. All the qualities we cherish are entangled with all their ruthless behaviors we abhor, since they stem from the same idolatrous source.

Rabbi Zecharia Frankel in his Darchei HaMishnah, endorsed this time by Rabbi Elyahu Ben Hamozegh, (something that hardly ever happened!) explained that most nations have people who are called first monarchs or forefathers who establish the

nation and build its conceptual foundation. Once a nation is established, its culture develops in proportion to its growing pace, producing at its height people who give expression to its collective spirit. Being the product of the nation par excellence, these people become the most representative element of national culture which was gestated, nurtured and brought forth by the nation.

In such a sense, if George Washington is a forefather for the United States, Hemingway is its product. Rurik and Tolstoy, father and child of Russia, Clovis and Voltaire, France. In a similar fashion, Rabbi Léon Ashkenazi (Manitou) explained that our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, are called "Avot/Avinu" as the ones who are at our roots, the founders and pillars of our people Israel. Once our nation congregated in Egypt, it brought forth Moshe "ben Amram" (the son of a great nation), which together could be given the Torah, though oral until then, could now be institutionalized through divine revelation.

That is to explain that first and foremost, Avoda zara is one of the expressions of a foreign culture in all its levels. An Egyptian god was the expression of the way of being or the way of living of Egypt, also representing a specific Egyptian ideal. Some gods were minor, involving some aspects of life or the culture, and were colorfully represented by statues, images or scapulars inspiring people to internalize certain ideas or ways of living. Hermes, for example, was "a swift traveler," or an ideally swift man. Atlas carried the world on his shoulder, maybe to express the idea that the world's existence depends on certain people's activities. Also these godly entities' names were inspiring. Prometheus, the one who stole fire is called "forethought" and he had a brother, Epimetheus "after-thought."

Some gods on the other hand, were major gods, commonly accepted by all and stood

at the head of the pantheon - Apep, for instance, was a snake god of Egypt, the main enemy of head of their gods Ra, whose convolving movements gave expression to the natural recurring cycles all humankind is subjected to. This is also the reason why God turns Moshe's rod into a snake, and his rod swallows all other snakes, showing Pharaoh and his court that the God of Israel was superior to all the Egyptian pantheon— and this is what was beyond the Egyptian sorcerers' power.

Rabbi Sharky (Manitou's brilliant student) does not hesitate to call these idol worshiping cults, "ideologies;" idols are therefore figurines representing ideas, ideals and ideologies. In his words, Terach, Avraham's father, used to sell ideologies to people. When an ancient man felt unhappy, he could be advised to look for a new god to worship, whose cult would cause him to change his activities, his life-style, and his dietary habits and help him with meeting new partners. Rabbi Ben Hamozegh explained that nowadays, western societies are closer to the pagan world than we could possibly conceive. Take Jesus and Christmas, for example, one as the main god to be worshiped by everyone (who happens to have a celestial family), the second as a time for love and kindness, inspired by figurines and cribs of all kinds. He points out certain traits of behavior and beliefs stating "this is where the atheists are polytheists and where polytheists are atheists." [Polytheism is a form of Atheism because it denies the Universal One Consciousness, even though it admits several divine beings; Atheism is a form of Polytheism because even though they outwardly deny any divine beings, they culturally admit several divine beings without acknowledging Universal One Consciousness.] You're kindly invited to read his beautiful and unparalleled exegeses on the Torah, "Em lamikrah", available at the

very useful site, Sefaria.

Therefore, when Torah narrates that God promised to bring “judgment to the gods of Egypt” it meant those gods’ destruction, but, more importantly, it meant setting the minds free from Egyptian conceptions of the world. As stated by the Pesach haggadah (S.D.), if not by God taking the Jews out of Egypt, the Egyptian cult would still extend throughout the whole world; humans would still be building Egyptian idols, living their lives according to the Egyptian pantheon of ideas.

When Torah commands us to destroy all “idols of canaan,” it primarily means to understand where they erred, where their ideologies lead to chaos and confusion, and to show they were wrong. Destroying a simple statue makes no sense and has no impact over time. Our mission was to debunk their false ideologies, to prove them wrong to the point that they themselves would destroy their idols and submit to the real God of Israel, to “emet,” the truth. That also included the observance of the positives and negatives mitzvot (S.D.), each of which giving expression to a different aspect of truth, that probably disavowed the idol worship’s mindsets; it also included warfare, since idol worship was entangled with military successes.

This is the same reason, in Sefer Shemot at the end of parashat Beshalach, why God does not allow the ones leaving Egypt to go through the land of the Philistines—for them not to be exposed to Philistine cults and ideas, which were apparently more refined and compelling than the Egyptian idols.

The Torah states clearly that one is not to follow “the ways of the Amorites” and the Talmud (S.D.) explains what they were, expressions of ideas, ideals and ideologies, representing life as the nations of the world conceived it. Rabbi Kook wrote an extensive chapter called “Darchei Haemori” explaining

the tractate of Shabbat.

In such a sense, the idol worshipers wanted to get to the truth, but in a way it is foreign to our truth, by the means of their foreign idiosyncrasies. Therefore, “idol worship” reads in Hebrew “a foreign worship”, or “foreign cult,” and this is where the prohibition dwells.

The Talmud narrates many encounters between eminent scholars with Greek and Roman philosophers such as Oenomaus (אבנימוס) from Gadera, a cynic philosopher, among many others. It is a subject that would demand many hours of study, including the way the septuagint was translated (the greek version of the bible rendered by the 70 Rabbis according to the tractate of megillah), the fasting day declared at that moment, the use of the greek language for the prayers and for the holy books, and so much more.

To make it very short, an idol is a little bit like an ideology, a little bit like a life-style, and a little bit like a system of thought foreign to us, that is supposed to bring us to some ideal, an intrinsic misconception of reality, which is doomed to fail sooner or later.

That said, studying foreign knowledge, assessing and trying to understand the logics and functioning of different systems of beliefs does not consist in avoda zara. However, embracing them, abiding to them, living according to them completely or partially and celebrating, being tuned in to their holy days is.

Our sages of blessed memory dedicated time to understand these foreign systems of thought with two essentially different approaches.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslau, in his “Sichot HaRan” chap. 40 (compiled by his student Rabbi Nathan) says one should avoid in all ways to try to understand the “books of investigation” (ספרי המחקר), including the ones written by the sages of Israel. He understood that people who lacked

wingspan— the capacity for dealing with questions that, according to him, were not essential— were doomed to confusion. He also says that the need to investigate is the consequence of bad temper and that some ill-tempered people are hopeless, as their questioning stems from a big void, a sort of a spiritual blackhole which swallows everything and releases no light.

Nonetheless, he understood it is a mitzvah for the chacham (S.D.) to study these works of investigation, as his studies would redeem the souls lost in this whirling wind of nothingness. So Rabbi Nachman did agree someone has to study them. Adding my assessment of his teachings, this was in order to recognize ideas when they arise, intellectual processes when they become a common background, their consequences when adopted, and then, to be able to contradict and prove them wrong when needed.

Spanish scholars who lived under muslim rulers had the opposite approach, and were largely acquainted with all knowledge available and discussed that knowledge freely in their works. Inspired by sages of the antiquity, from Philo of Alexandria to Saadiah Gaon, Rabbis like Maimonides, Yehudah HaLevi, Ibn Daud, Ibn-Guiat, Ibn-Ezra, Albo, Bibago, Migas, Shmuel HaNagid, Abuab, David Nieto, Abraham de Herrera, Nachmanides, Abarbanel, Rosso, Koriat, going all the way through Tsfat and Italy including Moshé David Valli, the Ramkhal, the Alsheikh and even 19th century Rabbis from Italy, such as Shmuel David Luzzato and his fierce opponent, Rabbi Eliahu Ben Hamozegh, all of them were acquainted with all the knowledge made available to them. Rabbi Elyahu Ben Hamozegh unequivocally states that every mitzvah is also the expression of an idea, an ideal and a mindset in action, disproving ideas foreign to Judaism, our cultural heritage and collective identity, which is the

means to bring the world to its ideal form. We might further study that point in the future. Under the light of all above considerations, we use Maimonides words when answering a letter written to him by the great Shmuel HaNagid, inquiring about the possibility of studying philosophy. The Great Eagle (Maimonides) answered the Great General of the Granadan Army (Shmuel HaNagid) that it is allowed, provided one is acquainted with Torah, and strong and steadfast in his faith first.

Also according to him none of the following mistakes are to be committed, and they are in his masterpiece, the Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avoda Zara, as stated by this brief introduction:

- Do not turn to another god.
- Do not seek after the imaginations of the heart or the sight of the eyes.
- Do not blaspheme.
- Do not worship [an idol] the way it is worshiped.
- Do not bow down to it.
- Do not make a carved image [for an idol] for yourself.
- Do not make a carved image [for an idol], even for others.
- Do not make any form or shape of it, even for adornment.
- Do not entice others to worship it.
- Burn the city whose inhabitants have strayed and performed idol worship.
- Do not rebuild the city afterward.
- Do not benefit from any of the city's wealth.
- Do not incite individuals to worship it.
- Do not love the one who incites others in idol worship.
- Do not prevent yourself from hating it.
- Do not spare or save it.
- Do not speak well of it.
- Do not refrain from reminding of its problematic aspects.
- Do not speak prophecy in its name.
- Do not listen to one who speaks

- prophecy in its name.
- Do not speak prophesy falsely, even in the name of God.
- Do not be lenient concerning the duty of putting a false prophet to death.
- Do not swear by the name of a foreign god.
- Do not practice necromancy (communicate with the dead).
- Do not consult a fortune-teller.
- Do not pass one's child through the fire to Molech (S.D.).
- Do not erect a standing stone.
- Do not bow down to a smooth stone, or a pedestal to a statue.
- Do not plant an Asherah pole.
- Destroy the idol and its accessories.
- Do not benefit from an idol or anything associated with it.
- Do not benefit from the coating of a molded image.
- Do not make a covenant with those who
- serve idols.
- Do not show them mercy.
- Do not let them dwell in our land.
- Do not imitate their customs or clothing.
- Do not practice divination.
- Do not practice sorcery.
- Do not mutter incantations.
- Do not conspire with them.
- Do not consult the dead.
- Do not inquire of a medium.
- Do not inquire of a familiar spirit.
- Do not practice witchcraft.
- Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head.
- Do not shave the edges of your beard.
- Do not have a man testify against a woman.
- Do not have a woman testify against a man.
- Do not tattoo yourself.
- Do not disfigure yourself.
- Do not shave a bald spot for the dead.

# Glossary:

## ***Term:*** ***Definition:***

**Bitul Torah:** Bitul Torah refers to the problem of wasting time that should be devoted to Torah study for futile endeavors or studies, potentially blowing off an obligation.

**Tanach:** Tanach is an acronym for Torah, Neviim, and Ketuvim, referring to the 24 books that make up the parts of the Torah that have always been written down.

**Midrashim:** Midrashim are a kind of Oral Tradition, expounding on complex, missing or seemingly contradictory parts of the Torah, delving deeping to explain more and fill in the blanks.



<b>Bal Tifnu:</b>	Bal Tifnu refers to the prohibition to admire, research, study, or derive benefit from idols and worshipping foreign deities.
<b>Keria bisfarim chitzoniyim:</b>	This is the prohibition to read certain books relating to idolatry or other matters against Jewish belief and law.
<b>Talmud Torah:</b>	The obligation for Jewish men to spend time immersing themselves in Torah study at once daily.
<b>The Talmud:</b>	Talmud, also referred to as Gemara, refers to part of the Oral Tradition of Jewish works, compiled into writing around 500 CE, mainly discussing laws and how to act as a Jew.
<b>[the rites of] Baal:</b>	A Canaanite rain deity explicitly discussed and prohibited throughout Tanach whose form of worship often involved sexual promiscuity.
<b>[the rites of] Moloch:</b>	A foreign deity explicitly discussed and prohibited in the Torah whose form of worship involves passing through fire.
<b>Sefarim Chitzoniyim:</b>	Books relating to idolatry or other matters against Jewish belief and law.
<b>Esmach Knesia:</b>	The prohibition to enter a place of idol worship.
<b>Pesach Haggadah:</b>	The book used at the Passover Seder to tell the story of the exodus from Egypt and fulfill the obligations of the night.
<b>Mitzvot/ Mitzvah:</b>	Torah commandment.
<b>Chacham:</b>	A Chacham is a sage, or a wise person who is well-versed in Jewish law who often is able to provide guidance into how to properly practice Judaism.
<b>Avoda Zara:</b>	Avoda Zara refers to idol worship or serving non-Jewish gods. This is one of the three most severe sins a person could commit.

**Hashkafa:** Hashkafa is a Jewish way of thought or outlook on the world. No one way is correct or authoritative, and it may vary among wide ranges of people, though often guided by Jewish laws and values.

**Halachic:** An adjective meaning in accordance with Halacha, the system of Jewish law.

**Pesika:** a definite Halachic ruling

## Have a question you want answered?

Email us at [acollegestudentsguidetohalacha@gmail.com](mailto:acollegestudentsguidetohalacha@gmail.com) or check out our previous issues at [www.acollegestudentsguidetohalacha.com](http://www.acollegestudentsguidetohalacha.com)!