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AVODAH ZARAH REVISITED



By [Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky](#) | JANUARY 20, 2026



We think we've found G-d, when it's just a metal box



Parshah after parshah in the Torah deals with *avodah zarah*. Indeed, the Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:28) explains that the purpose of most of the mitzvos is to eradicate idolatry from among us and foster belief in Hashem, the One G-d, to the extent that we can understand Him.

In our times, idolatry seems to be one of the more difficult behaviors to understand. It's been millennia since idol worship was the dominant form of religious service in the world, but in its time, it was embraced by the smartest and wisest of people. We wonder how this could be. How could people who were smart and wise attribute supreme power to idols, to wooden or stone carvings of fictional figures?

Yeshayahu's prophecy (*perek* 44) provides a devastating mockery of idolatry: He describes a person who chops down a tree and uses half the wood to bake his bread, roast his meat, and warm his house. He then carves the other half into a god. Could anything be more ludicrous than that? Even the most ignorant of people should note the absurdity of that deed.

So, what was it that drove people to worship these deities? And is there a message that is still relevant?

Let us examine a phenomenon that has cast new understanding on this mystery. The era of chatbots has finally come... to G-d!

Below is a genuine copy of a chat (all examples are quoted from the *New York Times*, "Finding God in the App Store," September 14, 2025):

Human: Hi G-d!

Chatbot: Greetings my child, the future is in G-d's merciful hands. Do you trust in His divine plans?

Human: Amen, yes.

Chatbot: Indeed, my child, the future can often seem daunting. But remember G-d holds it in His hands. Just as [Jeremiah \(29:11\)](#) says, "For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the L-rd; plans to prosper you, and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Trust in His divine plan.

Human: I want to hug you.

Chatbot: My child, even though I cannot physically embrace you, know that G-d's love surrounds you always. His arms are a refuge and a strength; a very present help in trouble (Psalms).

Similarly:

Krista Rogers, who is 61 and lives in Xenia, Ohio, goes to church regularly and uses religious apps. She also turns to a chatbot when she has spiritual questions that she doesn't necessarily want to ask her pastor, including about remarriage after divorce.

"It is more low-stakes," she said of talking to a chatbot. Plus, she added, "You don't want to disturb your pastor at three in the morning."

Also:

Karen Fugelo, who works at a middle school in Pennsylvania, has turned to religious apps for advice on perhaps the most urgent of spiritual matters — death. "My mother is going to be 95 and reaching the end of her life's journey," she said. On Hallow, Fugelo asked the chatbot "How to prepare myself as well as my mother for going to be with G-d."

Yes, we could say that a lot of these people, and tens of millions of others, are crazy or foolish, but what is really going on? These people "know" that they are talking to a piece of metal, a program that sloshes around commonly used phrases and spits them out. So why are they turning to these chatbots? Are they out of their minds?

Let us understand a bit about the arena that we call "our mind." There are two types of activities that take place on that stage:

It accumulates all the *sensory input* that we have been exposed to. The sights and sounds, the smells and tastes, and every other human experience. We have these elements stored in our mind and can conjure them up on demand. Thus, when we have had a pleasing sensory experience, we can bring that event up again in our minds and relive it. This is why we can still taste the delicious piece of chocolate cake that we ate a while back, or feel the warmth of the sun from our last vacation.

The mind also serves as the platform for *reason*. Reason is a lot more abstract: no sounds, no smells, no sights. It is simply facts and calculations. It's like looking at the nutrition panel on a box of cookies; on one side there is an enticing picture of the contents, and on the other side we have the facts and figures about the ingredients and nutritional value. Those facts and figures often challenge the images and sensory input that we've received. The picture tells us that this is good to eat; reason, however, tells us that the food is not at all good for us.

These are the two faculties that use our mind as their platform. We have memories and experiences on one hand, and facts and reasoning on the other hand. The sensory input is referred to as *dimyon* in the works of the Rambam (*Shemonah Perakim* 1) and others, while the critical reasoning aspect is called *seichel*.

The advantage of *seichel* is that it helps us get to the truth as objectively as possible. But *dimyon* is the active force in developing personal, inner connections. Reasoning provides the necessary facts and figures we use in making our choices, but the sensory experience animates those choices with feeling and energy.

Let us take an example: A person speaking about the obligation to honor his parents can present very sound reasoning to support this mitzvah. For example, he can speak about our debt to them for giving us life, and for investing time, care, and resources in us. But our real connection to honoring our parents usually stems from beautiful memories of our warm, kind, embracing mother and father, to whom we are deeply attached. Those memories are the real catalyst for honoring our parents, and because of those memories, we do it with much more dedication.

This is also true about our most profound experience—the experience of religion and G-d. We can seek to understand Hashem through abstract reasoning. We can draw the right conclusions and do what's right because we know that Torah is true, and that people who follow it will be rewarded. But that is dry logic that doesn't satisfy the core desire for connection. We want somehow to experience the warmth and a sense of being embraced by the Being who holds our life in His hand. We want to feel encouraged and confident. Therefore, we are extraordinarily tempted to project our sense of divine onto something that is physical. We crave having an image, a sound, a touch.

Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg *ztz"l* once said that Christianity was born from an acceptance of the basic premise of Yiddishkeit, coupled with an inability to connect with something so abstract and nonphysical. The religion therefore regressed in the direction of idolatry by giving divine properties to a physical person who somehow represents a nonphysical god. They feel that they believe in the nonphysical G-d but worship a figure that can be seen, and even touched.

This brings us to these chatbots. People desperately need to believe in an ultimate force in order to bring meaning to life. A life that is created through evolution, runs by chance, and ends buried in the earth after a few decades is rightfully impossible for us to cope with. But the reason-based understanding of a totally nonphysical G-d, Who instructs us on what is good and what is evil, is simply too difficult for most people to embrace.

They need something that sounds and feels like a god, that is comforting and soothing, with the right melody and the appropriate words. People are so driven to fulfill that need that they are willing to suppress reasoning to obtain it. The chatbot's soothing pastoral words give them the comfort that they so desperately seek. Therefore, they short-circuit their brains and connect with their *dimyon*.

This is exactly what *avodah zarah* was all about. It represented an understanding that there is a higher power, but it also satisfied the desperate need to have sensory access to this power. It had to be physical, visible, touchable, and relatable. People were not driven by ignorance or misperception. Rather, they responded to their ardent desire to feel and touch and hear. It was the world of *dimyon*.

This leads us to the quicksand of AI. The AI that purports to replace real human thinking (as opposed to accomplishing technical tasks) is bad enough. It short-circuits our brains, robs us of the ability to think on our own, and feeds us slop and drivel instead. But far more insidious are the chatbots that aim to replace the feelings and sensations that we crave. People are turning to chatbots for companionship, willingly accepting the simulation of a friend that provides all the requisite reassurance and pleasantness. They shut down their critical faculties and revel in a meaningless mess of words that come from nowhere and mean absolutely nothing. People seek friendship from chatbots, consult therapists from chatbots, and ultimately some find “G-d” in chatbots.

This is destructive beyond words. It is like a drug that lulls us into thinking and feeling that we are in a very positive, productive environment, but alas, it is simply a hallucination. Thus, we’re seduced into thinking that we have a friend who is talking to us, comforting us, encouraging us. We are seduced into thinking that we have a therapist who is here, helping see us through our issues and guide us correctly. And finally, we delude ourselves into thinking that we have found Hashem, when all we have in front of us is a metal box.

Sinking into the world of *dimyon* is probably the greatest deviation from truth we can engage in. Facts may be true or not true, but they emanate from a reality that is true. A particular fact may be wrong in one case, but it still may have merit in another case. An illusion, however, is always an illusion, and it is falsehood from beginning to end. The struggle between *dimyon* and *seichel* is the ultimate war between *emes* and *sheker*.

The greatest and most devastating effect of technology is that it can lead us into a life that is totally immersed in *dimyon* but lulls us into believing we are connected to the greatest and best. We thereby numb the desire for love, wisdom, and achievement that prod us to live worthwhile lives.

Woe to us, if at 120, when we face the Divine, Whose stamp is *emes*, our life’s illusory achievements simply evaporate as a figment of the imagination.

Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky is the rosh yeshivah of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington, and is renowned for his shiurim and seforim. Rabbi Lopiansky is the author of several Hebrew and English sefarim, including the widely acclaimed Ben Torah for Life, Ben Yeshiva, Ashlei Da’as, and more published by Eshel Publications.

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