

Every rabbi needs a Dick Cavett Show. That probably makes sense to no one other than myself, so allow me to explain. When I was growing up, Rabbi Howard Kahn, *alav hashalom*, frequently began his sermons with. “I heard this week on Dick Cavett...”

My Dick Cavett is Dennis Prager. Some of you may know of him only through his political writings and television appearances. For those who know him that way, 50% will agree with him and 50% will not. But all should know that Dennis began his career writing and speaking about things other than politics, and his Jewish work is among the very best I have ever heard or read. Dennis and I have developed something of a personal relationship over the years, and when he heard I was coming to Carmel, he promised to come here to do an event with us. We'll have to plan far ahead given his schedule, but I promise you it will be something special.

So Dennis Prager is my Dick Cavett, and I heard this week on the Dennis Prager Show an interview with David Hazony, who writes for the Jerusalem Post, The New Republic, and other publications. He has just written a book titled *The Ten Commandments: How Our Most Ancient Moral Text Can Renew Modern Life*. After hearing the interview, it is book I look forward to reading.

David Hazony grew up in America in a Hebrew speaking household. Like many Israelis, his family was Jewishly literate but not very observant. Later in life, Hazony became a *baal teshuvah*—he became observant. He did not write his book specifically for a Jewish audience, but as a book written by an observant Jew, there are no Christological perspectives that Jewish readers have to reframe.

Tonight, I would like to share with you one of David Hazony's ideas about the Ten Commandments, an idea

that is new to me. It relates to the second of the ten commandments, which begins as follows:

*You shall have no other gods besides Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them.*

Hazony asks the following question: What was so wrong about the Golden Calf? Of course, I think most of us, including me, would respond that it is a violation of the prohibition of making an image which was then worshipped. I do not think Hazony would refute that, but he certainly adds another layer of meaning on top of this one.

He points out that the Golden Calf was not a form of polytheism—there were not many calves, there was only

one. Yes, it was a likeness of something on earth, but Hazony teaches us that there are more problems with it. He points out how different the Golden Calf was from God: it was visible, it was beautiful and seductive, and it was the work of human hands. Hazony teaches that the moral corruption of idolatry is that it leads us to worship something not for its moral authority or moral clarity, but for its beauty or its power. It leads us to worship the work of mortal hands. It is one thing to respect or admire or even love the work of human hands—God knows I feel that way about just about anything written by Beethoven or Mozart, to name but two. But I do not worship them, nor do I worship what they produced. Once we elevate the work of human hands to the level of being worshipped, we have crossed the line.

Dennis asked David Hazony an interesting question. He asked if Hazony felt that God's invisibility was important. Hazony's answer was yes, and his reason was, I think,

unique. He said that God must be invisible because so is the moral plane that the Torah is trying to enforce. He points out that it is sometimes hard to distinguish the line between good and evil, between right and wrong. When is this the case? When whatever is popular, whatever happens to be in vogue at any particular time, can seem right simply because it becomes ubiquitous. When it seems like everybody is doing something, it is very difficult to swim against the tide and say that just because something is popular does not make it morally correct. From the “free love” of the sixties to the present day excesses of “body art,” popularity sometimes wins out over morality.

However, the rabbis of the Talmud have something important to teach us here. In the Hebrew Bible there is a story about a fellow named Micah. This is not the prophet of the same name; you can read the story of this other Micah in the Book of Judges. Read it and you will see that

Micah made an image of silver. Yet when the Talmud lists those who practiced idolatry in the Bible, Micah's name is conspicuously absent from the list. The question is asked why he is not included, and the Talmud tells us it is because he maintained the practice of give food to hungry travelers. Our Talmudic sages remind us that what we do for others is far more important than whatever ritual violations of which we might be guilty.

*The Ten Commandments: How Our Most Ancient Moral Text Can Renew Modern Life*—living as we do in our glorious digital age, I have downloaded the first chapter of Hazony's book as a free sample to my Kindle. If the book is as compelling as the interview, we may share more learning from Hazony's book in the future. I'm certain we'll share more things that I hear on the Dennis Prager Show. After all, every rabbi needs his Dick Cavett Show. I'm glad to introduce you to mine.

