

Paganism

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

So much of this week's reading is devoted to warning the Children of Israel not to follow the religion and fashions of the Canaanites they were coming to displace. The Israelite mission was to live a considered, thoughtful life, not the random, superstitious, loose and indulgent life of the pagans.

What characterized Canaanite paganism was the disguising of one's true outward and inward self. Ritual masks, body paint, tattoos and defacing, were all characteristic of their pagan religion, as well as child sacrifice and torture. Judaism encouraged pleasure but in a disciplined and controlled way. In Paganism, it was "do whatever you feel like it." This is why the Torah warns against four seemingly disconnected things this week that really make the one essential point of what differentiates us, ethically, from others.

These are some of its opinions and instructions about and against paganism:

- **"Each person did whatever was right in his or her eyes."** – Without religious standards we are in danger of being completely self-indulgent. "I can do whatever I feel like." This undermines morality and a fair, caring society.
- **"Do not write or deface your bodies."** – Tattooing or defacing one's body was a mark of primitive pagan societies. It was then and is now a signal to show others that we are the same as everyone else and we have their values.
- **"These are the animals you may eat."** – By controlling what and how we eat we are forced to stop and think, to consider, what our life and values are, every time we sit down to eat. That is how one builds up patterns of thoughtful, Godly behavior.
- **"If your friends entice you."** – Peer group pressure and fashion exert a very powerful pressure on us. So many youngsters get into trouble nowadays because they are bullied or scared to go against the popular stream or be made fun of simply because they want to be different and hold on to a different morality.

Written three thousand years these statements are still true today. They combine to define what being different amounts to. If we allow pagan influences to determine how we behave, we are no different to everyone else around us or to those who choose self-indulgent lives that contribute nothing to the benefit of society.