Nathan,

Yasher koach. You gave us a lot to think about this morning. In addition to parsing verses and phrases of your Torah portion, and sharing rabbinic wisdom, you posed a question that hits a nerve at the very core of Jewish religion. You asked: Is it possible that almost *all* religions could be true? And then you gave us really good commentaries to suggest that maybe even the Torah accepts this possibility, with the existence of other gods.

Personally, I find that it's hard enough for folks to believe in ONE God, let alone many. But your curiosity and the texts you found invite further conversation about this question. Are there other gods than ours? It would be a heretical question if the plain meaning of the text didn't set it up for us to ask.

Each day, Jews across the world say the Shema. Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One. But shortly thereafter, in the liturgy, we also say Mi Chamocha BaElim Adonai? Who is like You among the gods, Adonai? Both of those prayers are taken directly from the Torah.

Abraham Ibn Ezra, the medieval grammarian, translates Elim in Mi Chamocha not to mean "gods," but rather "stars," implying that God is singular in the Heavens. But Hizkuni points out that if you notice, there is no yud in the word "Elim," the way you would expect. Therefore, he says, if there are other gods, they're just not as good as ours. More specifically, they are silent. Ba-elim, other commentaries say, should be read as Ba-ilem, meaning "among the silent." This idea is consistent with one of the traditional psalms of Hallel, number 115: which says, in reference to idols: "they have mouths but cannot speak, eyes but cannot see; they have ears but cannot hear, noses but cannot smell." Before coming in with a mic drop to say…those who fashion them, and revere them, are doomed to become just like them.

Seems pretty clear that even if other people worship other gods, we're better off sticking just to one.

Some biblical scholars have argued that the religion of ancient Israel was not mono*theist*, but mono*lotrous*, believing in one god without denying the existence of others. Which is theoretically interesting, but religiously kind of a deal breaker. And as a rabbi, I'm not personally sure that's a fight I want to fight. So I'll give Jeffrey Tigay, the great Bible scholar, the final word: "That most Israelites ignored not only the gods of foreign nations," he says, "but even the gods of natural phenomena on which all humans depend can only mean that they did not consider these phenomena to be divine or independently effective."

And that's that. But the reason that this debate is so juicy is that Judaism is supremely self-aware about its place among bigger more famous religions. From the very beginning of our story as Jews, we've had to find some way of communicating *to* and *about* peoples who are not like us, and who believe very different things. This week's exchange with Pharaoh gives us a good example of that. As does the rest of the Torah, detailing as it does what to do and what not to do vis-a-vis the practices of other nations. And your teaching, Nathan, that Judaism allows for us to be accepting of other people's beliefs and practices is also pretty resonant in Jewish history.

Judaism is famously not a proselytizing religion, and is generally comfortable to let other people believe whatever they want. The Talmud explains that those non-Jews who observe the Noahide laws, which are effectively about living ethical lives, have a share in the World to Come and should be praised. The Mishneh Torah goes on to say that if we have a conversionary impulse, it should be to insist that all of humankind conduct themselves ethically, and establish a justice system to enforce ethical behavior.[1] And of course the Torah itself gives us many examples of non-Israelites who play essential roles in the life of the People. Moses' wife, Tzipporah, and her father, Yitro, who was a non-Israelite priest. Balaam, a non-Israelite prophet. These men literally pray to other gods, and the Torah doesn't bat an eye at that. Even as the Torah also describes conquering

[1] MT Kings 8:10

lands and people, even if it forbids us from certain practices and delineates boundaries to keep us knowing who we are…it's fair to say that the worldview of the Torah understands that Israel will be part of an international tapestry. Chosen, sure, to be a little different, but all the while accepting other nations. It's an orientation that was much more common in the ancient world, before global religions emerged later.

Pluralism – which is to say accepting the diversity of beliefs – has been part of Judaism since the beginning. Since even before the rabbis of the Talmud broke open the flood gates of disagreement and made it possible for us to disagree with one another as Jews. Which is the subject of another sermon. If anything, acknowledging the presence and validity of other nations has allowed us to thrive. How else could a teeny, tiny people survive scattered across the world over the last three thousand years?

As *American* Jews, we have double the reasons to accept and even celebrate the presence of views and identities of people who are unlike us. Living, as we do, as a minority among so many other minorities, all the more so here in New York City. We have thrived in America, precisely because pluralism was enshrined in some of this country's foundational texts. James Madison's Federalist Number 10, written to explain Constitutional ideas and to get New Yorkers to ratify the Constitution, argues that governments are not better when they limit dissent. But rather, when there are many different opinions in the public sphere, no one opinion can reign supreme, mitigating the potential of mob rule. Dissent, he argues, therefore needs to be protected in a democratic republic, where minorities must have the right to say and believe whatever they want, no matter who is in political power. This view pervades throughout the Constitution, in its establishment of a *collective* Congress, and within the free exercise of religion, freedom of speech, and so on.

This sort of American pluralism, alongside the Jewish approach to tolerance that we've described today, are together a kind of American Jewish gospel. And it couldn't be more important to speak about right now. When political currents push us in the direction of targeting minority groups,

or identifying certain views as “the problem.” And when there is a cultural trend toward circling the wagons, nationally, politically, socially, we can’t lose sight of a history and tradition that varyingly tolerates and celebrates the inherent diversity of humanity.

In this week’s parsha, as the Israelites leave Egypt, the text says: V’gam erev rav alah itam. A mixed multitude went with them.

But who were they? Rashi says they were a mix of nationalities who had chosen to convert. The Hertz chumash describes them as the Egyptian lower class who saw a chance to emigrate and live better lives. The 19th century Shadal says they were Egyptians who had intermarried with the Israelites. Whoever they were, there were a lot of them. The Mekhilta and Targum Yonatan all suggest that this number was actually bigger than the people themselves. 600,000 Israelite males set against somewhere between 1.2 to 3.6 million non Israelite males alongside them.

The Israelites and these fellow travelers make their way out of Egypt together, fighting the same battles, and building a shared society with one law for the native and the stranger alike.

Even then, at the very beginning, at the moment when Israelite norms and identities were being defined, non-Israelites, non-Jews, “the other,” were part of the national calculus. Not only did that fact lead the Torah to implore us to “love the stranger,” but we can surmise that all of biblical Judaism developed with an acceptance of all others who were ready and willing to accept the Jews…if not adherence to Juda*ism*.

Judaism has always been a tiny religion that has lived alongside other ideas, even as we’ve held onto our own. As we fight for a society in which we want to live fully as Jews, sharing the best wisdom from our tradition with those in this society, this is a central idea. That people who are different from us can also be core to us, part of our thriving. That a multiplicity of beliefs and views is only natural in human existence. That we are not any less, nor less ourselves, when we foster the flourishing of the

other. That is the ultimate lesson you shared with us, Nathan, and it is worth holding onto…as we live in this world, try to make some sense of it, and ideally, work toward making it better.

Shabbat Shalom.