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## Other People's Gods

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MR BLOOM LED a blameless life until he saw Ganesha. Some people do. Some, like Mr Bloom, go to ophthalmic college at their mother's insistence although in their hearts they had yearned to travel to far-off lands. Some, like him, dream of spice islands and dusky maidens but settle for Telma stock cubes and the buxom daughter of the retiring optician, Mr Lefkowitz. Some, like Mr Bloom, raise a family and examine rheumy eyes and rub their corns at night and quite forget in all that piling-up of years that once they longed to stand bare-chested on a shore of golden sand, to go where man had never trod, to love as man had never loved. Some find contentment there, and others discontent. Mr Bloom, quite to his own surprise, found Ganesha.

He was on a market stall, among bangles and saris, joss sticks and wall hangings. There, in the centre, a porcelain statue of a four-armed man with an elephant's head, or perhaps an elephant with the body of a four-armed man. He was bright pink, with large kind eyes and a golden headdress. One of his hands was beckoning, another motioning the observer to stay away. Mr Bloom saw at once that this was a god; what else could it be, enticing and warning at the same moment? He picked up the statue, the glaze smooth beneath his fingertips. The young man tending the stall, dirty blond dreadlocks falling into his eyes, said:

'Careful, Grandpa, yeah? You break it, you pay, alright?'

Mr Bloom thought of the story of Abraham our forefather, who condemned his father for *avodah zara*, by which is meant foreign worship, by which is meant idol worship. As a young boy, realising the truth that there is only one God, Abraham smashed his father's idols. When his father punished him, Abraham said, 'No, father, it wasn't me, it was the biggest idol. He took a stick and smashed all the others.' His father said, 'You idiot, idols can't move!' and Abraham replied, 'So why do you worship them, then?' The story does not relate whether at that moment Abraham's father was enlightened, or whether, on the contrary,

he punished Abraham yet harder for stripping him of the beliefs which, in prehistoric Mesopotamia, must have been even more precious than they are today.

Mr Bloom considered all this as he held Ganesha in his hands. Those eyes were so tender, full of love for whatever they looked upon. Those arms were so strong; with him on one's side how could a person ever fail? Mr Bloom had never touched an idol before, never before considered that the sin of *avodah zara* could have any practical application. He looked at the smooth curl of the trunk, mighty yet comforting.

'I'll take him,' he said.

For a while, Mr Bloom thought he could hide Ganesha. He wrapped the god in plastic bags, cushioned him with hundreds of soft lens-cleaning cloths, and tucked him behind the stack of Passover dishes at the bottom of the wardrobe in the spare room. But it was no use. Somehow his wife always seemed to need something from right at the back of that very wardrobe and he was sent to retrieve it. Or one of his children would have left the door open. Whenever Mr Bloom went near the spare room, Ganesha's trunk would have worked its way out of its wrapping and waved at him, bold and pink, from the plastic-bag swaddling.

He wants to be worshipped, thought Mr Bloom,

and knew at once that it was true, for wasn't that always what gods wanted? Love and gifts, or fear and wars, or sometimes both. But how to worship him? Mr Bloom was puzzled; he had never worshipped an idol before, and had not the least idea of the proper way to do so. He looked in his Bible. 'Thou shalt not make for thyself graven images,' he read. 'Thou shalt not bow down to them or worship them.' Then, later, God said 'an altar shalt thou make for me, and sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, thy sheep and thine oxen'. Mr Bloom had neither sheep nor oxen, and did not particularly want to make a burnt offering of his professional equivalent. He had once melted a pair of spectacles by mistake and the fumes had been revolting. But bowing down and worshipping seemed fairly easy to achieve.

Mr Bloom placed Ganesha on a raffia footstool in the spare room, taking care to close the door first. Ganesha seemed happy, the fiery glint in his eye now one of deep approval. Slowly, mindful of the mild arthritis in his right knee, Mr Bloom lowered himself to the floor, then bowed so that his forehead touched the ground.

'O Great Ganesha,' he intoned, in a prayer he had composed himself, 'I humbly thank you for gracing my home with your presence. I pray, O lord Ganesha, that you will bless all those who dwell here. And I

especially beseech you, all-knowing and most merciful Ganesha, to help my daughter Judy in her law A-level for, O kind Ganesha, she finds the coursework very hard to understand. Ohhhhh mighty Ganesha,' he said, attempting to raise himself up into a kneeling position again, to proceed with his prayer. But though his spirit longed to give Ganesha due praise, Mr Bloom's back was weak. A muscle in his left buttock spasmed, he crouched down again and, waiting for the pain to subside, it was in this position that his wife found him twenty minutes later.

'Reuben!' she said. 'What in God's name do you think you're doing?'

'I,' he said, 'Sandra, my back, it's gone again, bring the Deep Heat!' He hoped to distract her long enough to crawl with Ganesha to the wardrobe and conceal him, but Sandra was more sharp-witted than that.

'Reuben!' she said again, 'is that an *idol*? Were you *worshipping* an *idol* in our own home, with me so busy with the Pesach cleaning and the Rabbi coming for lunch on Shabbes?'

'Sandra!' Mr Bloom replied. 'How can you say such a thing?' For Mr Bloom hadn't been married for twenty years without learning a thing or two himself. 'No,' he continued, 'I found this *statue* on a market stall and I thought it might suit the colour scheme in

this room.’ Mrs Bloom had nagged him for years to take a greater interest in such domestic matters. ‘I was just... examining it when I tripped and fell and hurt my back.’

‘Hmmm,’ said Sandra.

‘Deep Heat?’ said Mr Bloom. ‘Please, my love?’

Sandra, whose heart was kind although her tongue was sharp, hurried to the bathroom to fetch the tube of healing ointment.

In the meantime, Mr Bloom attempted, without a great deal of success, to replace the statue of Ganesha in his wrappings, to cover over his flamboyance and thus cease to distress his wife. But the trunk seemed unaccountably slippery, and the bubble wrap must have shrunk a little. When Sandra returned, Ganesha was still sitting on the floor. She massaged the soothing cream deep into her husband’s buttock while staring thoughtfully at the god. At last, her fingers still menthol-fragrant, she picked up the statue and examined it critically.

‘Do you know,’ she said, ‘I think it might do for the living room. On the sideboard. It’s very ethnic.’

And so Ganesha took up residence at the very centre of the Bloom home. The children objected naturally, as children always do.

‘Errrr,’ said Judy at breakfast, while munching her Marmite bagel, ‘I think it’s staring at me.’

'Yuck,' said David, flicking Ganesha with his fingernail as he hoisted his schoolbag. 'It looks dirty. I bet it's infested.'

'The statue is hollow,' said Mr Bloom mildly, wondering in his heart why God chose to turn delightful babies into charmless teenagers, 'and his name is Ganesha.'

David rolled his eyes. Judy sighed. They went to school. As Mr Bloom was taking the breakfast dishes into the kitchen he paused for a moment in front of Ganesha, inclined his head slightly, and left a morsel of bagel on a saucer in front of him.

Mr Bloom could not help but notice that his life seemed better with Ganesha in it. When Mrs Rosenblatt, of the Rosenblatt Dried Fruit empire, missed her fourth appointment in a row, Mr Bloom did not tremble at the idea of rebuking her. Instead, he felt a mastery, a calmness, a purposeful strength. He picked up the telephone without hesitation and said:

'Mrs Rosenblatt, your appointment has now been rescheduled for half past four. If you are not in my shop at half past four, Bloom's Opticians will have no further need of your custom.'

'But... ' said Mrs Rosenblatt.

'No further need,' he said again.

'But Mr... ' said Mrs Rosenblatt.

‘Thank you,’ said Mr Bloom, ‘and good day.’

Mrs Rosenblatt appeared, punctual and meek, at half past four. As Mr Bloom ushered her into his eye-testing room he muttered a quiet prayer of thanks to Ganesha.

The rest of the family, too, grew increasingly fond of the god as the days went on. Ganesha’s gaze was so magnanimous, he filled the living room with a sense of quiet peace. Mr Bloom noticed that Sandra and Judy and David spent longer in that room now. David took to doing his homework on the table under the watching eye of Ganesha. And Mr Bloom noticed that, though Judy was still dismissive and disdainful of the statue, on the morning before her module exam she left a badge from her jacket on the sideboard in front of him. She caught her father’s eye as she turned to go, shrugged uncomfortably and said: ‘For luck. You know.’ And when Judy did better in that examination than in her teachers’ opinions she had any right to, Ganesha came to be looked on in the Bloom family home with a certain warmth.

At first, the Blooms did not speak of Ganesha outside their home. But Hendon is not a place for secrets. Perhaps it was that Judy’s friend from school, Mikaella, observed her placing a small handful of yellow mandel croutons in front of the god before she started her homework. Perhaps it was that

David's friend Benjy wondered why David rubbed the statue's head before the final round of every Wii Tennis game. However it happened, soon one person spoke to another and another to a third and it became known in Hendon that the Blooms – yes, Bloom's the optician, yes, Sandra Bloom of the PTA, yes, that nice David Bloom whose barmitzvah they'd attended only two short years before – those very Blooms had an idol in their house.

Now, it is made very clear in the Bible that the introduction of idolatry into a good Jewish home cannot go unchallenged. Were not 3,000 men put to death for worshipping a golden calf? And was it not for this very sin of idolatry that Jezebel was thrown from a window to be devoured by wild dogs? Of course, Barnet Council would be much alarmed should such events come to pass in Hendon. And thus it was that Mr Bloom was not awakened in the night by a party of eunuchs come to effect his defenestration, but instead received a telephone call asking that he should kindly pay a visit to the Rabbi at his earliest convenience.

The Rabbi was a young man, only recently finished with his seminary education. Nonetheless, his beard was neat and his manner suitably deferential to a man of Mr Bloom's seniority.

'Now, aheheh,' he said, steeping his fingers, 'I

wanted to talk to you, Mr Bloom, about your, um, statue.'

'Oh yes?' said Mr Bloom. He did not feel perturbed. He had found that since Ganesha had entered his life, he had been less easily disturbed by all vicissitudes. He felt solid.

'Yes,' said the Rabbi. He fiddled with his beard nervously. 'The thing is, Mr Bloom, there's been talk. That is, there has started to be talk. Not, you understand, that I listen to talk, no, not at all, but a man of your position, a trustee of the synagogue, Mr Bloom...'

'Talk?' said Mr Bloom, mildly.

'About your statue, Mr Bloom. People are talking about your statue.' The Rabbi began to speak more quickly, clearly discomfited by Mr Bloom's silence. 'The thing is, Mr Bloom, it doesn't do for a synagogue trustee to have a... to have a...'

'A god?' Mr Bloom volunteered.

'An idol,' said the Rabbi. 'It doesn't do for someone in your position to have an idol in your house. So, um, get rid of it, please.'

Mr Bloom thought about how his house had changed since the arrival of Ganesha. It was not, of course, that the family was unrecognizable. Not that there was no longer any strife or bitterness. They continued to argue, to complain; things contin-

ued to go wrong. And yet, the quiet presence of the elephant-headed god seemed to have strengthened each of them. Perhaps, thought Mr Bloom, it was his imagination. And yet he would rather not give the god up.

'I think,' he said, 'that I would rather not.'

The Rabbi frowned and leaned forward in his chair, earnest and sincere.

'Now look here, Mr Bloom,' he said, 'we can both be reasonable about this, can't we? Of course you know and I know that you don't *worship* the thing. But can't you see that it looks all wrong?'

'But I do,' said Mr Bloom.

'Ah,' said the Rabbi, satisfied, 'at least you can see that.'

'No,' said Mr Bloom, 'I mean that I do worship him.'

And the Rabbi sat back suddenly as if Mr Bloom, the kindly optician, had struck him in the face.

'Hmm,' he said after a long pause, 'we should talk more. Perhaps tomorrow?'

On the second day, the Rabbi telephoned in the afternoon and invited Mr Bloom to come to talk with him in his study at the synagogue.

'Mr Bloom,' said the Rabbi, obviously a little nervous, 'I want to talk to you about God.'

Mr Bloom smiled and said, 'that's your field,

Rabbi, not mine.'

The Rabbi smiled thinly, 'Quite, quite. But the thing is, Mr Bloom, God is really quite specific about idols. Second commandment, you know. No other gods before me. Make for yourself no graven image. It's really very clear.'

Mr Bloom nodded slowly.

'I don't see how you can say that you "worship" a statue and still keep your place on the synagogue board, you see, Mr Bloom. I don't see how we can keep on letting you attend the synagogue at all.'

Mr Bloom said, mildly, 'But I still keep the laws. I still pray to God. I'm still a Jew.'

And the Rabbi spread his hands wide and smiled nervously and shook his head and said: 'Ah, but "I the Lord your God am a jealous God," you know.'

Mr Bloom thought of Ganesha, his wide, kind eyes, his welcoming arms. 'If God is so great,' he said, 'why is he jealous? I thought we weren't supposed to covet.'

And the Rabbi's face darkened, and he said: 'I can see we will have to talk further about this, Mr Bloom.'

And on the third day, Mr Bloom received another telephone call. It was in the early morning; Mr Bloom's shop was not due to open for another hour. The Rabbi apologized for calling so early and

said: 'Mr Bloom. I have thought a great deal about what you have said. I think I should see the statue for myself. I wonder if you would be able to bring it here, to the synagogue, this morning? I think that the whole matter could be resolved if you would bring the statue here.'

Mr Bloom agreed that he would do so. He had, after all, benefited a great deal from the synagogue and its Rabbis. He was still a Jew. Whatever arguments the Rabbi might wish to muster, he, Bloom, felt honour-bound to hear out.

Mr Bloom wrapped Ganesha in a soft blanket and placed him into a sturdy holdall. As he did so, he caressed the curled trunk reverently. He wondered if, like the prophet Elisha, the Rabbi intended to challenge Ganesha to a duel with the Almighty, Lord of Hosts. He was intrigued to see which god would prevail.

The Rabbi was waiting for Mr Bloom at the synagogue gates. The building was old and respectable. Constructed in the 1920s, its solid bricks had housed generations of prayer, of lamentation and of joyful song. The Rabbi led Mr Bloom through the corridors of the synagogue, not into the main prayer hall, but up via a winding cedar-scented staircase to the choir stalls, perched high above the Holy Closet in which the scrolls of the Torah reside. From here

they could look across the ranged ranks of seats in the synagogue, those same seats which filled every Friday and Saturday with hundreds of Jews, come to worship the one and only God.

The Rabbi threw the windows at the back of the choir stalls open, inhaled deeply several times and then turned to Mr Bloom. 'Have you brought the idol?' he asked. Mr Bloom noticed that the Rabbi, too, seemed stronger and less nervous.

Mr Bloom nodded.

'Show him to me,' said the Rabbi.

Mr Bloom withdrew the god from the holdall, unwrapped the soft blanket and held him gently. He thought that perhaps the god was heavier now than when he had bought him.

The Rabbi's nose wrinkled in disgust. 'Do you not know, Mr Bloom, that this thing was made by men? That it is only china and paint? How can you give your worship to something that you could construct yourself?'

Mr Bloom shrugged. It seemed impossible to explain if the Rabbi could not understand it. At last, in an attempt to answer, he said: 'I followed my heart and my eyes,' but thought that this did not explain one tenth of what he hoped to communicate.

The Rabbi looked at Mr Bloom for a long moment. Then, with a little smile, he tugged on Mr

Bloom's arm and brought him to stand by the window too. The synagogue is at the top of a rise, and the whole of Hendon can be seen from its windows, if one is able to peer through the stained glass.

'Mr Bloom,' said the Rabbi, 'I hope you know that God loves you.'

Bloom nodded silently. He gazed upon the contemplative and peaceful face of Ganesha.

'I have never encountered a case such as this,' said the Rabbi. 'I had to consult with the most senior authorities for a ruling.'

Bloom nodded again.

'They were of one mind. You must understand, Mr Bloom, that this is for your own good,' said the Rabbi. Then, in one fluid motion, too quickly for Mr Bloom to react, the Rabbi grabbed Ganesha from Mr Bloom's hands. He held him for a moment, clutching the god close to his body in an almost protective gesture and then hurled him in a wide arc through the synagogue window. With a crisply crunching report, Ganesha smashed into a thousand pieces on the paved area below.

'Now, Mr Bloom,' said the Rabbi beaming, 'don't you feel better, rid of that revolting thing?'

Bloom said nothing. He stared down at the paved courtyard of the synagogue, where bright pink and gold fragments radiated from the central point of

impact. At length, he allowed the Rabbi to lead him away from the window and back to his own home.

Late that night, Mr Bloom – who had been synagogue treasurer for many years and remained a keyholder of the building – silently let himself in through the iron gate of the courtyard. He had brought a fine-haired clothesbrush and a carved wooden box from his living room, along with a bag slung over his shoulder containing one or two other, heavier items. Slowly, working in circles, he brushed the dust of Ganesha into the box and, when he was finished, dug a small hole in one of the ornamental flower beds and buried it. He wondered if he should say a few words over the grave, but could think of none that might be appropriate.

Then, still moving without sound, he opened the door to the main building of the synagogue and slipped through. He had rarely been in this vaulted space alone at night, and never without a specific and necessary errand. He paused now, thinking of the many hours of quiet contemplation this place had afforded him, of the services he had heard intoned here, of the comradely chats, the bustling ceremonial, the joyful celebrations and the sombre days.

The next morning, the synagogue officials were startled to find the building not only locked but

its locks stuffed with wax. Fearing the worst, they called a locksmith who, after some effort, managed to remove the locks bodily from the doors. The officials – and, by now, a small crowd who had heard that something might be going on at the synagogue – entered and looked around with horror.

The synagogue was ruined. The benches were smashed, the drapery torn, the candlesticks twisted, the windows broken. And in the centre was Mr Bloom, standing with an axe by his side and perspiration soaking through his clothes.

And they said, 'Why have you done this thing?'

And he said, 'I? I did not do this. This was done by the Almighty.'

And they looked around again at the benches with the axe-shaped cuts deeply incised into them, and at the places where the upholstery had been ripped out in quantities the size of a man's hand.

And they said, 'God did not do this! God cannot destroy in this way.'

And he said, 'Then why do you worship Him?'

But it is not recorded whether the people were grateful for this enlightenment.