13 PRINCIPLES: Monotheism vs. Syncrethysm

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In this column, we are analyzing one by one the 13 principles of the Jewish faith. Earlier, we saw the first principle: Believing that God exists. The second principle, monotheism is the belief that God is one.
Monotheism also includes another important element, which is explicitly stated in the second of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt not have other gods before Me.”
This element, “exclusivity”, is the way the Jewish people *practiced*monotheism since its beginning. And in this sense, monotheism was, perhaps, what protected the people of Israel more than any other value during its long history, and also the most costly one …
To understand in depth these two angles of monotheism, we must first know what “syncretism” is. In ancient times, it was common for peoples and civilizations to constantly fight against each other. There were very few periods of peace. Much, much less, than there is now. Empires rose on the ruins of empires, and were continually trying to conquer all the peoples around them. These wars of conquest were waged by empires or powerful nations to get richer: especially charging heavy taxes to the conquered people, slave trade, spoils of war, etc. When one nation conquered another nation the conquerors also imposed their religion, their gods. But when imposing their gods, they did not demand that the defeated people get rid of their local idols. Simply, they demanded that now they must serve *in addition* the gods of the victorious. This was an extremely common phenomenon and nobody in a polytheist society considered it as something wrong. What difference does it make between serving five and ten gods? Serving new gods was not only the prerogative of the defeated. Thus, when the Assyrians conquered the Phoenicians, they imposed their god Marduk, but also adopted the Phoenician god Melkart, who was fashionable in the entire Mediterranean.
This phenomenon, serving simultaneously two different religions and their idols, is known as “syncretism”.

Syncretism was also very common when two or more people wanted to forge an alliance and form a united front against a common enemy. Adopting the gods of other peoples without waiving your own, was a gesture of friendship between peoples.
Syncretism was accepted among all peoples of the world, with one exception: Israel.
The monotheism of the Tora not only opposes polytheism, it also opposes syncretism. When Alexander the Great conquered Judea, around the year 350 BCE, he demanded, as the most natural thing, that Jews place a statue of Zeus in their Temple. And he could not understand why Jews were willing to sacrifice their lives before accepting Zeus. At the end of the day, Alexander reasoned, we are not demanding them to stop serving their God, just to accept an additional god, as the rest of the world does!
Many historians say that the rejection of syncretism practiced by our parents, and for which they were willing to give their lives, helped triggering the first anti-Jewish feelings. Why? Because the peoples of the world did not understand that the belief in one God means that God has to be worshipped in "exclusivity". So it was not surprising that the Gentiles perceived us as "intolerant", "intransigent", "close minded". They did not recognize the idea of "exclusivity" as it is learned from the second of the Ten Commandments. And without this exclusivity the Jewish people would have disappeared a long time ago. Our values and principies would had diluted and mixed with multiple cultures and religions.
If we would have given up the practice of monotheism □"□, we would now be where the Phoenicians, the Assyrians and the Greeks are. In the museums of ancient history