



RABBI AARON

Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

A Halachic Flag?

Parshat Bamidbar, which begins the fourth book of the Torah, opens by teaching that each tribe had its own flag and sign/symbol on the flag (2:2). Many *midrashim* and commentators go into great detail describing what each of the tribe's flags looked like. According to the Sages, as quoted by Rashi, each tribe had a flag of its color. The color matched the stone of the tribe of the *Kohen Gadol's* breastplate.

In this context the question has been raised, especially in modern times, if employing a flag has a basis in halacha. Three towering figures of this past century addressed this very issue: Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook zt"l, Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l, and Rabbi Soloveitchik zt"l each presented a unique viewpoint.

Rav Moshe Feinstein and the Flag

In the modern era it became common practice in many synagogues in the U.S. to prominently display flags of Israel and America. As one of the preeminent deciders of Jewish law of this time, Rav Moshe Feinstein received a question regarding a group of people that felt that they were compelled to leave their synagogue and

find a new place to pray due the presence of the Israeli flag.

Rav Moshe addressed their question and said that the flag is a *davar chol* (secular object). He states that the kedusha of the synagogue is unaffected by any item of nonsense (*hevel-u-shetut*) that is brought into that setting. He posited that it is wrong to place flags in a synagogue, however, regarding the more severe issue of creating a *machloket* (dispute) by leaving the synagogue is a more serious offense; he therefore permitted the group who questioned the legitimacy of a flag in a place of prayer to continue to pray in a synagogue with flags. (*Iggerot Moshe, Orach Chaim* 1:46)

We see from this *Teshuva* that Rav Moshe clearly does not attribute any religious significance to the Flag of Israel.

Rav Soloveitchik and the Flag

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's assessment of the significance of the flag of Israel was quite different from the view of his eminent colleague and close relative, Rav Moshe.

It is worth noting that when the Rav addressed the status of the Israeli flag he did not make any reference to the precedent of the tribal flags in sefer Bamidbar. Apparently he viewed this practice as being purely intended for that time and

place in the wilderness and the fact that it was never codified in Jewish law to be practiced in future generations. Nonetheless, the Rav's position regarding the flag is quite remarkable and inspiring. He posited that the flag is holy because it represents the martyrs who fell in defense of the Holy Land. He explained his position in a most dramatic way: "If you ask me, how do I, a talmudic Jew, look upon the flag of Israel, and has it any halachic value? - I would answer plainly. I do not hold at all with the magical attraction of a flag or similar symbolic ceremonies. Judaism negates ritual connected with physical things."

It is here that the Rav identified a compelling source in halacha which, in his eyes, should be applied to the halachic significance surrounding the flag of Israel:

"Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of a law in the Shulchan Aruch to the effect that: "One who has been killed by non-Jews is buried in his clothes, so that the blood may be seen and avenged, as it is written: "I will hold (the heathen) innocent, but not in regard to the blood which they have shed" (Joel 4:21). In other words, the clothes of the Jew acquires a certain sanctity when spattered with the blood of a martyr. How much more is this so of the blue and white flag, which has been immersed in the blood of thousands of young Jews who fell in the War of Independence defending the country and the population? It has a spark of sanctity that flows from devotion and self-sacrifice. We are enjoined to honor the flag and treat it with respect." ("The Rav Speaks,' 5743, p. 139)



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The Rav shared this unique perspective at a major address when serving as the leading figure in the Mizrachi movement. It is no wonder that many of his students who served as distinguished rabbis in the US would often display the Israeli flag in proximity of the ark in the synagogue.

Rav Kook and the Flag

In 1915, during World War I, the British Army's Jewish Legion was formed. These Jewish soldiers participated in the Great War, and they had their own flag, a Menorah against a blue and white background. In the years following the war, the flag was displayed in synagogues across England. (Rav Ari Shvat, *Le'harim Degel*)

On December 17, 1925, the flag was carried to Israel and brought to the Churva Synagogue in Jerusalem. A ceremony was arranged to officially greet the flag. Amongst those who attended was the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook. In his speech, he cited the verse in Tehillim (20:6): "May we rejoice in your salvation, and in the name of our God set up our banners (*nidgol/degel*/flag)! May the Lord fulfill all your petitions."

Rav Kook noted that the Torah commands the Israelites to form a camp with banners representing different tribes. He then cited the Midrash, which describes that there were twenty-two thousand chariots of angels, each one decked out with flags, attended the Giving of the Torah. The Israelites immediately desired to have flags just like the angels, and God agreed.

This request for flags, the Midrash teaches,

is described in *Shir Hashirim* (2:4): "He brought me out the wine-house, and His banner (*diglo*) over me is love."

"He brought me to the wine-house" - this is Sinai; "and His banner (*diglo*) over me is love"...the Holy One, Blessed be He said to them: "What did you desire? To make banners. By your lives, I will fulfill your petitions!" - "May the Lord fulfill all your petitions." Immediately, the Holy One, Blessed be He, told Israel and said to Moshe: Make them banners, as they desired." (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 2:3).

Rav Kook powerfully suggested that the original flag of Israel began at Mount Sinai, at the Giving of the Torah. He went on to argue that the flag represents our march towards redemption and signifies (as it was in this case) the international unity behind the Zionist enterprise.

The 'march towards redemption' that Rav Kook speaks of appears to be alluding to at least two highly significant episodes in the Torah. When the Israelites left Egypt during the great Exodus the Torah states. "...and the Children of Israel were going out with an upraised arm (Shemot 14:8)." What is the meaning of the phrase "an upraised arm"? The Ramban, on this verse, answers: The Jews left with flags, song and celebration. This may be the very first source for a flag employed by the Jew to identify their mission and to celebrate their salvation. ■

Refuah Shleima
Robert R.

from the TT distribution staff