

Patriotism and the Halakhah

The Freehof Institute of Progressive Halakhah

Twelve Minute Shiur #18

1 Rabbi Israel Bettan, “[National Flags at Religious Services](#),” *American Reform Responsa* (New
2 York: CCAR Press, 1983), no.21, pp. 64-66

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4 **QUESTION:** In our Temple we have two flags on the pulpit: one is the United States
5 flag and the other is the flag of Israel. Some members of the congregation seem much
6 disturbed by the practice. They feel that these flags have no place in the auditorium where
7 religious services are held and should therefore be removed to the social hall. The matter
8 has been referred to our Committee on Religious Practice. We are anxious to avoid
9 unnecessary emotional conflicts among our members. We should like to bring to them a
10 proposal that would rest on sound principle and could be followed by all factions.

11 **ANSWER:** In Judaism, devotion to the welfare of the country in which one lives has
12 long assumed the character of a religious duty.

13 When, in the sixth century B.C.E., the people of Judah had been carried into captivity by
14 the Babylonian conqueror, it was the prophet Jeremiah who proclaimed God’s message to
15 the captives in the following words: “And seek the peace of the city whither I have
16 caused you to be carried away captive, and pray unto the Lord for it; for in the peace
17 thereof shall ye have peace” (Jer. 29:7).

18
19 Centuries later, when the Roman emperors ruled over many kingdoms, including
20 Palestine, it was the Rabbis who pronounced the same religious principle, “Pray for the
21 welfare of the government,” they said, “since but for the fear thereof men would swallow
22 one another alive” (Avot 3.2).

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24 Accordingly, a special prayer for the ruling power soon found its way into the fixed
25 liturgy of the synagogue (Abudarham, p. 47c). On the Sabbath Day, during the morning
26 services, immediately after the Scriptural lesson, the prayer for the welfare of the
27 government is recited in all the synagogues of the world. In every country the Jew thus
28 affirms his faith from week to week that loyalty to the institutions of the particular
29 country of which he is a citizen is a solemn religious obligation.

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31 The presence of the American flag in the synagogues of the land, far from being an
32 intrusion, may well serve to strengthen in us the spirit of worship. Symbolizing, as it
33 does, the duties we owe to our country, obedience to its laws, and zealous support of its
34 rights and interests, our national flag speaks to us with the voice of religion and partakes,
35 therefore, of the sanctity of our religious symbols.

37 ואחר שמסיימין בקריאת התורה... ונהגו לברך את המלך ולהתפלל לשם שיעזרו ויאמצו על אויביו
38 שכן כתוב (ירמיה כט, ז) ודרשו את שלום העיר אשר הגלית אתכם שמה והתפללו בעדה אל ה' כי
39 בשלומה יהיה לכם שלום.
40 ושלום העיר הוא שיתפלל לשם שינצח המלך את אויביו.
41 ואמרי' בפרק קמא דעבודה זרה (ג, ב) אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל מאי דכתיב (חבקוק א, יד) "ותעשה
42 אדם כדגי הים כרומש לא מושל בו." מה דגים שבים כל הגדול מחבירו בולע את חבירו אף בני אדם
43 אלמלא מוראה של מלכות איש את רעהו חיים בלעו. והיינו דתנן (אבות פ"ג מ"ב) רבי חנינא סגן
44 הכהנים אומר הוי מתפלל בשלומה של מלכות שאלמלא מוראה איש את רעהו חיים בלעו.
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46 Following the Torah reading... it is customary (*nahagu*) to bless the king and to pray that
47 God will help him and strengthen him against his enemies, for thus is it written (Jeremiah
48 29:7): "And seek the peace of the city to which I have sent you in exile, and pray for it to
49 Adonai, for in its peace shall you have peace."

50 The "peace [welfare; *shalom*]" of the city" means that one should pray to God that the
51 king vanquish his enemies.

52 And we read in the Talmud (*B. Avodah Zarah* 3b): "Rav Yehudah said in the name of
53 Shmuel: What is the meaning of the verse (Habakuk 1:14): 'You make humans like fish
54 of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler'? Just as with the fish of the sea, where
55 the larger ones swallow the smaller ones, so with human beings: were it not for the fear
56 of the government (*malkhut*), we would swallow each other alive."

57 And this is what the *Mishnah* says (*M. Avot* 3:2): "R. Hananiah *s'gan hakohanim* says:
58 Pray for the peace of the government* (*sh'lomah shel malkhut*), for were it not for the
59 fear of the government (*malkhut*), we would swallow each other alive."
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61 ואפילו של אומות העולם – "even Gentiles governments" (Bartenura)
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64 "Israeli Flag on a Synagogue Pulpit," *American Reform Responsa*, no. 22, pp. 66-68,
65 <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/arr-66-68>

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67 "Flags on the Bimah," *Teshuvot for the Nineties*, no. 5753.8, pp. 29-32,
68 <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/tfn-no-5753-8-29-32>
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