

Medina & Halacha

Exploring the Jewish State
through the lens of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Shimshon HaKohen Nadel

The Israeli Flag

A highlight of Yom Yerushalayim is the 'Rikudegalim', the flag parade which runs through the main arteries of Jerusalem towards the Old City, ultimately converging on the Kotel. Witnessing the sea of blue and white, one can't help but well up with emotion and pride.

But is the Israeli Flag just a symbol of nationalism, or does it possess religious significance?

Historically, the Jewish People have had flags for thousands of years. The Torah (Bamidbar 2:2) describes how the Jews encamped in the wilderness, "each man by his banner". According to the Midrash, these flags were a symbol of Hashem's love: "A great love Hakadosh Baruch Hu bestowed on them when He made them flags, so that they be recognizable" (Bamidbar Rabba 2:3). The Midrash describes how each tribe had its own color corresponding to the color of the stones on the breastplate of the Kohein Gadol, and a symbol based on the Torah's blessings for that tribe (2:7).

And while some may contend that the Israeli Flag is a modern invention, Rabbi Ari Shvat, who has done extensive research on the flag, has shown the historical antecedents of this symbol. For example, a flag with the Star of David hung prominently in the shuls of Prague since the mid-14th century, with the approval of their great rabbis, among them the Maharal, Shelah, Noda B'Yehuda, and Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschütz. The late historian Avraham

Ya'ari, in his ground-breaking work on the development of the customs of Simchat Torah - Toldot Chag Simchat Torah - records that for centuries the flag has been a part of the Simchat Torah celebration - an image we are all familiar with.

Let us not forget the obvious: The design of the modern Israeli Flag is based on the tallit. The blue and white flag of today was adopted at the First Zionist Congress of 1897, even though it had earlier incarnations. It was David Wolffsohn, a banker from Kovno who played a role in the early Zionist movement as an assistant to Herzl and later, the second president of the Zionist Organization, who made the decision to adopt the tallit motif. In a jubilee volume, celebrating 25 years since the First Zionist Congress, Wolffsohn writes that the choice was obvious: "We already have a flag, white and blue - the tallit that we wrap ourselves up in during prayer - this tallit is our symbol. Let us take the tallit out from its case and unfurl it before the eyes of Israel and before the eyes of all the nations!" By choosing the familiar religious motif of the tallit, Wolffsohn's intent was to imbue the flag with religious meaning.

Rabbi Avraham Yizchak HaKohen Kook also saw religious meaning in the flag. At the rededication of the Churva Shul in Jerusalem on Chanuka of 1926, Chief Rabbi Kook not only allowed the flag of the Jewish Legion to enter the shul, in his invocation he described the flag as "holy" and a symbol of Redemption.

But to some, the flag represents secular Zionism and a secular government at times antagonistic to religion. The truths of history, however, prove that

things weren't always so black and white (or blue and white). In an article that appeared on the 22nd of Nissan, 1948, just two weeks before Israel declared its independence, the newspaper of Agudat Israel, Hamevaser, called on its readers to place the Israeli Flag in their windows. And in the early years, following the establishment of the State, the flag was proudly displayed in many homes on Yom Haatzma'ut - including the homes of great rabbinic leaders of the day - among them Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky and the Rebbes of Modzitz and Sadigura. Till today, the flag is flown over the Ponevezh Yeshiva on Yom Haatzma'ut out of deference to its founder, Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman, who began the practice.

Growing up in New Jersey, my first encounter with the Israeli flag was in the shul we belonged to. There it stood, adjacent to the ark, flanked on the other side by the American Flag. Despite a ruling by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein against the placement of the flag in the sanctuary (Igrot Moshe, OC 1:46), the Israeli Flag has become a fixture in many shuls in North America.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in an address at a Mizrachi convention, expressed the significance of the Israeli Flag in halachic terms. He invoked the practice of burying a Jewish martyr in his blood soaked clothes, as they cry out for mercy and vengeance. Rabbi Soloveitchik continued and compared this to the flag:

"The blue and white flag, soaked with the blood of thousands of young Jews who fell in the War of Independence, protecting the Land and settlements, (religious and non-religious - for the enemy, yemach shemam, did not distinguish), has a spark of sanctity that

flows from devotion and self-sacrifice. We are all enjoined to honor the flag and treat it with respect" (Chamesh Drashot, p. 89-90; See also Nefesh HaRav, p. 99-100).

The State of Israel was not handed to us on a silver platter. We paid a heavy price and continue to sacrifice. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, the flag represents that very mesirut nefesh. Our fervent hope and prayer is to see the fulfillment of the words we pray in the daily amida, "Raise the banner to gather our exiles and speedily gather us together from the four corners of the earth to our Land." 