

Medina & Halacha

Exploring the Jewish State
through the lens of Jewish Law

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The Israeli Flag: A National or Religious Symbol?

Last week, the South Side Sandwich Shop & Smokehouse in Lakewood NJ, proudly displayed the Israeli Flag in front of their restaurant in advance of Yom Hazikaron and Yom Ha'atzmaut. A controversy arose when, according to one report, the restaurant's owner was told by the Kashrus Council of Lakewood that "if he does not remove the 'Zionist' flag, he should remove the Kashrus certification off his wall." According to another report, the restaurant was not in jeopardy of losing its supervision, but some individuals requested the flag be taken down out of sensitivity to the "bnei Torah" in the nearby area.

Here in Israel, the streets are filled with flags: On buildings, businesses, homes, and even cars, as we observe Yom Hazikaron, Yom Ha'atzma'ut, and Yom Yerushalayim. Witnessing this sea of blue and white, one can't help but well up with pride and emotion.

But what is the Israeli Flag? Is it just a symbol of secular nationalism, or does it possess religious significance and meaning?

Historically, the Jewish People have had flags for thousands of years. The Torah describes how the Jews encamped in the wilderness, "each man by his banner" (Bamidbar 2:2). 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 HaGadol, and a symbol based on the Torah's blessings for that Tribe (Ibid., 2:7).

And while some may contend that the Israeli Flag is a modern invention, Rav Ari Shevat 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 has been displayed prominently in the synagogues of Prague since the mid-14th Century, with the approval of their great rabbis, among them the Maharal, Shelah, Noda B'Yehuda, and Rav Yonatan Eybeschutz.

In fact, if you visit the Altneuschul in Prague today you will find a dark red flag with a Star of David at its center. The flag on display today is a reproduction of a flag that was awarded to the Jewish community of Prague in the 17th Century in recognition of their service in the defence of Prague during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). An earlier flag was gifted to the community in 1345 by Emperor Karl IV, which also featured a Star of David.

The late historian Avraham Ya'ari, in his groundbreaking 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.

And 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 twenty-five 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.

Rav Avraham Yizchak Hakohen Kook also saw religious meaning in the flag. At the rededication of the Churva Synagogue in Jerusalem on Chanuka 1926, Rav Kook not only allowed the flag of the Jewish Legion to enter the shul, in his invocation he described the flag as holy; 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. In an article that appeared on the 22nd of Nissan 1948, just two weeks before Israel declared its independence, the newspaper of the

Agudath 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 HaAatzma'ut - including the homes of great rabbinic leaders of the day - among them Rav Yechezkel Abramsky and the Rebbes of Modzitz and Sadigura. Till today, the flag is flown over the Ponevezh Yeshiva on Yom HaAatzma'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 Rav 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 synagogues.

For me, the importance of finding religious meaning in the flag became crystallized after an unfortunate event: One Purim, a yeshiva bochur who had imbibed a bit too much, noticed the Israeli Flag displayed proudly above our door and remarked that it is Avoda Zara, idolatry. I quickly responded that the Israeli Flag is a symbol of tremendous sacrifice.

Rav Yosef Dov HaLevi 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 his clothes cry out for vengeance (See Shulchan Aruch YD 364:4, and Shach, ad Loc.). Rav

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 Rav 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."