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Parshat Behalotekha

June's Lehrhaus Over Shabbat is sponsored by Lauren and David Lunzer to commemorate the 25th yahrtzeit of David's mother, Beila Raizel bas HaRav Binyamin, on 28 Sivan.

STAR-SPANGLED SYNAGOGUE: DO NATIONAL FLAGS BELONG IN OUR HOUSES OF WORSHIP?

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Do national flags belong in our synagogues?¹ The Jewish people are familiar with the concept of a flag, whether it be the biblical tribes living in the wilderness (Numbers 2:2) or seventeenth-century Jews attending the Old New Synagogue (Altneuschul) in Prague. However, controversy over the place of flags in synagogues first emerged in the twentieth century.

What makes the modern issue of flags pertinent is twofold: first, it will serve as a case study for understanding how recent rabbinic thinkers reckoned with the principles of

Zionism, American patriotism, and nationalism writ large. Secondly, the question of placing national flags specifically within the synagogue's sanctuary will require us to deepen our understanding of the imperative to uphold kedushat beit ha-kneset, the sanctity of the synagogue. We will initially survey noteworthy rabbinic authorities who either supported, rejected, or merely tolerated national flags. Subsequently, we will analyze whether placing such flags in the synagogue's sanctuary presents a further challenge or a unique opportunity.

I. Reasons to Promote National Flags

Dr. Yeshayahu Leibowitz once quipped that the Israeli flag is nothing more than a "rag hanging on a pole."² However, for many, it represents much more than a reductive physical description. Students of R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, such as R. Aharon Ziegler, record the following:

² *Oreshet* Vol. 1 (5770) *Mikhlelet Orot Yisrael* (pp. 297-342), n. 14.

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Yisroel Ben-Porat

Regarding the Halachic significance of the Israeli flag, Rav Soloveitchik said that he did not think that flags and ceremonies have any significance.³ However, [Rav Soloveitchik said,] let us not ignore a basic law in Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Dei'a, Hilchot Aveilut, that if a Jew is killed by Gentiles he is buried in his clothing, so that his blood will be visible, and people will avenge it. **The clothes of a Jew become holy to some degree when they are stained with holy blood, and this is certainly true of the blue and white flag, which is soaked in the blood of thousands of young Jews who fell in the defense of the land and the settlements. It has a spark of Kedusha which stems from dedication and self-sacrifice.** We are all obligated to honor the flag of Israel and to show respect for it.⁴

R. Soloveitchik draws an analogy from Rema's (Yoreh De'ah 364:4)⁵ reverence for a single martyr's blood-soaked

³ This is consistent with R. Soloveitchik's general opposition to inventing new rituals, as he branded religious innovation absent a Divine mandate as a form of paganism. See, for example, *Darosh Darash Yosef* (pp. 333-338).

⁴ R. Aharon Ziegler, "Halakhic Significance of the Israeli Flag" (*Torah Musings* 9/2/2016).

⁵ Text as follows: "If they found a slain Israelite, they may bury him [in the same condition] as they found him without shrouds, and they do not even remove his shoes. Gloss: Thus they do [with respect] to a woman in confinement who died, or regarding a person who fell down and died. Some say that they wrap them over their garments [with] shrouds. The accepted practice is that one makes no shrouds for them as [for] other dead, but one buries them in their garments over which [they place] a sheet as [in the case] of other dead."

⁶ R. Hershel Schachter communicated to me that he was not aware of whether R. Soloveitchik explicitly opined on the issue of displaying an Israeli flag in the synagogue.

⁷ "Rav Avigdor Miller on Flag Burning and Flag Hanging" (Tape #790, July 1990).

clothing to the symbolism of the Israeli flag which represents the blood of thousands of martyrs.⁶ R. Soloveitchik's rationale need not be limited to the Israeli flag but can be used to understand the imperative for honoring the American flag as well. In "Ragged Old Flag," Johnny Cash expresses a similar sentiment vis-a-vis the United States: the flag is much more than just a ragged piece of fabric—it is a symbol of all who bled and sacrificed to protect the people of their country. Indeed, the service flag hung in many synagogues during World War I began as a demonstration for honoring their members serving in the armed forces, and it likely set a precedent for normalizing national flags in the sanctuary.

Shortly after the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in *Texas v. Johnson* (1989) that flag burning constitutes symbolic speech protected by the First Amendment, R. Avigdor Miller was asked to opine on the matter. In a transcription of his oral response, R. Miller asserted that it is our duty to honor the American flag:

And therefore we have to be very displeased with those people who go as low as to burn the American flag. **The flag is a symbol of all the privileges that Hakodosh Boruch Hu is giving us in this country.** And therefore it's not a bad idea – even if you never did it before – to hang out a flag on the Fourth of July, l'hachis ha'rishaim [to spite the wicked]. It's not a goyishe thing. No! **Do it l'hachis – to show them that, yes, we do appreciate what Hashem gave us.**⁷

⁸ "Rav Avigdor Miller on The Fourth of July" (Tape #833, July 1991).
⁹ *Responsa Mikveh Ha-Mayim* (Vol. 5, *Orah Hayyim*, p. 21).

R. Miller not only supported the American flag but also advocated for flying it on the synagogue premises in honor of July 4th, American Independence Day.⁸ In addition to R. Soloveitchik's rationale that a national flag represents those who fell in its defense, R. Miller emphasized the importance of demonstrating gratitude for the privileges that its country grants us.

Whether one views a national flag as a symbol of self-sacrifice or as a reminder to demonstrate hakarat ha-tov (gratitude), both rationales can be applied to the United States and Israel. However, what makes the Israeli flag especially unique is that it represents a Jewish state. Whereas the United States deserves to be recognized as a benevolent country, it could be argued that it is fundamentally different from the State of Israel which might play a role in bringing about the destiny of the Jewish people on God's holy land. R. Moshe Malkah writes:

In my opinion there is no issue with placing an Israeli or American flag in the sanctuary. On the contrary, it is honorable and glorious for the State of Israel's flag to hang over the holy ark in order to demonstrate to those gathered that the Torah of Israel and the Land of Israel are one and the same. For the flag of Israel necessitates being bound to the Torah of Israel.⁹

While R. Malkah merely permits the American flag, he enthusiastically advocates for the flying of the Israeli one as it uniquely serves as a call to bring about the destiny of a Jewish people in the Holy Land living according to the dictates of the Torah.

While some might be uneasy with the innovation of the Israeli flag, R. Dr. Ari Shevat asserts that such a flag should not be an unfamiliar concept to the Jewish people:

If the Holy One Blessed be He celebrated the distinct identity of every tribe through their respective flags, certainly (kal va'omer) God celebrates when a flag serves to distinguish the identity of the entire Jewish people from the rest of the nations, [as the Midrash¹⁰ states:] Said the Holy One Blessed be He, the nations of the world have flags, however the only flag that is beloved to me is the **flag of Jacob**.¹¹

For Religious Zionists,¹² the flag of Israel is not simply a national flag, but it is a fulfillment of our liturgy in which we beseech God to "raise a banner to gather our exiles, and gather us together from the four corners of the earth." However, as we will see momentarily, not everyone viewed the State of Israel through the same rose-colored glasses.

II. Principled Opposition to National Flags

While our guiding question is whether one should display a flag in synagogue, R. Menashe Klein addresses this issue

¹⁰ *Midrash Tanhuma* (Numbers, no.10) based on *Song of Songs* (2:4), "He brought me to the banquet room, and his banner of love was over me."

¹¹ R. Dr. Ari Yitzchak Shevat, *Oreshet* Vol. 3 (5772) *Mikhlelet Orot Yisrael* (pp. 297-342). Many of Shevat's stand alone articles, such as those cited here, were later synthesized into *Le'-harim et Ha-Degel*, a remarkably researched work about the Israeli flag and Hebrew language.

¹² For R. Abraham Isaac Kook's view on the significance of the Israeli flag, see *Ha-Maayan*, *Nisan* 5769 (49:3).

from a notably different point of departure: “Is it permissible to pray in a synagogue that has a Zionist flag which signifies the State of Israel?” Hardliners like R. Klein presuppose that it is obviously problematic to place an Israeli flag in a synagogue; thus, the scope of their inquiry is whether one who finds themselves in a synagogue bearing an Israeli flag may pray there. Initially, R. Klein cites the suggestion of a R. Mordechai Savitsky who contended that the Israeli flag represents a form of *avodah zarah* (idolatry); however, he ultimately concludes:

However, [R. Savitsky] fundamentally erred in his analogy. Certainly this flag does not have any element of idolatry, for these Zionists [who founded the State of Israel] were not idolaters – on the contrary they were absolute deniers (*kofrim ba-kol*)! In the multitude of our sins, they [essentially] stated “My own power and the might of my own hand [have won this wealth for me]” (Deut. 8:17). And they [further] say, God forbid, that “there is no judgment and no Judge” [Vayikra Rabbah 28:1]. Accordingly, this flag that they established is not [related to] idol worship, rather it is a symbol for their rejection [of God] and their wickedness – woe to them and woe to their souls!¹³

While those sympathetic to the Israeli flag might appreciate that R. Klein disagreed with those who diagnosed it as idolatry, they might be dismayed to learn that he only disagreed because he thought it fell under the category of heresy instead.

¹³ *Responsa Mishneh Halakhot* 19:116. See also *Mishneh Halakhot* (4:110) where R. Klein addresses a similar issue regarding the permissibility of praying in a synagogue that displays images of animals.

However, it behooves us to ask why the State of Israel, a country dedicated to the protection and welfare of the Jewish people, met such a negative reception among many of the most preeminent rabbinic scholars. When the question of displaying an Israeli flag in the synagogue was raised in a previous issue of the journal *Koveitz Ha-maor*, R. Dr. Solomon Michael Neches, a prominent rabbi from California, wrote back: “Can the inquirer please explain why his question singled out “the blue-and-white flag.” After all, the American flag is standing there right next to the blue-and-white flag. So why did he not address his “question” in regards to both flags?”¹⁴

Indeed we can observe many instances in which the American flag not only escaped rabbinic censor, but was used to kasher the presence of the Israeli flag. R. Hershel Schachter records in *Nefesh HaRav* (pp. 99-100) that there was once an *Agudas Yisroel* convention held at a hotel in Jerusalem in which the organizers were uncomfortable with the presence of the Israeli flag. Seeing as removing the Israeli flag would not be viable, they instead opted to hang the flags representing the nationalities of all the convention’s participants. Thus the flags of countries such as America, France, and Britain in essence kashered the existence of the Israeli flag. Both R. Klein and R. Moshe Feinstein made a similar suggestion for tolerating the presence of the Israeli flag inside the synagogue. R. Feinstein writes:

Even though those who made this flag and symbol of the State of Israel were wicked, nonetheless, they never established it as a sacred entity, to the

¹⁴ *Koveitz Ha-maor*, Vol. 2, no. 12 (18) *Heshvan* 5712 (p. 15). See further citations from this journal collected in *Petihat Ha-Igrot* (pp. 50-51).

degree that we would need to be concerned that it would lead to idolatry. For it is known to all that this was merely a general symbol and is a secular entity. **The fact that the American flag is also there proves that they did not bring in [the Israeli flag] because they regard it as a holy entity**, rather it is [just] a symbol that the synagogue administration has affection (she-mihavevin) for this country and for the State of Israel – and they just want to display it in a place where they will be seen...[thus] it is not plausible to claim that this constitutes idolatry, rather it is [simply] vanity and silliness (hevel u-shtus).¹⁵

While R. Feinstein would prefer the absence of the Israeli flag, he appears to be more tolerant than some of his Haredi compatriots. So long as the Israeli flag is regarded as no different than any other national symbol, its presence can be abided. However, should the Israeli flag assume a religious status, it would seem that even R. Feinstein would be forced to put his foot down.

R. Feinstein would appear to take less issue with a secular-Zionist orientation toward the Israeli flag than the religious-Zionist community, in which many regard it with a sacred stature. Many of the Haredi opponents of the Israeli flag tend to focus on the secular aspects of Zionism. Take for instance R. Miller's sentiments toward the Israeli flag:

The Israeli flag is a symbol of Zionism...Zionism is not just some political movement; it represents the principle that in order to be a Jew all you need is to subscribe to the idea of a Jewish state. You don't need any Torah. **You know you can be an atheist and you can still be a very good Zionist!**

And that's where we come in and we say, that's the chillul Hashem! ... And therefore a flag that proclaims that the Torah is not necessary to be a Jew – that you can be an oichel treifos (eat non-kosher)...you can be a michaleil Shabbos (desecrator of Shabbos), and work on Yom Kippur, and be an eishes-ishnik, you can commit adultery, it's nothing to them.¹⁶

Thus, the primary opposition to the Israeli flag is not necessarily due to a lack of recognition for what the country provides nor from an antagonism toward the Land of Israel, which is clearly sacred. Rather, the primary Haredi aversion stems from a profound dissatisfaction with the State of Israel in its current iteration versus what they believe it ought to be.¹⁷

Indeed, national flags can serve as a form of a Rorschach test: two people can see the same piece of fabric and walk away with diametrically opposed interpretations about what it represents. Some will be moved to gratitude for all the positives that the country has done, while others will feel a

¹⁶ “Rav Avigdor Miller on Burning the Israeli Flag” (Tape #252, January 1979). It is noteworthy that the same R. Miller, who spoke in such lofty terms about protecting the honor of the American flag, also expressed absolute opposition to the Israeli standard. And similar to R. Feinstein, he only addressed the secular approach to Zionism, while either being unaware of or purposely omitting the existence of many religious Zionists who want nothing more than for Israel to be realized as a halachic theocracy.

¹⁷ The *Haredi* opposition addressed in this essay reflects the mainstream view which is in principle comfortable with reclaiming the Land of Israel, but is practically disappointed that it is not governed according to Jewish law. It should be noted that the *Satmar* sect fundamentally opposes returning to Israel at this point in time based on their understanding of *Ketubot* 111a. Thus, for the *Satmar* school of thought, the question of relating to any form of an Israeli symbol is moot.

¹⁵ *Responsa Igrot Moshe, Orah Hayyim* 1:46.

sense of disappointment for what it currently fails to provide.

III. The Sanctity of the Synagogue

Let us now grant the premise that there exist no fundamental objections to both the Israeli and American flags. The second piece of this equation is determining whether the synagogue, particularly its sanctuary, serves as the appropriate place to display these symbols. While some authorities expressed a relative tolerance for national flags, situating them next to the holy ark incurred the ire of many prominent rabbis.

(1) Distractions During Services

R. Aharon Simcha Blumenthal¹⁸ invokes the concern of Shulhan Arukh regarding visual distractions during prayer: “[Regarding] illustrated garments, even though [the image] does not protrude (ie. like an embroidered garment), it is not proper to pray in front of them. And if one happens to pray (i.e. he has no choice) in front of an illustrated garment or wall, he should close his eyes” (Orah Hayyim 90:23).

Shulhan Arukh is generally concerned with anything that presents a distraction during prayers, and R. Blumenthal believes that flags would qualify as such. However, one needs to take a genuine look at our synagogues and ask if the national flags are truly more distracting than some of the other ornaments that receive far less scrutiny.

(2) The Analogue of the Muslim Prayer Mat

One of the most common precedents cited in opposition to placing national flags in synagogue was the Responsa of the

¹⁸ Quoted in *Responsa Hillel Omer*, no. 37. R. Blumenthal advances the argument in *Koveitz Ha-maor*, Vol. 2, no. 12 (18) *Heshvan* 5712 (p. 15).

Rosh (Klal 5, Siman 2), which forbade hanging of a mat with the image of a scale in the synagogue since such a mat was commonly used by Muslims for their prayers. He writes that “it appears to me that it is forbidden to hang this in the synagogue – certainly next to the side of the sanctuary.” However, if we grant the premise that there is nothing fundamentally idolatrous about national flags, then it would make our case less analogous to the case of the Rosh.

(3) The House of God is Only for God

While we may grant that national flags do not carry the problematic associations of another religion, displaying them in the sanctuary, especially next to the ark, risks conveying an erroneous message.

R. Avraham Chaim Naeh cites Berakhot 49a, which explains that God’s kingship is not invoked in the third blessing of Birkat Ha-Mazon because it would be inappropriate (lav orah ar’a) to mention it alongside the kingship of David, as it would appear to equate God’s dominion with that of a mortal. Likewise, R. Naeh asserts, it would be inappropriate to display national flags next to the holy ark, since it places God and government on the same playing field.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Koveitz Ha-maor*, Av 5712, p. 3. R. Blumenthal cites the following verse as evidence for the same position: “There was nothing inside the Ark but the two tablets of stone which Moses placed there at Horeb, when the LORD made [a covenant] with the Israelites after their departure from the land of Egypt.” (I Kings 8:9). This verse implies that only the two tablets belong in the ark, and no other object, including flags. However, R. Blumenthal would need to reckon with the medieval commentaries (e.g. Malbim and Abarbanel ad loc.) who seek to reconcile this with the Talmudic account that there were indeed other items contained within the Ark. Furthermore, the flags are generally not inside the synagogue’s ark but placed to the side

From a slightly different standpoint, R. Meir Amsel cites the following ruling codified by Rema (*Orah Hayyim* 98:1): “And it is forbidden for a person to kiss one’s small children in synagogue, in order to fix in one’s heart that there is no love like the love of the Omnipresent Who is Blessed.”²⁰

Certainly it is not an affront to God for a parent to love their own child. Rather, the location where parents choose to express their affection may be inappropriate. Jewish law sets laws that govern the *kedushat beit ha-kneset*, the sanctity of the synagogue. While eating and drinking are necessary human functions, they may not be done within a synagogue’s sanctuary.²¹ Similarly, Judaism expects that a parent should bear affection for their child, but it is simply not appropriate to display that in the *beit ha-kneset*, a place designated exclusively for demonstrating affection and allegiance to God. Likewise, while expressing appreciation

²⁰ *Koveitz Ha-maor* (Vol. 2, no. 12 (18) *Heshvan* 5712, pp. 15-16). See also *Binyamin Ze’ev* (responsum 163) and Agudah in chapter six of tractate *Berachot*.

²¹ *Mishneh Torah*, Prayer and the Priestly Blessing 11:6.

²² It should be noted that the rules for a *beit midrash* are generally more relaxed than a room that bears the status of a *beit ha-kneset*. See Ran (Commentary on Rif 9a, s.v. Ravina), Rema (*Orah Hayyim* 151:1) and *Beur Ha-Gra* (*ad loc.*).
of it.

for one’s country may be commendable, the *beit ha-kneset* is perhaps not the appropriate place to demonstrate it.²²

(4) Christians and the Alleged Worship of America

While most of the aforementioned arguments have been made vis-a-vis the Israeli flag, R. Hillel Posek argues that the American flag constitutes an even bigger issue:

It is repugnant in a location in which [we express] that “we are for God and our eyes are to God,” to [demonstrate] a reliance on the guarantees of the American flag. For the Torah has already stated, “Yet even among those nations you shall find no peace” (Deut. 28:65). For we should only rely upon our Father in Heaven, and not which the masses think to pray to the flags and the military might which they represent.²³

Granted, most people are likely not directing their prayers to the American (or Israeli flags); however, the optics convey a certain set of values that some rabbinic authorities find questionable.

Rabbis who subscribe to R. Posek’s opposition to placing the American flag in the sanctuary are not alone. R. Meir Amsel, in disagreeing with the more tolerant position of R. Feinstein cited above, employs the following argument:

Regarding the Zionist flag in synagogues. It is known to all that the intention behind their placement is to acculturate those praying there with a love of Zionism in place of a love of the Creator. Go out and see the desecration of God’s name in this matter, for even the nations of the world will

²³ *Responsa Hillel Omer*, no. 37, p. 24.

not bring flags into their houses of worship – only we who have become lower than any other nation.²⁴

R. Amsel is seemingly referring to an ever-growing frustration among Christian theologians with the near deification of the American flag. Dr. Jonathan Sarna explains how the American flag developed religious-like qualities in the late 19th century. “The aftermath of the divisive Civil War, followed by the immigration of millions of foreigners to America’s shores, generated — even more than in Europe — a civil religious devotion to the national flag as an emblem of national unity. America soon pioneered the world in developing flag-related holidays and rituals, such as Flag Day...and the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag.”²⁵

Concern with conflating American patriotism and worship of God has led to strong pushback from certain segments of the Christian community. In the publishing of a 2005 issue of Pepperdine University’s Christian journal *Leaven*, Craig M. Watts writes:

A natural love for one’s own country coupled with a dedication for the wellbeing of all is a form of patriotism compatible with discipleship. There are ways that Christians as individuals can appropriately display patriotism. But the same

²⁴Koveitz *Ha-maor*, Vol. 14, no. 10 (148) Kislev 5725, p. 23. R. Amsel makes reference to Magen Avraham (*Orah Hayyim 244:8*), who forbade the use of leniencies to allow gentiles to construct a synagogue on Shabbat since gentiles would never conscience having their houses of worship constructed on their holidays.

²⁵Jonathan D. Sarna, “*American Jews and the Flag of Israel*.” See also *idem*, “*The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish Culture*,” in *Coming to Terms with America: Essays on Jewish History, Religion, and Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Nebraska Press, The Jewish Publication Society, 2021).

cannot be said for a church. **Because of the nature of the church’s identity and mission, patriotic expressions have no legitimate place in its worship and ministry...** The so-called patriotic hymns are most often songs of praise to a personification of the country and not a means of truly glorifying God. “My country, ‘tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing,” or “America, America, God shed his grace on thee.” The “thee” is not God but country. If these are songs of worship, it is false worship. God is mentioned as a supporting figure, a means to bolster the greatness of the nation, which is the real object of adoration in the hymns. **We should label this for what it is—idolatry.**²⁶

Taking a similar stance, another contributor to the same issue of *Leaven*, Dr. Micki Pulleyking, shares her church’s conclusion when they explored the question of patriotic displays in church:

Why would you ever say the Pledge of Allegiance in a sanctuary where the church gathers weekly to proclaim their loyalty to God alone? Our study led us to three important conclusions: First, whenever a national symbol is displayed in the church it is an unspoken form of **idolatry**. Second, Christians are to remember that their **true citizenship is not tied to any country but to the kingdom of God**. Third, the God Christians claim to worship is the

²⁶ Craig M. Watts, “Theological Problems with Patriotism in Worship,” *Leaven* 13.4 (2005), Article 4.

²⁷ Micki Pulleyking, “*Flying the Flag in Church: A Tale of Strife and Idolatry*,” *Leaven* 13.4 (2005), Article 3.

God of all persons, the creator God who equally loves all creation.²⁷

While the full extent of Christian opinions on this matter falls beyond the scope of this essay, it is noteworthy to see that some Christian thinkers have employed very similar lines of argumentation to the rabbinic sources who also emphasized that our sole allegiance is to God.²⁸ Patriotic displays in synagogues present a similar challenge. For even when we invoke God's name in prayers for the state, it is imperative that He not become relegated in our eyes to a "supporting figure," to borrow Watts' formulation.²⁹

An important takeaway from the Christian opposition to displaying national flags in church is that it demonstrates that this conversation is not necessarily contingent on how one relates to Zionism and the Jewish state. These theologians are not concerned with the Jewish debate surrounding Zionism, yet they still reached similar conclusions to many of the rabbinic authorities we have reviewed. In other words, one can maintain a strong appreciation for their country while still believing that the sanctuary is not the most appropriate place for such demonstrations.

IV. Conclusion

²⁸ R. Dr. Shevat argues that Judaism differs from Christianity as the former contains an explicit national component; *Oreshet* Vol. 2 (5771) *Mikhlelet Orot Yisrael* (pp. 153-200). However, the phenomenon of Christian nationalism in America offers a compelling analogy.

²⁹ While the scope of this essay is limited to national flags, it is worthwhile to consider the reception of national prayers in synagogue. While they are similar issues, it is worth noting that making prayers for one's own country is a longstanding Jewish practice based on *Jeremiah 29:7*, as adapted in *Avot 3:2*. See also *Noda Be-Yehudah*, 2nd ed., *Even Ha-Ezer* 88.

From a halakhic standpoint, it would be difficult to make a cogent argument to remove national flags from a synagogue – and certainly, to contend that one may not pray at such a place. R. Klein among many others notes that the Old-New Synagogue in Prague proudly displayed a flag and that the numerous Torah scholars who prayed there were not known to have protested its existence. Furthermore, R. Klein cites a Talmudic story (*Avodah Zarah 43b*),³⁰ in which a number of prominent sages did not refrain from praying in a synagogue that displayed a statue of the king. While the presence of the statue was clearly not desirable, it did not invalidate the status of the synagogue as a legitimate place of prayer. R. Feinstein makes the same point by citing Magen Avraham, who ruled that if someone committed a sexual sin inside a synagogue, it did not detract from its status as a *beit ha-kneset*—certainly a national flag should be no worse.³¹

It would seem that the propriety of displaying flags in synagogue need to be determined instead on meta-halakhic grounds. On the one hand, national flags serve as a reminder to those who sacrificed their lives for us, and the Israeli flag in particular may be a symbol of God returning the Jewish people to their homeland as "the beginning of the flowering of our redemption." According to R. Malkah there is an added imperative to inculcate into our hearts that the "Torah of Israel and the Land of Israel are one and the same." On the other hand, some have raised fundamental issues with national flags, particularly the Israeli one, which represents to them a government which deliberately

³⁰ See also *Rosh Ha-Shanah 24b*.

³¹ I would like to thank R. Naftali Wolfe for pointing out to me that while the passage in *Avodah Zarah* serves as a valid precedent, the case of *Magen Avraham* is less analogous since the sexual sin took place *before* services whereas the flags are on display *during* services.

neglects to rule God's land according to His Torah. Leaders like R. Miller and his school of thought would brand the flag as representing idolatry or kefirah.

The middle ground between these two poles is occupied by those who view national flags as legitimate, but strongly question whether the synagogue and its sanctuary are the appropriate venue to display them. While the Israeli or American flag may not be inherently idolatrous in nature, placing them next to the holy ark might come uncomfortably close to conveying such a message.

Appreciation for Israel and America should be encouraged, but like loving one's own child, the sanctuary may not be the right place to express such affection – for it is solely the house of God.

With these considerations in mind, let us conclude with a passage from the end of R. Feinstein's responsum on the matter: "If it is possible to remove the flags from the synagogue in a peaceful manner, it would be a good thing – but it would be forbidden to [do so if it would] cause discord." R. Feinstein believed that shalom, peace, in the congregation takes priority in this scenario.³² While the question of whether to display a flag in the synagogue and its sanctuary is important, there are other factors that need to be taken into the equation. In a similar fashion, R. Klein suggests that our paramount concern should be "with whom

³² *Responsa Igrot Moshe, Orach Hayyim 1:46*. See *Yalkut Yosef (Orach Hayyim Vol. 6, Laws of Torah Reading, Torah Scrolls and Synagogue, p. 429)*, which rules in accordance with *Igrot Moshe*. Also, see *Igrot Moshe, Orach Hayyim 3:15*, in which R. Feinstein addresses the status of Stars of David in the synagogue. Similar to the case of flags he concludes that an item bearing a Star of David with the word "Tziyon" should be removed only in a way that avoids discord. It is noteworthy that R. Feinstein adopted a conciliatory position on this issue, whereas on other modern issues such as the Conservative Movement (*Igrot Moshe, Yoreh De'ah 2:100-108*) and feminism (*Igrot Moshe, Orach Hayyim 4:49*) he was far more unyielding.

we pray, for prayer is supplication, and God desires what is in our hearts."³³

National flags are complex symbols that represent different ideas to different people. An introspective community should take all of the aforementioned considerations into account. Ultimately, whatever they do conclude, they should make the decision in a manner that upholds the integrity of the community and encourages them to proudly bear the banner of God.

NO MILK, NO TRUST - June 2020

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What is Moses' complaint when he says that he cannot nurse or carry the Israelite people ([Numbers 11:12](#))? This complaint is in response to the people's demand for meat, the penultimate test of the ten times the Israelites tested God in the wilderness ([Bartenura to Avot 5:4](#)). For many of the earlier tests, including the one immediately prior to this one, Moses successfully prays to God on behalf of the people. So why does Moses resist interceding for the Israelites when they ask here for meat ([Numbers 11:4](#)), and what does his response tell us about his character and fitness for leadership? Something in this demand leads Moses to state emphatically what he is incapable of providing to the Israelites. When this grievance is brought to him, he feels that the demands of his job have become beyond what he can impart to the people. Moses tells God

³³ *Responsa Mishneh Halakhot 19:116*, citing [Berakhot 26a](#) and *Zohar*, Vol. 2, 162b.

that he is physically unable to do what he thinks is being asked of him. But Moses' idea about his role and his capabilities for it may be part of his problem as a leader.

If we think about the book of Numbers as the opportunity for God to teach the people of Israel trust, so that they are readied for their transition from slavery of Egypt to the freedom of the land of Israel, then the job of the leader is to be encouraging of that goal. The giving of the Torah at Sinai enables the Israelites both to live in a particular way with Jewish law and also to access the most optimal human traits as fully as possible. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg takes a psychoanalytic approach to many texts she analyzes; in her discussion of Numbers she explicates attachment theories of children and parents and how they engender trust and enable the child to eventually function autonomously; the time in the wilderness prepares the Israelites for the new role they will have in the land of Israel. In the words of Zornberg, "The *midbar* is an inner condition, which challenges the individual to become human. The most sublime experiences contain that 'wilderness energy,' the primal forces out of which one generates a larger humanity. The theater of that struggle is called *midbar*."³⁴ Moses then is the one to be at the forefront of enabling the people in the wilderness to learn to access the primal energy that can be found there. Yet he explicitly rejects his role.

Moses' complaint is that what he is being asked to do is wholly unnatural. He pleads to God that he did not conceive this people, nor did he bear them, and he certainly is unable to physically nurture them and carry them: "Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me,

'Carry them in your bosom as an *omen* (nurse)³⁵ carries an infant,' to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers?" (Numbers 11:12). However, upon examination, the claim that the role God has put him in is unnatural is suspect.

Moses is not the only person to be cast in the role of nurturer who one might think is biologically incapable of feeding a child. For example, Naomi emphasizes to her daughters-in-law that she is past her childbearing years (Ruth 1:11), and yet she embraces the role which she chooses for herself as nurturer to the child of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 4:16). This role is all the more remarkable because the child, Oved, is biologically related to her late husband Elimelekh through his kinship with Boaz, but has no biological link to Naomi herself.

Yet another biblical figure appearing to be biologically unable to nurse and yet still providing suckle is Mordecai, who nursed Esther, as described in Genesis Rabbah (30:8): "R. Yudan said: On one occasion [Mordecai] went round to all the wet nurses but could not find one for Esther, so he himself suckled her. R. Berekiah and R. Abbahu said in the name of R. Eleazar: Milk came to him and he suckled her [and he never even tried to find a wet nurse]." This story, where a number of options for a nurse were tried and the most suitable was a close relative, parallels the midrash in *Sotah 12b* that Moses refused to nurse from Egyptian women. The Gemara asks why the daughter of Pharaoh sought a wet nurse among the Hebrews (Exodus 2:7-9), and responds that

³⁴ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Bewilderments: Reflections on the book of Numbers* (Schocken, 2017), 88. See also Zornberg, *Moses: A Human Life* (Yale University Press, 2016).

³⁵ Other places in the Hebrew Bible where the word *omen* is used for 'nursing man' are II Kings 10:1,5 and Isaiah 49:23.

prior to this, they took Moses around to all the Egyptian wet nurses and he did not agree to nurse from any of them, as he said: “Shall a mouth that in the future will speak with the Divine Presence actually nurse something impure?” And this is as it is written: “Whom shall one teach knowledge? And whom shall one make understand the message?” ([Isaiah 28:9](#)). The prophet is asking: To whom shall God teach the knowledge of the Torah, and to whom shall God make to understand the message of the Torah? The answer is as the verse continues: “Them that are weaned from the milk, them that are drawn from the breasts” (ibid.). The conclusion of the verse indicates that the Torah should be taught to the one who did not want to nurse from the milk of a gentile woman³⁶, i.e., Moses.

There is a certain level of irony that Moses, who was so careful about his own nurse, now refuses to play the role of wet nurse to the Israelite people.

A look at other places in *Hazal* where men find themselves in a position of nurturer can help us understand the validity of Moses’ complaints. The Talmud in [Shabbat 53b](#) tells the story of a man whose wife has died and left him a son to nurse. Without money for a wet nurse, “a miracle was performed on his behalf, and he developed breasts like the two breasts of a woman, and he nursed his son.” This is not the only place in the Talmud where male lactation is

³⁶ Translation from Sefaria. The parallel between Moses and Esther only nursing from a relative makes even clearer the rabbinic idea that adherence to the Torah was completely affirmed only during the time of Esther, based on the verse “the Jews ordained and took upon them” ([Esther 9:27](#)). Both Moses and Esther in these parallel midrashim require the same purity in their food since they will both be recipients of Torah.

mentioned; there is reference to milk from male goats in [Hullin 113b](#). Are *Hazal*’s statements scientifically possible, or are they just a metaphor? Dr. Jeremy Brown [discusses this question](#) in his Talmudology blog, writing that “there are other mammalian species in which the male has been known to lactate, including sheep, rats, free-ranging Dayak fruit bats in Malaysia and the masked flying fox bats of Papua New Guinea. Male lactation was also recorded in World War II prisoner of war camps when malnourished detainees were later liberated and provided with adequate nutrition.” Brown concludes that male lactation “is, at least in theory, *an entirely natural event* [emphasis mine].” Thus, at least according to *Hazal* as supported by science, Moses’ complaint that he can’t nurse the Israelites is not without merit.

If we assume then that theoretically Moses could have nursed the people, whether physically or metaphorically, what does his refusal here say about his understanding of which parts of his role as leader and nurturer he is willing to accept?

Moses’ explicit rejection of his ability to nurture can be seen as a precursor to his cursing at the people, calling them rebels and then striking the rock ([Numbers 20:10-12](#)). Really, what Moses is saying by distancing himself from the people by labeling them “rebels” ([Numbers 20:10](#)) is that he no longer wishes to connect himself to them. At a time when the Israelites want more variety in their food, Moses explicitly says he will not nurse them; when they need water he cannot give it to them without anger and verbal and physical violence. While Moses claims that he is unable to provide for the Israelites, there are in fact things he could have done; for example, he could have suggested ways to cook the manna to enable it to taste more like meat, or reminded the people that even though they are frustrated, God is providing for them. He could even correct

their faulty memories of the ease with which they got sustenance in Egypt - they claim that the food they ate in Egypt was “free” ([Numbers 11:5](#)), but that in fact they performed backbreaking labor to earn it ([Exodus 1:13](#)). However, Moses does not do what he can, even in some kind of incremental way, to help those he is tasked with leading, his response showing a total lack of empathy to the Israelites’ needs.

The people are complaining about the food they are given. But this same food is part of the trust-inducing plan of God for them in the *midbar*, teaching them that they will be provided for each and every day. The complaints of the people about lack of variety in their diet are without merit. The food itself is fungible, lending itself to being prepared in a variety of ways, by being grounded or pound, boiled, or made into cakes ([Numbers 11:8](#)). As well, there is an assortment of tastes with the food God sends the Israelites. The taste of the manna is compared to something thick and delicious ([Numbers 11:8](#)), which the Talmud in *Yoma 75a* suggests is comparable to breast milk: “Rabbi Abbahu said: ‘*Shad*’ ([Numbers 11:8](#)) means breast. Just as a baby tastes different flavors from the breast, so too with the manna, every time that the Jewish people ate the manna, they found in it many flavors, based on their preferences.” Essentially, God is the one nursing the people, providing nourishment that is explicitly compared to the milk a baby drinks from a mother’s breast. If so, why is Moses so upset about his role? He is not in fact called upon to nurse the people; God is doing that already!

Moses’ refusal to nurture the people, or even to simply encourage them to enjoy the manna, is essentially a devaluation or even rejection of the role of nurturer. Ultimately, he even entreats God to kill him ([Numbers 11:15](#)) because of his inability to “bear” the people by himself ([11:14](#)). One might see what Moses is doing in

these verses as a critique of the feminine body and its ability to bear children and nourish them.³⁷ However, this criticism actually becomes one of *Moses himself* because of his refusal to participate in the process of bearing and nurturing the people; to be an ‘*omen*’ (nursing father) is clearly part of his refusal to teach them *emunah*, trust, which comes from the same root word. The process of developing trust is the hallmark of why the people must spend forty years wandering in this desert. God is willing to bear, nurse, and nourish the people; it is Moses’ refusal of that role and denigration of it that makes him unfit to be the leader who is going to increase their attachment to and trust in God during this time in the *midbar*. A nursing mother teaches her baby trust and fosters attachment. It is Moses’ disparagement of the role and its importance that shows that he is unfit for leadership.

In many situations, including the current one with the coronavirus, feminine leadership qualities enable better outcomes for countries with female political leaders.³⁸ As Louise Champoux- Paille and Anne-Marie Croteau write in their article “[Why women leaders are excelling during the coronavirus pandemic](#),” “This new type of leadership

³⁷ Another assessment of the feminine body as negative and weak is that of Rashi (following *Sifri Bamidbar 91*) to Moses’ request to God to kill him ([Numbers 11:15](#)). Rashi speaks of the fact that the verse has “you” (*at*) in the feminine form to “intimate that Moses’ strength grew weak as that of a woman when the Holy one, blessed be He, showed him the punishment which He was to bring in future upon them for this (for their sin).”

³⁸<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html> and <https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/04/13/what-do-countries-with-the-best-coronavirus-reponses-have-in-common-women-leaders/#354858d93dec>, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/equality/493434-countries-led-by-women-have-fared-better-against>, and <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-countries-female-leaders-covid-deaths.html>

primarily involves resilience, courage, flexibility, listening, empathy, collaboration, caring and recognition of collective contribution. The participation of everyone's intelligence becomes the key to success. These are all characteristics of traditionally feminine management." Moses's refusal of feminine traits that might have led to better outcomes made it impossible for him to properly manage the various outbreaks in the desert.

What keeps Moses from being a leader who might engender more trust in those he is trusted to lead? Avivah Zornberg says that when Moses negates his ability to be an *omen* he is expressly limiting himself from the possibilities of the role God has given him as wilderness guide. Zornberg writes, "In one moment of imaginative genius, [Moses] frames his constancy and compassion, merging self and other. In such a relation, he would indeed be an *omen*, a source of unbounded nurturance, of *emunah*, of trustworthiness. As such, he could not fail to elicit a responsive trust from them. But the very words in which he articulates this image undermine its force. Framed in rhetorical questions – 'Did I conceive this people, did I bear them?' his fantasy of himself is deflected from the outset. Even as a fantasy, it is not viable."³⁹ The non-viability even of Moses' briefly-positing role for himself as nurturer is yet another reason why his leadership too is becoming unsuitable. Moses raises the possibility that he might nourish the people in a way that promotes trust and attachment, only to immediately reject it as inconceivable. Had Moses thought that part of his role as leader was to nourish in a way that would foster *emunah*, trust, in the people he might have entered the Promised Land. It is his refusal both to physically sustain the Israelite people, as well as to encourage their faith that shows he is unfit to continue as a leader. Given the entirety of the character

³⁹ *Bewilderments*, 80.

traits of Moses as leader, we see that even imagining himself in the role of procreator, bearer, nurturer, and carrier of this people is a non-starter which ultimately leads to his removal from his role.

During the forty years in the desert, God wants to train the Israelites in faith. This training started with the understanding that manna will be a constant like mother's milk, a food to soothe, comfort and nourish all at once, the substance itself a stand-in for the physical presence of God. Just as a mother must be physically present to nurse a child, God in providing manna is promising God's continued presence. Moses wants no part of either nourishing or creating an atmosphere where the people will be able to feel God's presence. Perhaps it is a lack of faith in himself and his own abilities, as we have seen at every stage of his commission as leader that he has excuses such as stuttering, why he cannot speak or lead, that disables him from taking on the nurturer role. The negation of the specifically female traits of being an *omen*, a nurturer or wet nurse, and of physically bearing the people, with concomitant positive empathetic and collaborative attributes connected with women leaders, is the very thing that makes Moses unfit to continue as leader.

God is portrayed as like a mother and a nurse, but Moses will not embrace those roles. Jordan Rosenblum, in an article about the role of breastfeeding in rabbinic literature⁴⁰, writes, "Fortunately, unlike a human nurse from whom one receives physical milk for only the first two or three years of life, God is a nurse who nurtures for the entirety of one's life." Moses does not instill or encourage trust, so his role as leader is diminished. Though the final

⁴⁰ Jordan Rosenblum, "'Blessings of the Breasts': Breastfeeding in Rabbinic Literature" *Hebrew Union College Annual* Vol. 87 (2016).

declaration of the sentence against Moses comes through his refusal to get water appropriately at the waters of Merivah in Numbers 20, his inability to give milk here in Numbers 11 plays a significant role in signaling to God that a new leadership style needs to be sought.

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