

Service Entrance: May One Go into a Foreign House of Worship?

Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

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Our previous article discussed the prohibition against entering places of idolatry;[1] in this one, we survey various discussions of this *issur* by *poskim* of the previous couple of centuries.

R' Chaim Palagi in Turkey was asked about an incident in which several Jews had accompanied a high-ranking government official into a non-Jewish house of worship on their holiday. He rules that entering a house of foreign worship is unequivocally prohibited, and that this applies even today, despite the principle articulated by *poskim* in many other contexts that there is no idolatry today.[2] He accordingly requires the violators to undergo a penance including immersion, flogging, and the donation of the garments in which they had entered the place to the poor, in order to achieve atonement.[3]

R' Eliezer Deitch in Hungary was asked about a similar incident in which several Jews had attended a memorial service for a government official in a non-Jewish house of worship ("and removed their hats, as is the custom among them"). He rules that they had sinned doubly: Entering a foreign house of worship is forbidden as an act associated with idolatry (*abizrei hu da'avodas elilim*), and it is also included in the prohibition against following the traditions of non-Jews (*chukos hagoyim*).[4] He goes so far as to express uncertainty about whether entering such a place would be permitted even if life was at stake,[5] and he concludes similarly to Rav Palagi, that the violators require "great atonement." [6]

R' Ovadia Yosef, during his turbulent two-year stint in the Egyptian rabbinate (a period apparently marked by conflict with the community and the local rabbinic establishment), was once asked by the government-appointed chief rabbi to represent him at the funeral of a Christian diplomat that would take place in a church and include prayer by priests. The chief rabbi asserted that this was a matter of maintaining good relations with the non-Jews (*darchei shalom*), and that this was the custom of many rabbis.[7] Rav Yosef wrote a comprehensive analysis of the question, in the course of which he rejects the idea that a concern for enmity (*eivah*) can override the prohibition against entering a place of idolatry. He further denies that his situation ("in Egypt, where the government is Arab, and the foreign consuls do not rule over us") actually involved *darchei shalom* and *eivah*. He ultimately concludes:

It is prohibited to enter their churches, even if there is a concern for *darchei shalom*, a fortiori when there is only an interest in befriending them and finding favor in their eyes, and all the more so since their custom is to offer incense at that time to idolatry, and they cry out (in prayer) but are not answered in their prayers...and a fortiori for a *rav* in Klal Yisrael to go there (with the entourage of the office of the rabbinate) with his official garb and rabbinic attire, which certainly entails a desecration of Hashem's Name, *chas veshalom*. And one

must resort to all means and efforts to abolish this evil minhag, which comprises the same letters as *Gehenom*. [8]

R' Eliezer Yehudah Waldenberg in Eretz Yisrael was asked about the permissibility of entering a church for the purpose of viewing its art, and he responded that this is strictly forbidden. He extends the prohibition against entering places of idolatry to mosques, per a ruling of the Ran that despite the fact that Muslims do not deify Mohammad,

since they bow to him the bowing of divinity, they have the status of idolaters for every prohibition of idolatry, for their bowing is not merely out of honor, since there is no honor toward the dead, but their service is rather like a form of divine service." [9]

Rav Yosef, however, rejects Rav Waldenberg's extension of the prohibition to mosques. He acknowledges the position of the Ran and other *Rishonim* that Islam constitutes idolatry, but he accepts as normative the view of the Rambam and other *Rishonim* that it does not:

These Yishme'eilim are not idolaters at all, and it (idolatry) has been extirpated from their mouths and hearts, and they maintain the unity of Hashem, may He be blessed, with a proper conception of unity, a unity that is without fault... [10]

Rav Yosef goes so far as to permit prayer in a mosque, and he notes that this is the custom:

And so I have seen many geonim and *tzadikim* that would pray inside the mosque of the *Me'aras Hamachpeilah*, and to this day there is an established shul there for prayer, for our brothers the residents of Chevron and Kiryas Arba. [11]

Rav Waldenberg, however, is indeed opposed to davening in the section of the *Me'aras Hamachpeilah* in which Muslims pray, particularly in light of the presence there of Islamic books, quotations from Islamic scriptures, and the crescent moon Islamic symbol. [12]

Note that R' Yehuda Dovid Bleich has suggested that entering the basement, anteroom, or gym of a church may be different from entering the sanctuary. [13]

[1] For a general, comprehensive discussion of this prohibition, see R' Yehuda Dovid Bleich. Survey of Recent Halakhic Periodical Literature: Entering A Non-Jewish House of Worship. Tradition 44:2 (Summer 2011) pp. 73-92.

Cf. R' Doniel Neustadt. Parshas Bo: Visiting A Church Or A Mosque; R' Anthony Manning. Halachic and Hashkafic Issues In Contemporary Society: 34-Entering Churches and Mosques-Part 2. OU Israel Center, Winter 2016.

[2] Cf. Shu"t Yabia Omer *cheilek* 2 Y.D. *siman* 11 from *os* 4 (R' Chaim Palagi is cited at the end of *os* 6); Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer *cheilek* 14 *siman* 99 *os* 3; Rav Bleich *ibid.* I: The Status of Christian Belief, pp. 73-84; R' Gil Student. President Obama's Prayer Service: III. Churches Today. Torah Musings. Jan. 23, 2009.

[3] Chaim Bayad *siman* 26.

[4] See our previous discussion of this prohibition in Playing with Fire: Adopting *Chukos Hagoyim*. Bais HaVaad Halacha Journal. Mar. 2, 2023.

[5]See Yabia Omer *ibid.* os 2 for a discussion of this point, including sources from the *Rishonim*.

[6]Shu"t Pri Hasadeh *cheilek* 2 *siman* 4.

[7]As noted in the previous article, U.K. chief rabbis of the past several decades have also been accustomed to attend services in churches on certain occasions.

[8]Yabia Omer *ibid.* os 8.

[9]Chidushei HaRan Sanhedrin end of 61b. Tzitz Eliezer *ibid.*

[10]Shu"t HaRambam (Mekitzei Nirdamim 5694) *siman* 369 pp. 334-36, and cf. Hilchos *Ma'achalos Asuros* 11:7.

[11]Shu"t Yabia Omer *cheilek* 7 Y.D. *siman* 12 *osios* 2-4. Rav Yosef has an additional *teshuvah* focusing specifically on the question of davening at the Me'aras Hamachpeilah in *cheilek* 10 O.C. *siman* 16.

[12]Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer *cheilek* 10 *siman* 1 os 44. Cf. R' Ben-Tzion Mutzafi. *Teshuvos* #146703 and #189710.

[13]"Entering the basement, anterooms, or gym of a church is different than entering the sanctuary proper. It's very common in New York and other places for voting to be located in the auditoriums of churches. I don't like quoting things not in writing, but there are enough anecdotes about people of halachic stature who voted in a church auditorium. They did not regard it as a *bais avodah zarah*."—Elliot Resnick. *Vaccinations, Lost Diamonds, And Torture: An Interview with Noted Posek Rabbi J. David Bleich*. The Jewish Press. Feb. 8, 2017.