

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

Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

May 18, 2023

CNN reports:

Britain's Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, will walk to King Charles III's coronation, in keeping with Shabbat laws... "[The King and Queen] are being exceptionally gracious in order to make it possible for me to walk to [Westminster] Abbey on our Shabbat, because we don't go in vehicles," he told CNN's Bianca Nobilo in an interview on Friday. "So [they] have invited us to be their guests in St. James' Palace over the Sabbath."...

Mirvis's role in the ceremony marks the first time that faith leaders from all of Britain's major religions will be included in a coronation, which has traditionally been a solely Christian service.

While the Archbishop of Canterbury will conduct the ceremony and anoint Charles with holy oil, the Chief Rabbi said he will be part of the procession entering Westminster Abbey and will give the newly crowned king a blessing.

"After the religious service is over, I, together with four other faith leaders, will be forming a line, the king will stand in front of us, and we will give him a blessing and greetings," he said.

"He will acknowledge that. It's historic and is exceptionally powerful and much appreciated," Mirvis added...[1]

The announcement that the Chief Rabbi would be entering Westminster Abbey—an Anglican church—aroused indignation online. A year ago, he attended a prayer service at St. Paul's Cathedral in London in honor of Queen Elizabeth II's 70-year anniversary on the throne.[2] Former Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits, who served from 1967 to 1991, described his own practice as follows:

After consultation with the [London] Beth Din, my own practice is occasionally to attend Church services on royal and state occasions to represent the Jewish community. But I never actively participate, nor do I wear cap and gown. I find that my Christian hosts usually show understanding and respect for this attitude and its reservations.[3]

And elsewhere:

Naturally, I often face the problem of having to respond to invitations to take part in interfaith services, sometimes at the highest level for royal and national events. My attitude invariably is that I cannot take an active part in a religious service of any except my own faith, and this is always understood and respected. But I do on occasion attend such services as a representative of the Jewish community, though without wearing canonicals or "officiating" in any other form.[4]

The day after President Obama's inauguration, a National Prayer Service was held at the National Cathedral in Washington. As JTA reported at the time:

The main Modern Orthodox rabbinical association says a prominent

member violated its rules by participating in the National Prayer Service.

A Rabbinical Council of America official told JTA that Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, the religious leader of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York City, broke the organization's rules by participating in the service Wednesday at the National Cathedral on the morning after Barack Obama's inauguration.

"The long-standing policy of the Rabbinical Council of America, in accordance with Jewish law, is that participation in a prayer service held in the sanctuary of a church is prohibited," the RCA said in a statement. "Any member of the RCA who attends such a service does so in contravention of this policy and should not be perceived as representing the organization in any capacity."

The RCA said that Lookstein's participation was problematic both because the service was held in the sanctuary of a church, which Orthodox Jews are prohibited from entering, and because it was an interfaith prayer service, which the RCA discourages...[5]

Although an absolute prohibition against entering a foreign house of worship does not explicitly appear in the Gemara, the existence of such a prohibition is generally accepted. The Rambam writes (in his Peirush Hamishnayos, not in Mishneh Torah) regarding a house of idol worship that "it is virtually prohibited for us to see it, and *kal vachomer* to enter it,"[6] and the Shulchan Aruch rules that "It is a mitzvah to distance oneself four *amos* from a path of idolatry." [7]

One basis in the Gemara for such a prohibition is the following anecdote:

R' Chanina and R' Yonasan were traveling on the road, and they reached two diverging paths. One path opened onto the door of a temple of idol worship, and one opened onto the door of a brothel. One said to his friend: Let us go on the path that opens onto the door of a temple of idol worship, for its *yeitzer hara* has been slaughtered. The other one said to him: Let us go on the path that opens onto the door of the brothel, and we shall subdue our *yeitzer hara* and receive reward.[8]

Tosafos comments:

From here we may derive that it is customary to distance oneself from the entrance of a place of idol worship to the extent possible, because it is written, "and do not come near the entrance of her house"[9]—which the Gemara above interpreted as referring to idol worship—for he preferred to go by the path that led to the entrance of the brothel rather than the one that led to the entrance of the place of idol worship.[10]

Although Tosafos only infers that distancing oneself from the entrance of a place of idol worship is "customary" and does not assert that it is absolutely forbidden, and in any event, the inference from the Gemara's anecdote is not entirely straightforward,[11] the halachic consensus is that entering a place of idolatry is forbidden.

In a follow-up article we will *iy"H* survey the positions of recent *poskim*

regarding this prohibition, in particular on whether there is any basis for leniency in coronations, presidential inaugurations, and the like, where there may be the opportunity to develop and improve relations with non-Jews by attending, or conversely, the danger of injuring such relations by not attending.

[1] Bianca Nobilo and Issy Ronald. UK's Chief Rabbi will walk to King Charles' coronation to keep Shabbat laws. CNN.

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/05/uk/chief-rabbi-king-charles-coronation-intl-scli-gbr/index.html>.

[2] Cnaan Liphshiz. Orthodox rabbis don't enter churches. So why was Britain's chief rabbi at St. Paul's Cathedral?

<https://www.jta.org/2022/06/03/global/orthodox-rabbis-dont-enter-churches-so-why-did-britains-chief-rabbi-attend-service-at-one>.

[3] Dear Chief Rabbi: From the Correspondence of Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits on Matters of Jewish Law, Ethics and Contemporary Issues, 1980-1990, p. 46.

[4] Ibid. p. 49.

[5] Jacob Berkman. Orthodox group: Rabbi violated rules by joining National Prayer Service. Jan. 21, 2009.

<https://www.jta.org/2009/01/21/politics/orthodox-group-rabbi-violated-rules-by-joining-national-prayer-service>.

[6] Peirush Hamishnayos, Avodah Zarah 1:4, cited by Shach Y.D. *siman* 149 s.k. 1 and Ba'er Heiteiv *ibid.* s.k. 1.

[7] Shulchan Aruch Y.D. 149:1.

[8] Avodah Zarah 17a-b.

[9] Mishlei 5:8.

[10] Tosafos *ibid.* s.v. *Neizil*.

[11] See Maharam Lublin *ibid.*; Shu"t Yabia Omer *cheilek* 2 Y.D. *siman* 11 os 1.