

The Royal Treatment: How Must We Act Toward Kings?

Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

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In our previous article, we noted Chazal's exhortation to act with respect toward kings—even, according to some, wicked ones. Elsewhere the Gemara indicates that there is a Torah imperative to run to greet kings:

R' Yochanan said: A person should always strive to run to greet Jewish kings. And not only toward Jewish kings, but even to greet kings of the nations of the world, so that if he will merit (Rashi: to witness the glory of Mashiach), he will distinguish between Jewish kings and the kings of the nations of the world.[1]

This imperative is so strong that it justifies the violation of an *issur deRabanan*:

R' Elazar bar Tzadok said: We jumped over the coffins of the dead to greet Jewish kings. (R' Elazar did this even though he was a kohein and forbidden to become impure through dead bodies.) And they did not say this only about greeting Jewish kings, but even about greeting kings of the nations of the world, so that if he will merit, he will distinguish between Jewish kings and the kings of the nations of the world.

After some discussion, the Gemara concludes that we are dealing with a form of *tum'ah* (impurity) that is only prohibited *mideRabanan*, and therefore

Due to respect for kings, the Chachamim did not decree in such a case.[2]

The language of this passage is somewhat puzzling: The initial rationale given for the imperative to run to greet kings is in order to be able to distinguish in the future between Jewish and non-Jewish kings, but later the Gemara indicates that the purpose is to show respect for kings.

Some authorities understand that the Gemara's position has undergone an evolution: The Gemara initially understood that one may violate a prohibition even just to eventually distinguish between Jewish and other kings, but it concludes that only showing respect for kings justifies a violation, and the imperative of showing respect applies only to Jewish kings.[3]

Others maintain that it is permitted to violate an *issur deRabanan* even for a non-Jewish king, because both imperatives, that of showing respect for kings as well as that of attaining the ability to distinguish between kings, justify violating a *deRabanan*. [4]

This debate has important implications for a question discussed by several nineteenth-century halachic authorities. There was a long-standing minhag to welcome and show respect to monarchs (as well as other political leaders) by receiving them while carrying a sefer Torah.[5] Is it permitted to do so on Shabbos or Yom Kippur in a place without an eruv? One of the Chasam Sofer's sons, R' Shimon Sofer (author of *Hisorerus Teshuvah*) considered this obviously permitted, while another, R' Avraham Shmuel

Binyamin Sofer (author of Ksav Sofer), maintained that in principle, this should not be permitted, because the mitzvah to show respect for kings is limited to Jewish kings, and being able to distinguish between kings does not require carrying a sefer Torah. In practice, however, the Ksav Sofer agrees that it is permitted: Since the custom to carry a sefer Torah is well established and well known, failing to do it would be disrespectful and insulting to the king, which is prohibited. Additionally, it would engender enmity (*eivah*), a concern that justifies disregarding numerous halachic strictures. He accordingly agrees in practice with his brother's permissive stance, but only as a temporary dispensation due to exigent circumstances (*hora'as sha'ah*).[6]

Their father, the Chasam Sofer, adopts a stricter stance on a somewhat different question involving a conflict between the need to show respect for kings and another halachic imperative. He was asked by the Jewish community of Vienna whether it was permissible to honor the emperor, upon his visit to the community, with a performance involving men and women singing together in shul. He responded that although honoring kings is indeed a great and important mitzvah, "and one who violates this is considered by us like one who has not put on tefillin," this does not justify violating our tenets. He makes the ingenious argument that it is precisely the emperor's graciousness and religious tolerance toward us, allowing us to observe our Torah, which we so admire and for which we are so grateful, and so it is actually the faithful observance of the Torah without any deviation that constitutes a display of honor toward the emperor:

But if we were to *chas veshalom* do on this day something in opposition to our Torah, this would not constitute honor toward him but a desecration of his honor, *chas veshalom*, as if he desires the overthrowing of our religion and a weakening of our efforts in the service of Heaven, and this is the opposite of our intention in our praising and thanking him for all the good (he does for us).[7]

(It should be noted that the Chasam Sofer's language in this *teshuvah* suggests that he was writing with a potential hostile reader in mind, so it is difficult to be sure of the extent to which his stated reasoning accurately and fully represents his thoughts on the halachic issues at stake.)

We close our discussion of the imperatives to show honor to kings and to avoid *eivah* with the guidance of several contemporary halachic authorities on appropriate behavior during the mourning for Queen Elizabeth II:

As Britain prepares for the funeral of Queen Elizabeth, R' Chaim Dovid Weiss, Rav of the Satmar *kehillah* of Antwerp, was asked whether a *hachnasas sefer Torah* celebration can be held in the streets during the days of mourning for the Queen.

Rav Weiss replied that it should not be held, stating that *Yidden* should refrain from public celebrations like a *chupah* outside or a *hachnasas sefer Torah* in the streets, which could cause hatred for Jews from non-Jews.

In a different ruling, the *Rosh Yeshiva* of the Gateshead Yeshiva, R' Avrohom Gurwicz, said that since "the whole country is observing a

full day of mourning and all schools and shops will be closed as a mark of respect," therefore, "all Jewish institutions should act accordingly." [8]

In another *psak* halacha from the Rosh Yeshivas Gateshead, HaGaon HaRav Avrohom Gurwicz, he instructed that a girls' school should be closed during the funeral and afterward only teach *limudei kodesh*.

In a letter sent to the parents of the students at the school, the administration writes: "We asked HaRav Avrohom Gurwicz regarding opening the school next Monday because of the Queen's funeral. The decision was not to hold studies during the funeral, and afterward only teach *limudei kodesh*. Therefore we're holding lessons in school only between 2:00 PM and 4:00 PM in the afternoon, and only *limudei kodesh*." [9]

[1] Brachos 58a.

[2] Ibid. 19b.

[3] Magein Avraham *siman* 224 s.k. 7, as explained by Machatzis Hashekel *ibid*.

[4] Rambam Hilchos *Aveilus* 3:14; Chasam Sofer to Magein Avraham *ibid*.; Shu"t Ksav Sofer O.C. *siman* 37.

Cf. Mor Uktziah *ibid*. R' Yehudah Zoldan, Malchus Yehudah VeYisrael, Merkaz Shapira 5762, *siman* 7 "Re'ias Pnei Melech Umanhig Uvirchasah", *os* 2 (also here).

[5] See Sefer Hachinuch mitzvah 379; Rav Zoldan *ibid*. *Hotza'as* Sefer Torah *Likras Melech*, *siman* 8, pp. 131-146 (also here)

[6] Ksav Sofer *ibid*. end of *the teshuvah* s.v. *Venavo*, s.v. *Amnam*. Cf. Bais Lechem Yehudah to Y.D. *siman* 282 s.k. 6 (citing Radvaz, although I have been unable to locate this discussion of Radvaz); Shu"t Maharsham *cheilek* 3 *siman* 198; Rav Zoldan, *Hotza'as* Sefer Torah *os* 4.

Cf. Shu"t Yabia Omer *cheilek* 2 Y.D. *siman* 11 and *cheilek* 7 Y.D. *siman* 12 about whether the concerns of *eivah* and *darchei shalom* can justify entering a church or mosque for the funeral of a prominent non-Jew.

[7] Shu"t Chasam Sofer C.M. *siman* 190.

[8] Rav Gurwicz: Country is Observing a Full Day of Mourning for the Queen; Jewish Institutions Should Act Accordingly. Matzav.com.

<https://matzav.com/rav-gruwicz-country-is-observing-a-full-day-of-mourning-for-the-queen-jewish-institutions-should-act-accordingly/>.

[9] Queen Elizabeth's Funeral: Shailos And Teshuvos.

<https://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/2124492/queen-elizabeths-funeral-shailos-and-teshuvos.html>.