

Halachos of Avodah Zara: Part I Shiur

MAINTAINING A DISTANCE FROM AVODAH ZARA

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A TRANSCRIPTION OF THE YORUCHA CURRICULUM WEEKLY SHIUR VIDEO

THE DEFINITION OF AVODAH ZARA:

While most people are vaguely familiar with the laws of *avodah zara*, there are many common misconceptions that must be dispelled before delving into the practical aspects of these halachos.

The simple definition of *avodah zara* is that this is a term that refers to religions or individuals who worship any entity other than Hashem Yisborach. Some people have the misconception that Christianity does not fall under the category of *avodah zara*; however, the consensus amongst the Rishonim is that mainstream, organized Christianity definitely is considered *avodah zara*. The Rambam and other Rishonim are very clear about this fact.

While there is a Tosafos in Sanhedrin (63) that some point to as saying that the belief in a “*shituf*” (something similar to the Christian belief in a “trinity”) is not genuine *avodah zara*, the Nodah B’Yehuda strongly avers that this is a misunderstanding of Tosafos, and this opinion is echoed by many other Achronim.

Since mainstream Christianity is *avodah zara*, a Christian church would be considered to be a “house of *avodah zara*” in regards to all of the halachos that we will subsequently discuss.

Islam, however, is not considered by the vast majority of Rishonim to be actual *avodah zara*. While Muslims believe in a *navi sheker* (false prophet), the G-d they worship is Hashem, which means that they are not serving *avodah zara*. Their religion is considered heretical, but it is not a form of *avodah zara*. This will be relevant to many halachos that we will discuss.

ENTERING A PLACE OF AVODAH ZARA:

The Mishnah in Avodah Zara (11A) speaks about areas where an *avodah zara* is located and says that it is forbidden to enter a city where there is an *avodah zara*. Of course, in almost every city in today’s time, there is at least one Christian church. This leads us to ask how it is permitted to enter almost any city.

The Shach (Yoreh Deah 149) quotes the Pirush Hamishnayos of the Rambam who says that although the halacha is in accordance with the Mishnah that says that it is forbidden to enter a city where an *avodah zara* is located, and it is certainly forbidden to live there, it is impossible to uphold this halacha in today’s times. We are in exile and do not have the authority or ability to eradicate places of *avodah zara* as we did in the times of the Bais Hamikdash; therefore, we are considered “*anusim*”.

We are forced against our will to live in such places and, due to no fault of our own, we are unable to keep this halacha.

The Shach concludes, however, that although the halacha forbidding a Jew to enter a city that contains an *avodah zara* cannot be applied today, it is still forbidden to enter an actual house of *avodah zara*, i.e., a Christian church.

There is a disagreement amongst the Rishonim whether the prohibition to enter a place of *avodah zara* applies only during times when people are actually engaged in worship or at all times. The Rambam rules that one may never enter such a place at any time, and the Shach rules in accordance with this opinion.

There is a further dispute regarding whether or not one may enter the grounds of such a place, without entering the house itself. This would apply to a church’s yard, garden, and the like. The question is very relevant to people who may need to attend a non-Jewish funeral. Are they permitted to stand outside the church, in the yard or elsewhere on the property, without entering the building?

The Rema (Yoreh Deah 149) cites two opinions on this matter. The first opinion rules that if no one is worshiping *avodah zara* in the yard at that time, it is permitted for a Jew to be there. He then cites a “*yesh omrim*” (some say) that even entering the yard or garden is always prohibited. There is a general rule that we always follow the last *yesh omrim* in the Rema. Accordingly, one should avoid ever entering the yard of a church.

The Tur also discusses this halacha and says that one may not enter the courtyard of a church even for “*iskei rabim*”, public benefit, or “*pikuach nefesh*”, to save a life. The Prisha says that the coronation of a king is an example of *iskei rabim* that is forbidden. It was common for a king’s coronation to be held outside a church, and it would be beneficial for the public if Jewish dignitaries would attend to pay respect. The Prisha says that even for such a purpose, and even though no worship is taking place at that time, it is forbidden to enter the yard of a church.

DISTANCING ONESELF FROM A HOUSE OF AVODAH ZARA:

In addition to the prohibition of entering a house of *avodah zara*, there is another prohibition of going near one.

The Gemara in Avodah Zara (17A) says that one must stay at least 4 *amos* away from “a house of *meenus* (heresy).”



I receive many *shailos* from people who are in the process of purchasing a multiunit commercial property, with one of the units occupied by a church. The first thing I tell them is that they cannot enter or go within 4 *amos* of the church for any reason.

In a *teshuva*, Rav Moshe Feinstein discusses Reform and Conservative temples. He says that these places are not houses of *avodah zara*, as the people there do not worship a foreign deity; however, they are houses of *meenus* and *apikorsus* because the people there do not believe in the fundamental tenets of our religion and deny the basic foundations of Jewish belief. Accordingly, even though the Gemara that forbids a person from entering a city that contains an *avodah zara* may not apply to such temples, the halacha prohibiting a Jew to walk within 4 *amos* of such a place does apply. This means that it is forbidden to enter or even go very close to non-Orthodox houses of worship.

Rav Moshe discusses cases where Orthodox schools were interested in renting space within non-Orthodox temple compounds and concludes that this would be forbidden, based on the above reasoning.

Interestingly enough, it would be permitted to enter a Muslim mosque. In fact, there are a number of *kivrei tzadikim* in Eretz Yisroel that are located inside mosques, and many Jewish people go there to daven at the *kevarim*. This is permitted because, as we said, Islam is not considered *avodah zara*. Furthermore, although their beliefs are not in line with the fundamentals of Judaism, this does not deem them the type of *meenus* that would forbid a Jew from walking within 4 *amos* of their house of worship. This is because non-Jews are not obligated to believe in our fundamental belief system. They only are commanded not to serve idols. The fact that they have heretical beliefs does not make their mosque the type of place that is forbidden to enter or go near.

A church would be classified as both a house of *avodah zara*, as we explained above, and also as a house of *meenus*. While non-Jews are not required to accept Jewish beliefs, they are commanded not to worship idols. If a non-Jew does believe in and worship idols, he is guilty of *meenus*, as well as *avodah zara*. Accordingly, it is forbidden either to enter a church or walk within 4 *amos* of it.

Many *shailos* are received regarding Jews who need to enter a church for a specific function. Unfortunately, some people need to attend 12-step addiction rehabilitation sessions, and these sessions are often held inside church buildings. This may be a case of *pikuach nefesh*. As we said, the Tur prohibits entering a church even for *pikuach nefesh*, but other Poskim disagree and rule that if it is clear to all that the person is only going into the church for this reason, then it is permitted. In any event, in cases where no life is at stake, it would be forbidden to enter a church. Sometimes during election season, voting is held inside a church building. It would be very problematic to enter the church for this reason and one should certainly not be lenient in this area before speaking with a Rov.

SENDING IN A NON-JEWISH EMPLOYEE:

While a Jew who purchases a commercial property that contains a church is not permitted to enter the premises, he is allowed to send his non-Jewish manager to inspect it. The halacha that forbids merely entering a church applies only to a Jew and not to a non-Jew; therefore, there is no problem in having one's non-Jewish employee enter the church on his behalf to do a job.

NON-PERMANENT WORSHIP:

It is only forbidden to enter a house of *avodah zara* when this house is regularly used for this reason. If a housing complex has a clubhouse that is used for Christian prayer gatherings on rare occasions, it does not become labeled as a house of *avodah zara* and there is no prohibition to enter.

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