

May Jews enter churches?

Torah Quote 1. And Moses said to him, "As soon as I am out of the city, I will spread my hands to the Lord..." (Ex. 9:29)

Commentary 1. Moses did not wish to pray to God inside the city, because it was full of idols. (Midrash, Exodus Rabbah 12:5)

News item

Orthodox group: Rabbi violated rules by joining National Prayer Service at the National Cathedral on January 21, 2009 [see below summary of article]:

Discussion

- Prohibition is about "entering a house of idolatry [Avoda Zara]"
 - One may not come closer to it than 4 cubits (6') (Avoda Zara 17a)
 - Most Orthodox authorities consider Christianity idolatry: Rambam, Rashba (Rabbi Solomon ben Aderet), Ritba (Rabbi Yom Tov ibn Asevilli) and Rosh (Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel), as well as contemporaries-- Rabbis Moshe Feinstein, Ovadia Yosef, Soloveitchik and Eliezer Waldenberg.
 - Some do not:
 - Meiri [1249-1310]: A religion that has a system of law and ethics (mugdar b'nimussim) is not idolatry (Beit HaBechira on Bava Kamma 113a,b).
 - The Maharal of Prague (ShoT 24), the Tiferet Yisrael (Avot 3.14), and the Noda Biyehuda (intro to Hitnatzlut HaMechaber) : A religion that accepts the idea of divine revelation is not idolatry
 - Talmud, Chullin 13b: "The Gentiles outside the Land of Israel are not idolaters; they merely continue the customs of their ancestors [without understanding what they are doing]".
 - Even if one holds that Christianity is not idolatry:
 - Mar'it 'ayin (avoid appearance of wrongdoing)
 - Deep-rooted reluctance to enter church for historical reasons (Christian oppression; would not feel this reluctance for Hindu temple, which is clearly an idolatrous shrine)
 - Halacha: Entering a church is forbidden (but entering a mosque is permitted)
- Yet two Talmudic principles require us to maintain good relations with neighbors:
 - Mipnei darkhei shalom* (Because of the ways of peace)
 - Mishum evah* ("lest we cause hatred")

For this, British Orthodox rabbis have always attended state functions at Westminster Abbey

Torah Quote 2. And the flax and the barley were destroyed; for the barley was in the ear, and the flax was in bud. But the wheat and the spelt were not struck, for they were still pliant (Ex. 9:31-32).

Commentary 2. A person should always be as pliant as a reed; and never as unyielding as the cedar. (Talmud, Taanit 20b)

News item [summary]:

Orthodox group: Rabbi violated rules by joining National Prayer Service
By Jacob Berkman • January 21, 2009

NEW YORK (JTA) -- 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 for fear that such participation could allow missionaries to legitimize their argument that Jews can indeed embrace Jesus.

"To go into a cathedral, in this case an Episcopalian cathedral in the main sanctuary, is certainly by most accounts not appropriate," the executive director of the RCA, Rabbi Basil Herring, told JTA...Herring was adamant that the RCA was not taking a political stance, noting that the organization sent a letter to President Obama congratulating him...

Lookstein joined six representatives of various religious communities, including Rabbi Jerome Epstein, the executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, in reciting portions of a nondenominational responsive prayer. Most of the overall service was nondenominational, but there were a few distinctly Christian reference.

Lookstein said he was satisfied with his decision to participate.

"After consultation with people who are absolutely committed to halacha, I had originally decided to do it because I felt it was a civic duty to honor the new president of the United States. That is why I originally agreed to do it," Lookstein said. "But the people who spoke to me about it indicated it was an important contribution to the Orthodox community because it is only right for the Orthodox community to be supporting the president in a visible way when he is being supported by representatives of the Conservative and Reform movements."

...“Had I pulled out it would have been something of an insult from the Orthodox community, which was at least the way I felt,” Lookstein said.

He also said that he heavily weighed the halachic implications of his move, and though he would not ordinarily participate in an interfaith prayer service, especially one in a church, in this case he felt “there were other concerns.”

“If I reached a decision to do it, since I am very careful about shmirat mitzvot, you should conclude that I felt halachically this was the right thing to do,” Lookstein said. “I am not going around and making a decision for the world.”

...He also met Obama after the reading and recited to the new president the blessing Jews say when they come into the presence of a king -- only after Obama gave him permission. “I thanked him for his support of Israel and I urged him to remember the unforgettable statement he made in Sderot, where he said, ‘If anybody would shoot rockets into my house while my daughters were sleeping, I would do anything in my power to make sure they wouldn’t do it again,’ “ Lookstein said. “He responded with a clear assent.”

...

According to another source, the Obama team was looking specifically for the participation of an Orthodox rabbi.

One person in attendance said that Sen. Joe Lieberman, the one-time Orthodox candidate for vice president, told him that it was an incredibly important and a very positive thing that the Orthodox community was represented.

Rabbi Tzvi Hersch Weinreb, the executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, was rumored to have been approached by the Obama team, but declined the invitation -- paving the way for Lookstein to appear.

Weinreb would neither confirm nor deny that he was asked to participate, but stood by the RCA's rule, which is based on an edict from the late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Modern Orthodoxy's longtime spiritual leader. Orthodox rabbis, according to Soloveitchik, should not engage in theological debate or participate in interfaith services, but they should absolutely work with religious officials of other faiths on matters of social welfare, freedom and hunger, Weinreb said.

...
