

Seasonal Shailos

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During this time of the year, some of us merit being oblivious to the celebrations of non-Jewish Chicagoans, while other yidden must address various issues that arise about their holidays and the practices associated with them.

The poskim have discussed Notzrus (Christianity) and the prohibition of avodah zarah, which is forbidden for non-Jews as well. This was discussed at length in "Shailos to the Bais Horaah" #24. This is only in regard to non-Jews. All poskim agree that for Jews it is a bona-fide avodah zarah. This leads to several shailos, some which we will discuss below.

CAN HIS NAME BE SAID OUTRIGHT?

There is a Torah prohibition to mention the name of an avodah zarah, as the posuk¹ states "the names of other gods may not be mentioned." The Gemara Sanhedrin² declares that even to mention the name as a landmark for a meeting place, as in "meet me near that avodah zarah" is forbidden. The Chinuch³ explains that we try to distance ourselves as much as possible from avodah zarah in order to eradicate the whole concept from our hearts. Therefore, being that Notzrus is certainly avodah zarah for Jews, it seems that one must refrain from using his name in any form other than a derogatory one, such as Yashka or Yashkee. However, Haagos Maimonios⁴ writes, that the issur is limited solely to names given to express divinity. A regular name that does not have any intrinsic connotation of greatness would be permitted to use. For example, if a man named Bob would be accepted as a deity, it would be permitted to continue calling him by that name, because it is not rooted in religion. The Haagos Maimonios proves this from the fact that the name of J is mentioned many places in Talmud (before being removed by censors). This is because during that era it was a regular name and has no implied divinity to it. This view is accepted by the Shulchan Aruch and Vilna Goan⁵. Therefore, it would be permissible to say his name outright. Even so, some suggest that it is best to avoid using the proper name when possible⁶. It is curious that the Haagos Maimonios himself does not rely on his own heter referring to J as "oso ha-ish" or "that man".

[It has been suggested that today the name has fallen out of use and hence the name exclusively refers to the founder of the Christian faith and is forbidden. However, this point is irrelevant when discussing the Haagos Maimonios. The heter is because the name was not given as a holy name, it precludes the name from being of an idolatrous name. If so,

the fact that it has fallen out of use today does not consecrate the name with any "holiness" and it remains a secular name.]

The name of an idol or foreign deity that later became a word found exclusively in secular lingo would be permitted to be used, as it has lost any association with religion⁷. Examples include months in the secular solar calendar, or the word "mammon" (Aramaic for money).

Using the second name of Ch- is different than J. The very word (Kristos in Greek) means anointed one, or Messiah. To use this word in reference to that man would certainly imply a sympathy of their beliefs and is forbidden. Rav Azriel Hildesheimer⁸ is at a loss to explain why people are lax in this regard.

WHAT GREETINGS MAY ONE GIVE NON-JEWS THIS TIME OF YEAR?

Shulchan Aruch⁹ writes that one must avoid greeting others with the names of the holidays of avodah zarah. This is especially true if the name has a sense of importance to the followers. December 25th is a day of mass, so the name of their holiday seems to fall under this category. Rishonim and Acharonim refer to this day as "Nittel"¹⁰. Therefore, one should greet those celebrating other religions with a simple "Happy Holidays" or "Enjoy your vacation". (Some suggest that today most people celebrate it as a secular holiday, and the name itself does not carry a religious connotation. While it is a potential limud zechus, it is not mentioned by the poskim¹¹.) It is common for the day to be referred to as X-mas. And it is a valid alternative for the real name. There are those who point out that the sign X in Greek is shorthand for the letters Kri, but since most people are not fluent in ancient Greek, the word is not recognizable as a proper name, and is permitted¹².

One should also keep in mind the words of the Shulchan Aruch¹³ that while one may greet a non-Jew on their holidays, it shouldn't be with levity and happiness. Although Rema¹⁴ writes that many of these halachos are permitted for fear of reprisal, this does not necessarily apply in all situations. A person can give a simple, socially acceptable greeting without being overly enthusiastic.

MAY ONE SING OR LISTEN TO THEIR CAROLS?

The Rambam states that any form of respect or honor expressed to an avodah zarah is a violation of serving a foreign deity¹⁵. Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l¹⁶ writes that this includes singing praises of an idol. Many classic compositions were written in honor of the church and its beliefs. Therefore, it would be forbidden to sing these songs, even if one's intentions are not for idolatry¹⁷. Similarly, one may not play these songs in any venue, even if one's motivations are purely financial. Moreover, merely listening to religious Catholics singing such songs is rabbinically forbidden¹⁸. (The Chofetz Chaim¹⁹ even discusses if a person is forced to listen to such music must cover their ears.) Rav Moshe zt"l writes that listening to musicians that have no intentions of praising any deity, such as a modern symphony orchestra playing classical church compositions, is not technically forbidden, but would

be inappropriate. [Contemporary poskim deliberate if a song is not known to the masses as having any connection to religion, as is the case with many symphonies, then it would perhaps have the status of a completely secular song. This needs further study.] Many holiday songs are not related to the religion itself, merely to the time of year. These songs have no avodah zarah concerns. However, one must be sure that they are free of other concerns, such as profanity and/or immodest lyrics that would make it forbidden to listen to.

IS THERE AN ISSUE WITH RECEIVING AND/OR GIVING GIFTS THIS TIME OF YEAR?

The first Mishnah in Avodah Zarah²⁰ records a prohibition to do business or settle loans with non-Jews on and around the holidays for their idolatry. This would seemingly apply to giving or receiving gifts as well²¹. The Rishonim discuss as to why we find that many are lenient in this regard. One of the primary reasons provided is the concept of eivah, fear of reprisal, from the idolaters. Another point is that the concept of gift giving was adopted from pagan holidays celebrated this time of year. Some suggest that the true origins of these holidays were from Adam HaRishon, as recorded in the Gemara Avodah Zarah²². As winter approached and the days were getting shorter, Adam believed the world was slowly regressing to nothingness. When in the month of Teves (December on the solar calendar) the days began to get longer, he realized that the world was not going to be destroyed. He celebrated by bringing korbanos to Hashem. The Gemara states that eventually this morphed into a pagan holiday. In Rome, this pagan holiday included gift giving. Therefore, this is an activity that a Jew must try to avoid. If refraining from gifts will cause ill will between the non-Jewish benefactor and the Jew, he may participate in gift-giving²³. However, as with any activity allowed only because of eivah, one should try to avoid it if possible. In addition, it is best to refrain from gifts on December 25th itself, as well as referring to it as a gift for the holiday. Rather it should be given as an end of the year appreciation or bonus, thereby removing the pagan aspect of the gift²⁴.

WHAT IS THE HALACHIC STATUS OF THEIR TREES AND LIGHTS?

It is unclear what religious significance a tree has in Catholic belief. That being said, the association of trees with their holiday is nearly universal. Therefore, having a tree at one's workplace would be an outward display of respect towards their religion, which is not allowed. If there is a potential issue of eivah, a shailah should be asked. The idea of putting up a tree stems from pagan practice. To quote from the Encyclopedia Britannica "The use of evergreen trees, wreaths, and garlands to symbolize eternal life was a custom of the ancient Egyptians and Chinese. Tree worship was common among the pagan Europeans and survived their conversion to Christianity in the Scandinavian customs of decorating the house and barn with evergreens at the New Year to scare away the devil and of setting up a tree for the birds during this time". Being that it is traced back to pagan practices, to put up a tree would be mimicking a non-Jewish practice rooted in idol worship and a violation of following the chukim of the non-Jews²⁵. One who is compelled to do so such as one running a facility housing non-Jews, should speak to a halachic authority.

The lights that many put up, according to many secular

scholars, seems to be a spinoff of candle lighting performed in the church, which is considered an act of honor and hence a form of idol worship. There are those who date this practice back to the days of Greek mythology, and it is considered chukas hagoyim. To enjoy candles lit for such a purpose should be avoided, as it is deriving benefit from idolatry²⁶. Lights that are put up in honor of an idol would also be connected to idolatry and should be avoided.

A secular person who puts up light without attaching any religious significance to it is not considered engaging in idolatry. On a technical level one is permitted to enjoy these lights, but it would be like listening to church music played by secularists, which Rav Moshe zt"l had deemed inappropriate.

IS THERE ANY PROBLEM ATTENDING AN "END OF THE YEAR" PARTY?

A Christian-themed party should be avoided, even if one's attendance is merely for business purposes²⁷. Even more so, Chazal forbade one from attending a celebratory feast held by a non-Jew, such as a wedding²⁸. A number of poskim deem this to be an issur D'Oraysa²⁹. If failure to attend would place one's job in jeopardy, a shailah should be asked.

Most parties held by offices and companies are secular in nature and are merely "end of the year" events. (If there are Christian practices such as gift swapping under a tree one may not participate.) Even so attending a secular holiday party with non-Jews carries its own set of challenges such as drinking, fraternizing and other issues involving non-Jews and is looked down upon by the poskim³⁰. One must consult his/her Rav before attending such an event. Even if one is advised to attend to prevent ill will, participation should be kept to a minimum³¹.

- 1 שמות פרק כג פסוק יג
- 2 דף סג ע"א
- 3 מצוה פו
- 4 פ"ה הל' ע"ז ה"ג, הובא בביאור הגר"א יו"ד סי' קמז ס"ק ג
- 5 שו"ע יו"ד סי' קמז ס"ב, ביאור הגר"א ס"ק ב
- 6 דרכי תשובה ס' קמז ס"ב בשם ס"ח אות קצד. ע' חוות יאיר יו"ד סי' א, שו"ת רבי עזריאל הילדסהיימר ח"א סי' קפ (הובא שניהם סדר עיקב ח"ב (מהר"ח) עמ' שפן. מצאתי בשו"ת דברי חכמים (עמ' ריו) בשם הגר"ח שיינברג זצ"ל ח"ל נכון להזהיר שלא להזכיר שמן, וטעמו דשם אלהים אחרים לא יזכר על פיר עכ"ל.
- 7 בית יצחק ח"א סוסי' קנב בהג"ה, מסורת משה ח"ה יו"ד.
- 8 שו"ת שם
- 9 סי' קמז ס"ב
- 10 נכון הג"מ פ"ט מהל' ע"ז ה"ב, תרומת הדשן סי' קצה
- 11 לא מצאתי בספרי פוסקים אבל כן מצאתי שמציינים ספר דברי חכמים (שם) בשם הגר"ח שיינברג זצ"ל, ח"ל נכון להזהיר שלא לומר (שם חנם) דחושבין שזהו גם נקרא הזכרת שמן, מיהו מדינא אין צורך להחמיר בזה, דאין זה שמו, אלא שמו של אידים עכ"ל. אבל קשה שאפילו יום אידים א"א להזכיר כמבואר בשו"ע וצ"ע. ג. ואינו כדאי להזכיר בפנים. (שמעתי מהרב שמואל פירסט שליט"א) וכן קשה על מש"כ בשו"ת עולת יצחק ח"ב סי' קנט שהתיר כיון שאינו שאותו האיש הוא משיח, אלא סתם משיח וצ"ע.
- 12 ד"ע
- 13 יו"ד סי' קמח ס"ט
- 14 שם ס"ב יב
- 15 פ"ג הל' ע"ז ה"ו
- 16 אנ"מ יו"ד ח"ב סי' נ, וסי' קיא
- 17 ע"פ מהרש"א חגיגה דף טו ע"ב בנינו ירידת התנא אלישע בן אבויה
- 18 ע' פסחים דף כו ע"ב
- 19 ספר חפץ חיים כלל וס' יד
- 20 דף ב ע"א
- 21 שם דף נ, וסד, ע' רמב"ם פ"ט ע"ז ה"ב
- 22 ע"ז דף ח ע"א
- 23 רמ"א סי' קמח ע"ב יב מתרומת הדשן סי' קצה
- 24 רמ"א שם
- 25 שו"ע יו"ד סי' קמב ס"ב טו שאסור להתכל בניו אלילים כיון שנהנה בראייתו. ע' ביאור הלכה הל' שבת סי' שז
- 26 ד"ה שומרי מצוה מ"ח אם האיסור דוקא בניו של ע"ז צמנו, אלא כל בני למען ע"ז בכלל האיסור ומסיים שיש להחמיר במהרה רבנים
- 27 פשוט שאם יש איסור להראות שמחה ביום אידים, כ"ש וכ"ש שאינו יכול להצטרף בשמחתם
- 28 שו"ע סי' קנב ס"א, ע"פ נ"י ע"ז דף ח ע"א
- 29 ע"ז ט"ז ונקודות הכסף שם ס"ק א
- 30 דרכי תשובה שם ס"ק א בשם חסד לאברהם סי' כו שאפ"י משתה שלא נעשה ע"י עובדי ע"ז אסור, וע"ע חמכ"א כלל פ"ט ס"ב יב
- 31 חזו"א יו"ד הל' ע"ז סי' סב יב ע"פ הר"ן שיש להחמיר משום איהו, ומאריך לבאר כונת הר"ן שראוי למעט עיוויש.



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