YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Halakha and Israeli History**

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**Planting Israel’s Flag Among the Stars**

**The First Israeli Spacecraft**

In the seventy-first year of its existence, the State of Israel attempted to become one of the few countries in the world to successfully land a spacecraft on the Moon. The lunar lander *Beresheet* was built by Israeli scientists and was launched from [Cape Canaveral](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cape_Canaveral) on 22 February 2019.

On 5 March, the lander sent a selfie back to Israel. In this sensational picture, the Israeli flag could be seen “flying” in space with the Earth in the background.

Unfortunately, the Israeli flag did not make it to the Moon. On 11 April a malfunction in the spacecraft’s systems caused it to crash on the Moon’s surface.

**The First Israeli Astronaut**

This attempt was not Israel’s first foray into space. On 16 January 2003, Israeli Air Force pilot Colonel Ilan Ramon became the first Israeli astronaut, on the USA’s Space Shuttle *Columbia*.

Ilan Ramon carried with him a miniature *sefer Torah* which had survived the Holocaust, and he was advised on halakhic questions regarding keeping *mitzvot* in space.

Tragically, upon re-entry on 1 February 2003, *Columbia* exploded as it entered Earth’s atmosphere. Ilan and all the ship’s crew were killed.

**The First Man on the Moon**

In the mid-20th century, the Space Race raised many halakhic questions. As the USA successfully landed men on the moon in 1969, Rav Menachem Mendel Kasher (1895-1983) dedicated an entire book to the subject, *Ha-adam al Ha-yarei’ach Le-or Ha-Torah Ve-ha’emuna* (Man on the Moon in Light of the Torah and of Faith) which dealt with philosophical and religious questions which the landing raised.

Other rabbinic authorities have also dealt with the numerous implications of a human race no longer confined to the planet Earth, including how *Kiddush Levana,* the monthly blessing over the Moon, should be recited nowadays; and how to keep Shabbat in space.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Our Focus Today**

In today’s *shiur,* we will discuss a topic in the background of Israel’s attempt to reach the Moon; I am referring to the Israeli flag which was proudly attached to *Beresheet*.

A nation takes great pride in its symbols. Thus, Israel’s blue-and-white flag with a *Magen David* in its center, flying tall and high, touches the hearts of Jews worldwide. However, does the Israeli flag have any religious value or importance?

**The Design and its Origins**

The Israeli flag is a field of white with two horizontal sky-blue stripes which are intended to symbolize the stripes of a [*tallit*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tallit). The *Magen* (“Star of,” literally “Shield of”) *David* in its center is a widely-acknowledged symbol of the Jewish people and of Judaism.

[David Wolffsohn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Wolffsohn) (1856–1914), second president of the World Zionist Organization, writes in his memoirs what brought him to suggest the design of the Zionist flag:

At the behest of our leader Herzl, I came to Basel to make preparations for the Zionist Congress. Among many other problems that occupied me then was one that contained something of the essence of the Jewish problem: what flag would we hang in the Congress Hall? Then an idea struck me. We have a flag — and it is blue and white. The *tallit* with which we wrap ourselves when we pray: that is our symbol. Let us take this *tallit* from its bag and unroll it before the eyes of Israel and the eyes of all nations. So I ordered a blue and white flag with the Shield of David painted upon it. That is how the national flag, that flew over Congress Hall, came into being.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Does the fact that the design of the flag is taken from a religious article have any effect on our attitude towards it?

**Flying the Flag on Yom Ha-atzmaut**

Many Israeli homes display an Israeli flag around Yom Ha-atzmaut, Independence Day.[[3]](#footnote-3) There are many stories of rabbis who support flying the Israeli flag on Yom Ha-atzmaut.

The Sadigura Rebbe, Rav Avraham Ya’akov Friedman (1884 -1961), lived in Vienna during Anschluss. He was forced by the Nazis to sweep the streets of Vienna and to raise a Nazi flag. At the time, he made a *neder* (vow) that if he escaped the Nazis and made it to the Land of Israel, he would clean the streets of the Holy Land and fly the Zionist flag over his house. Indeed, there are testimonies that on Yom Ha-atzmaut, the rebbe could be seen sweeping the streets of Tel Aviv, an Israeli flag flying over his home.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Ponevezh Rebbe**,** Rav Yosef Shelomo Kahaneman (1886–1969), insisted that an Israeli flag be hoisted on the roof of Yeshivat Ponevezh in Bnei Brak.

There are testimonies that the head of the London Beth Din, Rav Yehezkel Abramsky (1886-1976), who made aliya in 1951, displayed the flag on Yom Ha-atzmaut as well.

**Objections to the Flag**

In the 60s, the rabbis at an Agudath Israel conference in Jerusalem protested the flag flying over their hotel. The rabbis were uncomfortable with the Israeli flag and were only willing to accept its presence if international flags were flown around it. Doing this, they argued, proved that flying the Israeli flag was merely complying with accepted worldwide practice.

Later that year, at the annual Mizrachi conference, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik took issue with this approach. The Rav claimed that no one needs the Union Jack to provide a *heter* (dispensation) for the Israeli flag. In his speech, he explained:

If you ask me how I, as a Talmudic Jew, view the flag of the State of Israel, and whether it has any halakhic value, I will answer you simply. I do not give any weight to the reverence of a flag, or similar ceremonial symbols. Judaism negates the worship of material objects. However, we cannot overlook the law in the Shulchan Arukh (*Yoreh De'ah* 364:4) that one who is murdered by non-Jews is buried in his clothes, so that his blood should be seen and avenged, as it says, "I will not excuse their blood" (*Yoel* 4:21). In other words, the clothes of a Jew achieve a certain holiness when they are stained with his holy blood. This most certainly applies to a blue and white flag which is soaked with the blood of thousands of Jewish youth (religious and irreligious, as the enemy did not differentiate) who fell while protecting the land and the Jewish settlement. It has a spark of holiness with stems from dedication and self-sacrifice. We are all obligated to honor the flag and to relate to it with respect![[5]](#footnote-5)

**Placing Flags in Synagogues**

One of the antecedents of the modern Israeli flag is the Jewish flag of the oldest active synagogue in Europe, Prague’s Altneuschul. The story of this flag goes back to the 14th century, when Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV granted the Jews the right to wave their very own flag. The flag’s color was purple and in its center, there was a *Magen David*. The current flag on display in this synagogue dates back to 1716.

In 1957, Rav Moshe Feinstein was asked if it is permissible to pray in a synagogue that has Israeli and American flags displayed there. In the beginning of the responsum, Rav Moshe discusses the *kedusha* of a synagogue. He claims that the *kedusha* of a synagogue cannot be annulled by negative or even sinful actions.

Regarding the flags, Rav Moshe understands that a flag is merely a symbolic object and that the people who place the flag in the synagogue have no intention to consider it an object of *kedusha*. He refers to the flag as a *davar chol* (secular object). Thus, claims Rav Moshe, there is no concern that the flag is an object of idol-worship.

However, Rav Moshe holds that all flags are nonsense *(hevel u-shetut)*, and therefore he argues that it is not appropriate to bring them into a synagogue; they most certainly should not be placed beside the *Aron Ha-kodesh*.

He concludes that although he believes it is wrong to place flags in a synagogue, no *machaloket* should be created regarding their removal.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Rav Avraham Chaim Naeh (1890–1954) was a prominent Posek and a [Lubavitcher](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lubavitcher) chasid. In his written responsum on this topic, he objects strongly to the custom of placing a flag in a synagogue. His reasoning is that a synagogue is a place where we worship Hashem and thus is a symbol of God’s Kingship over the world. The flag however, symbolizes *malkhut basar ve-dam (*human sovereignty). Quoting a *gemara* in *Berakhot*, Rav Naeh argues that it is not appropriate to mix the two.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Rav Kook’s Speech**

In 1915, during World War I, the British Army’s Jewish Legion was formed. These Jewish soldiers participated in the Great War, and they had their own flag, a *Menora* against a blue-and-white background. In the years following the war, the flag was displayed in synagogues across England.[[8]](#footnote-8)

On 17 December 1925, the flag was carried to Israel and brought to the Churva Synagogue in Jerusalem. A ceremony was arranged to officially greet the flag. Amongst those who attended was the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-kohen Kook.

In his speech,[[9]](#footnote-9) he cited the verse in *Tehillim* (20:6): “May we rejoice in your salvation, and in the name of our God set up our banners! May the Lord fulfil all your petitions.”

Rav Kook noted that the Torah commands the Israelites to form a camp with banners representing the different tribes:

The Israelites shall encamp with each person near the banner carrying his paternal family’s insignia. They shall encamp at a distance around the Communion Tent.[[10]](#footnote-10)

He then cited theMidrash, which explains that twenty-two thousand chariots of angels, each one decked out with flags, attended the Giving of the Torah. The Israelites immediately desired to have flags just like the angels, and God agreed. This request for flags, the Midrash teaches, is described in *Shir Ha-shirim* (2:4): “He brought me to the wine-house, and His banner over me is love”:

“He brought me to the wine-house’ — this is Sinai; “and His banner over me is love” … the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them: “What did you desire? To make banners. By your lives, I will fulfill your petitions!” — “May the Lord fulfil all your petitions.” Immediately, the Holy One, Blessed be He, told Israel and said to Moshe: “Make them banners, as they desired.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

He thus proved that the original flag of Israel began at Mount Sinai, at the Giving of the Torah. He went on to argue that the flag represents our march towards redemption and signifies (as it was in this case) the international unity behind the Zionist enterprise. The flag also represents those young Jewish men who sacrificed their lives in battle for the redemption of the Land of Israel.

Obviously, Rav Kook found it appropriate to place the Jewish flag in proximity to this synagogue. Thus, although Rav Kook died thirteen years before the establishment of the State of Israel, I believe this speech can help us recognize that the modern Israeli flag has spiritual value for us and belongs in our *yeshivot* and synagogues.

1. See Rav[J. David Bleich](https://www.sefaria.org/person/J.%20David%20Bleich), *Contemporary Halakhic Problems*, Vol. V, Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yom-Tov Levinsky, *Sefer Ha-moadim,* p. 432*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Aaron Arnd, *Pirkei Mechkar Le-Yom Ha-atzmaut,* pp.103-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. My friend Victor Ofstein referred me to the book *Alei Tamar, Shevi’it* 4:7, where the story is mentioned. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Five Essays*, pp. 138-139; see also *Nefesh Ha-Rav*, pp. 99-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Iggerot Moshe, OC* 1:46. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The letter was published in *Shut Zikhron Ha-maor,* p. 544. See: <http://www.shturem.net/images/articles/1669_articles_27042009_3934.> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rav Ari Shvat*, Le-harim et Ha-degel.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The entire speech can be found at: <https://www.machonso.org/mishol/item.asp?id=698>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Bamidbar* 2:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 2:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)