

Flowers and Trees in Shul on Shavuot

It was my deep honor to work in President Richard M. Joel's office for a number of years and to see first-hand his profound commitment and tireless dedication to enhance so many aspects of our Yeshiva, University and community. In honor of Shavuot I have chosen to focus on our minhag of beautifying our homes and mekomot Torah on Shavuot. This practice highlights but one of President Joel's achievements; his spectacular beautification of our Yeshiva. In addition to the many other aesthetic improvements to our Yeshiva's campuses, President Joel is responsible for the construction of our gorgeous new Glueck Beit Midrash, which has added significant beauty to our Yeshiva. He was not content, however, with only enhancing our Yeshiva's physical appearance. Through his sichot mussar and campaigns, he tirelessly combated the corrosive effect of cynicism that too often plagues batei medrash. Effectively he beautified our Yeshiva in the physical sense and improved our culture as well. Both of these constitute hiddur mitzvah. Maharsha in Shabbat 133b explains that hiddur mitzvah is a category that can be applied to mitzvot bein adam lchaveiro as well as to mitzvot bein adam Lamakom. Through his hard work, our Yeshiva is now a far more beautiful, upbeat and positive place. Thank you President Joel for this, and for so much more.

There is a widespread custom to decorate our homes and shuls with trees and flowers on Shavuot. We will discuss the variety of reasons for this *minhag*, and the consequent practical implications in terms of the scope of the practice. Finally, we will discuss



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how and why this practice was met with controversy.¹

The earliest source of this practice is the Maharil:

נוהגין להשטיח רצפת ב"ה בבשמים של עשבים ובשושנים לשמחת הרגל.

It is our custom to spread the floor of the synagogue with fragrant spices and roses in order to enhance the joy of the holiday.

Sefer Maharil, Hilchot Shavuot

It seems from a careful reading of the Maharil that the practice was to place fragrant spices on the ground of the shul and this was a fulfillment of the general mitzvah of *simchat yom tov*. Although every *yom tov* mandates *simcha*, the Gemara (*Pesachim* 68) teaches us that Shavuot is supposed to be more joyous than other festivals. Hence the practice was limited to Shavuot, and not other *yamim tovim*.²

Rama's citation of this *minhag* modifies it somewhat. Rama writes:

ונוהגין לשטוח עשבים בשבועות בב"ה והבתים, זכר לשמחת מתן תורה.

Our practice is to spread grasses on Shavuot in the synagogues and the homes as a remembrance of the joy of receiving the Torah.

Glosses of Rama, Orach Chaim 494:3

According to Rama, the practice is to place grasses rather than spices,

and the practice extends to homes as well as shuls. Moreover for Rama, the practice is based on *matan Torah*, rather than the generic joy of *yom tov*. Perhaps placing greenery to commemorate *maamad Har Sinai* is a fulfillment of the Torah prohibition against forgetting this formative event.³

This practice was further extended by *Magen Avraham* (494:5) to place trees in shuls and homes to remind us that Shavuot is a time of judgment, when we are judged regarding *peiros hailan* (fruit trees). Effectively *Magen Avraham* is adding an additional reason for the practice. Consequently, for *Magen Avraham*, the practice involved the placement of trees rather than spices or grasses.

It is well known that the Vilna Gaon (Gra)⁴ opposed this practice. Gra felt that since the non-Jews place display trees during their holiday, our display of trees would constitute a prohibition of *chukot akum* (following the ways of the idolaters). Many of the later *seforim* ponder if Gra's opposition to the practice in fact is at odds with the position of Rama.

Some suggest that there is no dispute. They contend that a careful read of Rama only supports the practice of placing grass, while Gra opposed

the extension of *Magen Avraham* to include trees.⁵ Although there is much merit to this argument, nonetheless many leading *poskim* including *Aruch Hashulchan* (495:6) understood that Gra opposed the placement of all forms of botany.

Others suggest that there is no dispute between Rama and Gra, and their differences are due to historical considerations. It is generally assumed that Gra opposed placement of trees because of the similarity between this practice and the Christmas tree that was introduced by Martin Luther (שר"י) to replace nativity scenes, and subsequently came into widespread use in Protestant countries. Rama, who passed away in Catholic Poland in 1572 less than thirty years after Luther, may not have been aware of this practice. Gra, however, who lived 200 years later in Lithuania and was well aware of the practice, forbade it.⁶

However, a careful read of the original source in *Chayei Adam* indicates that the non-Jewish holiday that concerned Gra was Pentecost rather than Christmas.⁷ An essential part of the observance of Pentecost involved decorating homes and churches with birches and other greenery. *Chayei Adam* writes:

הגר"א ביטל מנהג מלהעמיד אילנות בעצרת, משום שעכשיו הוא חוק העמים להעמיד אילנות בחג שלהם (שקורין "זאלאניע שווענטע" או "פינגסטן")

Gra nullified the custom to place trees on Shavuot because now it is the custom of non-Jews to place trees on their holiday (which is called Zielone Świątki or Pfingsten).

Chayei Adam 131:13

Chayei Adam identifies the non-Jewish festival he is referring to by its Polish name Zielone Świątki and its German name Pfingsten. These terms

for Pentecost are absent from many of the later editions, which deleted the foreign terms in *Chayei Adam*. This deletion led to the mistaken impression based on our modern experience that the festival addressed by Gra was Christmas.⁸

If Gra meant to oppose the practice of both trees and other greenery, and if the holiday Gra was concerned with was Pentecost, then Rama and Gra would be in dispute.

Perhaps we can trace this disagreement back to a well-known *machloket* regarding *chukot akum*. In *Yore Deah* 178:1, Rama paskens like Maharik that the prohibition of *chukot akum* only applies to practices that originated among pagans and does not have a good reason. However, a practice that is based on a solid, readily comprehensible reason cannot be forbidden. Effectively for Rama, the prohibition is only for *chukim*, practices that are not understood.⁹ Consequently, it is permitted for doctors to wear special clothing to demonstrate their educational attainment, since the reason for this practice is easily comprehensible.

Gra (178:7), however, disagrees. According to Gra, even practices that are grounded in comprehensible reasons may be forbidden. His proof is from the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* 52b, where the tanna Rabbi Yehuda forbids carrying out the *mitat beit din* of *hereg* (capital punishment) with a sword, since the idolaters use a sword to kill. Gra maintains that there is a logical reason to employ a sword; swords simply do a good, neat job of killing. Even so, the tanna Rabbi Yehuda wants to forbid the use of a sword. Apparently reason alone does not suffice to conclude that an action will not constitute *chukot akum*.

Based on this we can explain that Rama permitted placing trees in shul and at home since there are legitimate logical reasons to do so. Gra, however, consistent with his position in *YD* 178, forbids even activities that have a logical basis.

Endnotes

1 Much of the material cited comes from Rabbi Gedalia Oberlander's fine article in *Ohr Yisrael* volume 20 (5760) page 136-150. Rabbi Oberlander traces the practice in great detail and offers a fair number of other reasons for the practice. For the sake of brevity, we will suffice with the broad general overview presented.

2 In Rabbi Oberlander's article note 14, he connects this with another famous comment of Maharil. Although for Maharil it is permitted to fast a *taanit chalom* (a fast for a troubling dream) on every other yom tov, on Shavuot one may not fast a *taanit chalom*. Shavuot mandates an even greater level of joy than any other yom tov.

3 See Ramban Devarim 4:9 and *Shichichat Lavin* #2.

4 As cited by *Chochmat Adam* 89, Gra forbade the practice of placing trees since the non-Jews display trees during their holiday. See also *Chayei Adam* 131. In *Maaseh Rav* (195) Gra writes similarly that the practice should be nullified since it is not a strict obligation but only a *minhag*. Interestingly, this paragraph was absent from a number of the editions of *Maaseh Rav*. See 2009 edition note 106.

5 See Rabbi Oberlander, *loc. cit.* page 146 in the name of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach.

6 This is the approach of the *Sefer Halikutim* printed on the side of *Maaseh Rav* 2009 edition.

7 I would like to thank Dashiell Ferguson for alerting me to this point.

8 My brief survey of this matter shows that all versions of *Chayei Adam* published until 1960 contained the foreign language terms. Those who removed the terms may in fact be in violation of Rabbenu Tam's strict admonition not to amend the text in sefarim.

9 See Rashi Bamidbar 19:2.