

# ***Parashat Bemidbar***

## **Hoisting the Blue-and-White**

*Parashat Bemidbar* introduces us to the flags that the twelve tribes used to organize their encampments and travel during their long sojourn in the wilderness (Numbers 1:52, 2:2). Their colors, images, and, in some cases, letters carried profound significance.<sup>1</sup> Little is known about later uses of flags in either of the Jewish Commonwealths, presumably because the fabric did not stand the test of time. Jewish signs and symbols have been preserved primarily as carvings in stone graves or monuments, castings on metal coinage or jewelry, and ink on bowls or parchment. This all changed with the establishment of the State of Israel, when a Jewish flag was flown once again. The colors of the nascent country became an inspiring symbol and rallying point for world Jewry, but also raised concerns for halachically observant Jews.

### *Flags in a Place of Prayer*

American synagogues commonly display the flags of Israel and America in the sanctuary, often flanking the ark containing the Torah scrolls. As one of the preeminent halachic decisors of twentieth-century America, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein was asked about people who deemed this forbidden and wanted to break away from their synagogue to form their own minyan. Rabbi Feinstein could find no prohibition on the books that this violated, since the flags were not treated as some kind of holy object. Nevertheless, he felt that their placement there was a matter of foolishness (*inyan hevel u-shetut*), and encouraged their peaceable removal. If it is wrong to place flags in a synagogue, he reasoned, it would be much worse to create a dispute over it. He concluded his responsum by ruling that those desiring to leave were acting improperly, for it is a matter of “politics which comes from the evil inclination and Satan.”<sup>2</sup>

We see from this responsum that Rabbi Feinstein did not attribute any religious significance whatsoever to the Israeli flag, and even considered its placement in the sanctuary improper.

### *White, Blue, and Red*

The assessment of the Israeli flag by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik differed considerably from that of Rabbi Feinstein, his eminent colleague and close relative. He posited that the flag is holy because it represents the martyrs who fell in defense of the Holy Land:

If you ask me, how do I, a talmudic Jew, look upon the flag of Israel, and has it any halachic value? I would answer plainly. I do not hold at all with the magical attraction of a flag or similar symbolic ceremonies. Judaism negates ritual connected with physical things.

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<sup>1</sup> See further *Parashat Bemidbar*, “Serving God with Flying Colors.”

<sup>2</sup> *Igerot Moshe, Orach Chayim*, 1:46.

It is here that the Rav identified a compelling source in Halachah which, in his eyes, should be applied to the halachic significance surrounding the flag of Israel:

Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of a law in *Shulchan Aruch* to the effect that: “One who has been killed by non-Jews is buried in his clothes, so that the blood may be seen and avenged, as it is written: ‘I will hold (the heathen) innocent, but not in regard to the blood which they have shed’ (Joel 4:21).” In other words, the clothes of the Jew acquire a certain sanctity when splattered with the blood of a martyr. How much more is this so of the blue and white flag, which has been immersed in the blood of thousands of young Jews who fell in the War of Independence defending the country and the population (religious and irreligious alike; the enemy did not differentiate between them). It has a spark of sanctity that flows from devotion and self-sacrifice. We are enjoined to honor the flag and treat it with respect.<sup>3</sup>

The Rav shared this unique perspective at a major address when serving as the leading figure in the Mizrahi movement. It is no wonder that many of his students who served as distinguished rabbis in the United States would often proudly display the Israeli flag near the ark.<sup>4</sup>

### *Banner of Redemption*

In 1915, the precursor to the British Army’s Jewish Legion, the Zion Mule Corps, was formed. These Jewish soldiers participated in the Great War and had their own battle flag, a menorah set against a blue-and-white background. In the years following the war, the flag was displayed in synagogues across England.<sup>5</sup> On December 17, 1925, the flag was brought to Israel. A ceremony was arranged to officially greet the flag as it made its way into the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Yerushalayim, where it would be placed in the Hurva Synagogue. Among those in attendance was the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, who gave an important address to the assemblage.

The sermon begins by noting that the Torah commands the Israelites to form a camp with tribal flags, and then cites the Midrash which says that the Jewish people requested flags, to which God acceded, upon beholding thousands of angelic chariots descending on Mount Sinai bedecked with flags.<sup>6</sup> Rav Kook locates the paradigm for the blue-and-white at the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the beginning of our nationhood. Its current iteration, he impassionedly declares, represents our march towards redemption and signifies the international unity behind the Zionist enterprise.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks*, 139. Perhaps the Rav did not draw on the flags of the wilderness because he did not consider them a lasting model, or because he felt self-sacrifice to be more significant.

<sup>4</sup> One example is the Young Israel of Kew Gardens Hills, which was led by Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld (1923–2020), a close disciple of the Rav. His son Rabbi Yoel serves as the synagogue rabbi presently.

<sup>5</sup> Shavit, *Leharim et ha-Degel*, 172–173.

<sup>6</sup> See further *Parashat Bemidbar*, “Serving God with Flying Colors.”

<sup>7</sup> Shavit, *Leharim et ha-Degel*, 179–183.

In a prayer offered on the occasion, Rav Kook said: “we bear with us the exalted flag, a token of the mighty salvation of Your right hand.”<sup>8</sup> He likely was alluding to episodes in Jewish history where flags accompanied salvation or redemption. When the Israelites left Egypt it says, “and the Children of Israel were going out with an upraised arm” (Exodus 14:8). The Ramban commented on this verse that the Jews left in song and with flags. This may be the very first source for a flag employed by Jews to identify their mission and to celebrate their salvation. The tribal flags again play a prominent role as the nation is about to enter the land, which represents the realization of their national mission and salvation from the harsh desert (Numbers 10:11-29).

Rav Kook saw fit to bring a Jewish flag within the confines of the synagogue. Although he died thirteen years before the establishment of the State of Israel, he clearly indicated that the modern Israeli flag has deep spiritual value.

### *Exploring the Rav's Insight*

In the Rav's famous address *Kol Dodi Dofek*, he identified the State of Israel as a modern wonder. It offered a positive identity and source of pride to so many Jews, particularly for the younger, post-Holocaust generation. Had the state not been established when it was, the Jewish people would have stood to lose so many of its members.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Rabbi Ari Shavit, in his important volume dedicated to the religious and halachic status of the Israeli flag, suggests that for the less-affiliated Jew, the flag and the national pride that it engenders have immense meaning. According to the *Shem mi-Shemu'el*, Rebbe Shmuel Bornsztain, the original tribal flags themselves were deployed in battle so that errant soldiers could find their way back to safety.<sup>10</sup>

The color and pattern of the Israeli flag are supposed to mimic the tallit with its *techelet*, the blue tzitzit. A Midrash lays out a string of visual associations: the *techelet* fringes resemble the sea, which resemble the sky, which in turn is reminiscent of the Throne of Glory. Rashi fills in the final step, that the seat above reminds us of the enthroned King.<sup>11</sup> The Rav asked a simple question: Why bother with the intermediate steps instead of cutting right to the chase, that the *techelet* draws our consciousness to God? He said that to remove those links would be to fail to see God's hand in the world. Strikingly, the Rav identified six ways in which God could be seen orchestrating the establishment of the State of Israel.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, with enormous sensitivity and pride the Rav attached profound meaning to the flag of Israel. The flag symbolizes two of the Jewish people's most remarkable traits: self-sacrifice and the deep yearning to return to the Land.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>9</sup> For the importance of pride in and a connection to the land, see *Parashat Beshalach*, “Venerable Bones.”

<sup>10</sup> *Shem mi-Shemu'el*, *Bemidbar* 5670, s.v. להבין ענין הדגלים.

<sup>11</sup> *Menachot* 43b, with Rashi ad loc., s.v. ורקיע לכסא הכבוד. Note that Talmud Yerushalmi, *Berachot*, 1:2, has further intermediaries, which supports the Rav's point immediately below.

<sup>12</sup> See *Parashat Bechukotai*, “The Rav and the Land.”