

Current Jewish Questions

Celebrating Secular Holidays

I. Potential Problems

<p>1. B. Sanhedrin 52b It had been taught: R. Judah said to the Sages: I too know that this is a death of repulsive disfigurement, but what can I do, seeing that the Torah hath said, neither shall ye walk in their ordinances? But the Rabbis maintain: Since Scripture decreed the sword, we do not imitate them [when using their method]. For if you will not agree to this, then how about that which was taught: Pyres may be lit in honor of deceased kings, and this is not forbidden as being of the 'ways of the Amorites': but why so? Is it not written, neither shall ye walk in their ordinances? But because this burning is referred to in the Bible, as it is written, [But thou shalt die in peace:] and with the burnings of thy fathers ... [so shall they burn for thee], it is not from them [the heathens] that we derive the practice. So here too, since the Torah decreed the sword, it is not from them [the Romans] that we derive the practice.</p>	<p>1. תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין נב:ב גמרא. תניא, אמר להן רבי יהודה לחכמים : אף אני יודע שמיתה מנוולת היא, אבל מה אעשה, שהרי אמרה תורה +ויקרא י"ח+ ובחקתיהם לא תלכו! ורבנן : כיון דכתיב סיף באורייתא - לא מינייהו קא גמרינן. דאי לא תימא הכי, הא דתניא : שורפין על המלכים ולא מדרכי האמורי, היכי שרפינן? והכתיב ובחקתיהם לא תלכו! אלא, כיון דכתיב שריפה באורייתא, דכתיב +ירמיהו ל"ד+ ובמשרפות אבותיך וגו' - לאו מינייהו קא גמרינן. והכא נמי, כיון דכתיב סיף באורייתא - לאו מינייהו קא גמרינן.</p>
<p>2. Tosafot A.Z. 11a s.v. Ve'I Rather according to all it is not an established practice for idolatry, but rather it is an established practice for pointlessness and foolishness</p>	<p>2. תוספות מסכת עבודה זרה דף יא עמוד א אלא דכ"ע לאו חוק היא לשם עבודת כוכבים ומ"מ הוא חק הבל ושטות</p>
<p>3. Rambam Avoda Zara 11:1 One does not follow the established practices of non-Jews, and we do not copy them in dress, haircuts and the like for it is written "do not follow in the statutes of the nations" (Lev. 20:23) and "do not follow in their statutes" (Lev. 18:3) and "guard yourself let you stumble after them" (Deut. 12:30) – all these are regarding one topic and that is that we should not be like them, rather the Jew should be separate from them and identified as such in dress and in all other actions just as he is distinct in his thoughts and manners</p>	<p>3. רמב"ם עבודה זרה יא הלכה א אין הולכין בחקות העובדי כוכבים ולא מדמין להן לא במלבוש ולא בשער וכיוצא בהן שנאמר ולא תלכו בחקות הגוים, ונאמר ובחקותיהם לא תלכו, ונאמר השמר לך פן תנקש אחריהם, הכל בענין אחד הוא מזהיר שלא ידמה להן, אלא יהיה הישראל מובדל מהן וידוע במלבושו ובשאר מעשיו כמו שהוא מובדל מהן במדעו ובדעותיו...</p>

II. Religious vs. Secular: Thanksgiving and its Origins

4 Edward Winslow, Mourt's Relation (1620-1621)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving_\(United_States\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving_(United_States))

Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruits of our labor. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which we brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.

5. William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation (1623 harvest)

And afterwards the Lord sent them such seasonable showers, with interchange of fair warm weather as, through His blessing, caused a fruitful and liberal harvest, to their no small comfort and rejoicing. For which mercy, in time convenient, they also set apart a day of thanksgiving... By this time harvest was come, and instead of famine now God gave them plenty ... for which they blessed God. And the effect of their particular planting was well seen, for all had ... pretty well ... so as any general want or famine had not been amongst them since to this day

6. George Washington – Thanksgiving Proclamation

New York, 3 October 1789

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/GW/gw004.html>

By the President of the United States of America, a Proclamation.

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor-- and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.

Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be-- That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks--for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation--for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his Providence which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war--for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed--for the peaceable and rational manner, in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted--for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed; and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful

knowledge; and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us.

and also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions-- to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually--to render our national government a blessing to all the people, by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed--to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shewn kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord--To promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the encrease of science among them and us--and generally to grant unto all Mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.

Given under my hand at the City of New York the third day of October in the year of our Lord 1789.

7. Abraham Lincoln – Proclamation of Thanksgiving

Washington, D.C. October 3, 1863

<http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/thanks.htm>

By the President of the United States of America.

A Proclamation.

The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God. In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defence, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship; the axe has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom. No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American People. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United

States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this Third day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States the Eighty-eighth.

By the President: Abraham Lincoln

William H. Seward,
Secretary of State

III. Opposition

8. Rabbi Menashe Klein – Mishneh Halachot 10:116

Thus, those who eat fowl as a commemoration for the fact, as I heard it, that they did not have what to eat, and they found this bird, and they were very happy and rejoiced over having found this bird, this appears not to be a Gentile custom. Nonetheless, one must examine this to determine if it is, as it states in Yoreh Dea 147:6, a case of one who makes a private holiday, and worships many gods, on the day that he was born or was first shaved or any similar case. It is possible that Thanksgiving is such a case; even though they claim that they are worshipping God, and not idols, it is possible that there is a mixture here and thus it is possible that this is a Gentile ritual. Thus the spirit of the Sages does not approve of one who celebrates, and it is possible that there is a biblical violation.

IV. Support

9. R. Soloveitchik – Recounted in Broyde

Others have also recounted that Rabbi Soloveitchik ruled this way [that Turkey is kosher], and that he found it difficult to comprehend how one could consider Thanksgiving a Gentile holiday or that it was prohibited to celebrate it. Indeed, there were instances when Rabbi Soloveitchik implied to his students that he and his family celebrated Thanksgiving, although shiur was always held on Thanksgiving.'

Rabbi Howard Jachter of Brooklyn notes that he explicitly spoke to Rabbi Soloveitchik about this in July 1985 and that Rabbi Soloveitchik affirmed this ruling and did not see any problem with

celebrating Thanksgiving. Dr. Avi Feldblum of New Brunswick also confirmed to this author that he heard such a ruling from Rabbi Soloveitchik, as did Dr. Marc Shapiro of Boston.

Dr. Avi Feldblum re counts: While I do not know whether Rabbi Soloveitchik had turkey for dinner that night or whether he called it a Thanksgiving dinner, it was well known that on the day that is marked on the calendar as Thanksgiving, Rav Soloveitchik started shiur much earlier than usual, in order to end earlier than usual and catch the plane back to Boston, to have a festive meal, etc. However, it is of interest to note that while Thanksgiving appeared to be of sufficient importance to change the fixed time for shiur, it was not sufficient to end shiur if the Rav had not completed what he wanted to understand. On Thanksgiving 1976, there was the famous Thanksgiving shiur where the Rav spent about five hours (most of it in silent thought) working through one Tosafot. After the second or third time the shamash passed him a note about the flight [back to Boston], the Rav turned to him and said "no one can leave here until we have understood what it is that Tosafot is saying!"

10. Rabbi Yehuda Hertzl Henkin

Where is there found any prohibition to rejoice on the king's birthday and similar occasions? Common practice proves the opposite. Rather there are two distinctly different rules. On a Gentile religious holiday, it is prohibited to do business [to assist the Gentiles] since they use that which we provide for worship. For this rule, it makes no difference what is the purpose of the holiday, even the coronation or birthday of the king is included. Such is not the case regarding rejoicing and celebrating alone; in this case one must examine the holiday to determine if its origins are primarily idolatrous or not. However, if the reason for the celebration is primarily secular it is permissible to celebrate, such as the coronation of the king, the Fourth of July in America or Thanksgiving. For this it makes no difference that some Gentiles celebrate these holidays in churches."

V. Possible Compromise

11. Iggrot Moshe Even Haezer 2:13

On the question of celebrating any event on a holiday of Gentiles, if the holiday is based on religious beliefs [by the Gentiles], such celebrations are prohibited if deliberately scheduled on that day; even without intent it is prohibited because of *marit ayin*...The first day of the year for them [January 1] and Thanksgiving are not prohibited according to law, but pious people [*ba'alei nefesh*] should be strict.

12. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein Am Hai orah 13:1 (mahadura 2)

"Is there a Prohibition of *bechukotahem* in going to a Stadium where Sports are Played, Sitting in an Office Bare-Headed or Eating a Thanksgiving Meal"

On the issue of joining with those who think that Thanksgiving is like a holiday to eat a meal: since it is clear that according to their religious law books this day is not mentioned as a religious holiday and that one is not obligated in a meal [according to Gentile religious law] and since this is a day of remembrance to citizens of this country, when they came to reside here either now or earlier, halacha sees no prohibition in celebrating with a meal or with the eating of turkey. One sees similar

to this in *Kiddush in 66* that Yanai the king made a party after the conquest of Kochlet in the desert and they ate vegetables as a remembrance. Nonetheless it is prohibited to establish this as an obligation and religious commandment [mitzvah], and it remains a voluntary celebration now; in this manner without the establishment of obligation or religious commandment – one can celebrate the next year too with a meal. But, I think, nonetheless it is prohibited to establish a fixed day in the year for the celebration and it is only in the first year of the event, like when Yanai conquered, and then they had a party, and not for permanence...

Thus, it is obvious in my opinion, that even in a case where something would be considered a prohibited Gentile custom, if many people do it for reasons unrelated to their religion or law, but rather because it is pleasurable to them, there is no prohibition of imitating Gentile custom. So, too, it is obvious that if Gentiles were to make a religious law to eat a particular item that is good to eat, halacha would not prohibit eating that item. So too, any item of pleasure in the world cannot be prohibited merely because Gentiles do so out of religious observance.

Bibliography

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