



MEDINA &

HALACHA

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# Creating 'New' Jewish Holidays

Following the miraculous birth of the State of Israel in 1948 and the dramatic unification of Jerusalem in 1967, the Chief Rabbinate, together with leading authorities, established Yom Ha'atzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim as full-fledged festivals, with the recitation of special Tefillot, including Hallel.

The question - debated by many - was: *Is it permissible to add new holidays to the Jewish calendar?*

According to the Ramban, creating a new Jewish holiday violates the prohibition of *Bal Tosif*, "adding" to the mitzvot of the Torah (See Ramban to *Devarim* 4:2).

But throughout Jewish History, both communities and individuals who experienced a miraculous salvation established 'Purims,' festivals to be celebrated like Purim in commemoration of the miracle.

In the 16th Century, the Jewish community of Lepanto (today Nafpaktos, Greece), established a holiday to give thanks to Hashem for sparing them from imminent destruction and to publicize the miracle. Members of the community asked Rabbi Moshe Alashkar if they were justified in creating such a holiday, like Purim, to celebrate this

miraculous salvation. They also inquired if future generations and those no longer living in the community too must celebrate. The Maharam Alashkar ruled that indeed community leaders have the authority to establish such a day, and it is binding upon members of the community - present and future - no matter where they reside (*Teshuvot Maharam Alashkar*, 49).

The *Pri Chadash*, Rabbi Chizkiyah da Silva, however, was upset with this practice. He criticized the Jewish communities in Greece and Egypt for establishing new holidays and based his objection on *Megillat Ta'anit*, a list of 35 festivals observed during the Second Temple Period. He cites a passage in the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 18b), which relates that following the destruction of the Temple, *Megillat Ta'anit* - together with all of the festivals described therein - becomes null and void. Accordingly, he rules that neither a community, nor an individual, has the authority to declare new festivals today (*Pri Chadash*, OC 496:14).

But Rabbi Moshe Sofer, the famed Chatam Sofer, defended the practice of instituting new holidays, arguing that even according to the opinion that *Megillat Ta'anit* is null and void, the holidays of Chanukah and Purim were never nullified. Accordingly, festivals created to commemorate a miraculous salvation - patterned after Chanukah and Purim - are indeed permitted. He concludes by noting how both he and his teacher,

Rabbi Natan Adler, were careful to observe 'Purim Frankfurt,' even when no longer living in Frankfurt (*Teshuvot Chatam Sofer*, OC 191). 'Purim Frankfurt,' also known as 'Purim Vinz,' celebrates the downfall of the wicked Vincenz Fettmilch who led a populist uprising and pogrom against the Jews of Frankfurt am Main in 1614, forcing them to flee the city until the emperor personally intervened. Even today, the Jewish community of Frankfurt still celebrates the 20th of Adar, the day when Fettmilch and his followers were hanged and the Jews returned to their homes, escorted by imperial soldiers.

Elsewhere, the Chatam Sofer is critical of those who celebrate Lag Ba'omer, as the day is not mentioned anywhere in rabbinic literature and doesn't commemorate any miracle or salvation. But establishing a festival to mark a miraculous event, he continues, is a Biblical requirement, and one who does not do so is in violation of not performing a positive commandment (*Teshuvot Chatam Sofer*, YD 233).

Rabbi Avraham Danziger also ruled that it is a mitzvah for an individual or a community to establish a holiday. He relates how he himself established a holiday on the day when he and his family were spared after a powder keg explosion destroyed a number of homes including his own, claiming the lives of 31 people (*Chayei Adam* 155:41).

The *Magen Avraham* (OC 686:5) and *Mishnah Berurah* (OC 686:8) both record that a community can create a "Purim," for themselves and for future generations, on a day in which they experienced a miracle. And over the centuries, tens of communities and families have established these 'Purims,' sometimes with the recitation of

special prayers, meals, and sometimes even reading from a special Megillah, written to commemorate the event. (For an exhaustive list, see Yom Tov Levinski, "Purim Shenì," published in his *Sefer Hamo'adim*, vol. 6, pp. 297-321).

With the establishment of the State of Israel, the Chief Rabbinate, together with other leading authorities, looked to these precedents in establishing Yom Ha'atzmaut and later Yom Yerushalayim, as religious holidays. One such authority, Rabbi Meshulam Roth, wrote that it is a "mitzvah" to celebrate Israel's Independence Day as a "joyous festival with the recitation of Hallel," marking the "miracle of our salvation and freedom" (*Kol Mevasser* 1:21).

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 94a) relates that King Chizkiyahu could have been made the Messiah but for the fact that he failed to give praise upon the downfall of the wicked Sancherev, King of Assyria. Chizkiyahu failed to give this profound experience religious expression.

We dare not make the same mistake.

Yom Ha'atzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim possess profound religious significance and meaning. These are days of great Divine Providence - miracles and wonders - and deserve religious expression. By celebrating Yom Ha'atzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim as festivals, we express our thanks for the tremendous gifts of the State of Israel and Jerusalem. ■

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