

# HALOCHOSCOPE TOPE

May a Jew buy membership in an recreational organization that professes to be devoted to spreading christianity, or any other “religious” missionary group?

The issues:

- (A) Christianity and *Avoda Zara*
  - (B) The status of an organization primarily for recreation
  - (C) The issue of *Mehaneh*, benefitting *Avoda Zara*
- (A) *Avoda Zara and Christianity*

We have given extensive coverage to this issue elsewhere [see *Halochoscope* I:3, II:15, 26, VII:1.] Therefore, we shall cite only the most pertinent conclusions for the sake of our question. Gentiles are forbidden to worship idols as one of their seven basic Mitzvos of *Benei Noach*. When this worship includes worshipping Hashem it is called *Shituf*, making believe that there exists a form of Divine power-sharing. This is forbidden to Jews. Its relevance to gentiles is a matter of debate by the Poskim. Christianity in its original form involves making a human into a god, and/or considering him a messiah. Apart from its inconsistencies, it is generally agreed to be a composite version of many old forms of *Avoda Zara*. Its ideology is a composite of various mythologies, sanitized into sainthoods and incorporating some ideas from Judaism. Many local brands are clearly meant to include rituals from local old paganisms to broaden their appeal. Icons and symbols of the church are definitely considered *Avoda Zara* after they have been used for any ritual.

Many Poskim do not consider gentiles who practice these religions nowadays idol worshipers. They do not understand the pagan roots and are neither devout nor religious. Their practices are *Minhag Avosaihen*, traditions. There is, however, some serious discussion with regard to what is known as the orthodox church. Eastern religions often involve a more serious strain of idolatry as well. They often do not include Hashem as one of their idols. Thus, it is worse than *Shituf*. Furthermore, their revised beliefs and updated “proofs” of the powers of their icons are considered stronger than simple traditions.

*Avoda Zara* is one of the three cardinal sins for Jews. It is forbidden to prac-

tice it even if it means putting one's life in danger. Jews are forbidden to practice Shituf according to everyone. They may also not cause a gentile to violate one of the seven Mitzvos. This is included in the Mitzvah *Lifnei Ivair*, forbidding misguiding another person to sin. If the sinner could sin without the help of the Jew *Mesayeia*, helping, is forbidden Rabbinically. Participation in a missionary organization in any form thus raises these serious issues. Moreover, *Maisis Umaidiach*, missionizing is perhaps the most serious of the Avoda Zara related sins.

In our case, the issue will arise when the Jew joins the organization. Is he considered subscribing to the philosophies of the group, or can he claim to be doing it for other reasons, such as health? Does doing it for health raise the specter of violating the cardinal sins or their subcategories to save a life, which is also forbidden? Is he furthering the spread of the idolatry to other gentiles by adding to the membership? The answer to these might depend on the discussion in the forthcoming sections. [See references to aforementioned issues of Halochoscope.]

#### **(B) A recreational facility**

The Talmud discusses a number of situations where the Avoda Zara is not the primary focus, but is involved tangentially. One example is drinking from a fountain that has an Avoda Zara placed above it. This would involve bowing, one of the main four forbidden activities done in front of Avoda Zara. Though the drinker does not actually bow, it is still an issue of *Maris Ayin*, giving the appearance of doing so. A similar issue involves drinking from a fountain made into an Avoda Zara pouring water from its mouth. This is forbidden for the additional reason that it gives the appearance of kissing the idol.

Another problem involves dealing with businesses that are decorated in the name of the religion. The issue is whether the profits are taxed to support the religion, which we will discuss in the next section. A *Bais Avoda Zara*, house built to house an idol, is forbidden to enter into. It is considered a *Tashmish*, item used in service of Avoda Zara. In addition, one must actually avoid walking within its vicinity. Accordingly, another case discussed by the Talmud and Poskim involves benefitting from, or even entering, an establishment that has an icon inside it. The establishment may or may not be used for religious services or rituals, but has the idol there as a decoration. This could depend on the function of the building. If it was made with the idol in mind it is much worse than if the idol was introduced afterwards. If the function of the building is primarily secular in nature, the presence of the idol might be considered too secondary to forbid entry there. If the

function is extremely mundane, such as a bath house, one issue is whether the bathers are considered worshipping in their unclad state, especially if they attend to their mundane bodily needs in its presence.

However, the cases which most relate to our case are those involving gardens, bath houses or markets that are built and maintained by the religious organization.

The Poskim debate the meaning of the Talmuds restrictions or dispensations regarding these. They categorize them into four basic categories. The first is where there is a charge for use which directly benefits the Avoda Zara. It is used to refurbish it or to bring offerings to it. This includes where the charge is not totally dedicated to this purpose, but the general fees are taxed for this purpose. The second is where the priests are the beneficiaries. There is a debate whether this means that they actually charge a fee which they pocket or they demand favors in return for the free use of the facility. Within this category there are at least three subcategories. If the facility is a church or the like, with the recreational facility attached, whether the gain goes to the idol or the priests it is forbidden. If it is a separate facility, it is forbidden if it benefits the idol but permitted if it merely benefits the priests. If there is a partnership between the priests and the laymen or the country, it would depend on how the profits are distributed or divided. If they only reach the priests or religious organization indirectly many Poskim permit it. If some or all of the profits reach the idolatrous organization directly, the above restrictions apply. The third situation is where the facility is made for non-religious purposes but the Avoda Zara is placed there for decoration. This is basically the aforementioned case. The fourth situation is where the religion is being used as a front for commercial gain. Though this might seem to be the least serious case, the Poskim maintain that the original priests who misled people to Avoda Zara did so for this very reason, playing on people's superstitions. It is probably fair to say that much of the activity taking place in this realm is still pointed in this direction. Therefore, in such cases it must be determined whether the organization involves any true idolatry. If there is no religious basis at all, but the money is all pocketed, it is similar to the case mentioned where the priests take all the money for personal use. It might be more lenient if the "religion" of the organization is known to be such that the people involved do not truly believe in it at all.

Thus, the issue here is whether the Jew may enter the recreational facility in the first place. This is not a facility for use in worship, nor is it attached to one. It might have a chapel somewhere inside it, and might have crosses or crucifixes hanging around. However, it is not a *Bais Avoda Zara* because of this alone. How-

ever, the missionizing claim might make the entire organization suspect, forbidding all of its facilities. The issue might be both where the money goes and whether use of the facility is made to try to introduce and spread religion. [See Avoda Zara 12b-13a, 32b-33a, 44b 50b-51a, Poskim. Tur, Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 139:1, 142:14, 143:3-6, 149:3-4, commentaries.]

### *(C) Mehaneh, benefitting Avoda Zara*

Thus far we have alluded to the issue of the actual worship, particularly of the gentile and helping him perform it, and the issue of a Jew entering the facility. There is an additional issue for a Jew in particular. One is forbidden to benefit from Avoda Zara. This is a separate Mitzvah, *Lo Yidbak*, one may not gain anything from idols or idolatry. This extends to its trappings and adornments. The Talmud debates whether this means that only gaining is forbidden but giving benefit is permitted, or whether if benefitting is forbidden, benefaction is most certainly forbidden. We follow the view that forbids it. Thus, it is forbidden to do anything that benefits the idol-worship financially or materially. This forbids paying a fee towards the upkeep of the idols or their functionaries, if this is one way that they are being paid for this work. [See Avoda Zara 13a, Poskim. Tur, Sh. Ar. Y.D. 139:14-15 142, 143:3-6, commentaries.]

In our case, it would appear that membership dues are not used for missionizing, but for upkeep of the facility. The real issue is the actual membership, and using the facility, even when not paying. In a related question, one contemporary Posek categorically forbids using a gym owned by a church. He does not even discuss whether or not it is on the same premises as the church. In addition, he says, the missionaries come there to entice people to join their religion. The facility in our discussion might be less stringent since it is not owned by a specific church, nor do the missionizing activities take a primary place within it. It has become very secularized. However, in accordance with the issues discussed, it would be prudent to avoid paying membership, and, where possible, to find alternative places to exercise. [See Igros moshe O.C. IV:40:26.]

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