

HALOCHOSCOPE

Congregation Shaaray Teffillah, Pittsburgh, PA

The question:

A person belongs to a group of people which is totally unconnected to any religious group. However, they meet regularly in a meeting-room on the premises of a church. The meetings are not in the sanctuary, and are for business purposes. May he enter the building to attend this meeting? By the same token, may one attend a wedding or other function in a hall owned by, or on the premises of, a "religious" establishment?

What are the issues?

(A) Is christianity Avoda Zora - paganism?

(B) "Lo Yidbak" - It is forbidden to derive any benefit from Avoda Zora. [Parshas R'ay 13,18.]

(C) "Mehaneh" - Giving benefit to idols, which is a subdivision of Lo Yidbak. [Avoda Zora 13a.]

(D) "Al Tifnu El Ha'Elilim" - Do not turn to idols. [Parshas Kedoshim 19,4.] This forbids looking at idols. [See Shabbos 149a.]

(E) "Lo Sosuru Acharei Levavchem Veacharei Eineichem" - Do not follow the temptations of your heart and of your eyes. Seeing idols or their adornments leads one to think of idol-worship. [See Rambam Hilchos Avoda Kochavim 2]

(F) "Harchek Me'oleho Darkecho" - We must keep our distance from an Avoda Zora. [See Avoda Zora 17a.]

(G) "Mar'is Ayin" - The appearance of worshipping idols is forbidden. [Avoda Zora 12a.]

(A) Is christianity Avoda Zora?

Christianity, i.e., the belief in a trinity or in J.C. is definitely Avoda Zora for a Jew. Even for gentiles the Halacha authorities consider christianity as either outright Avoda Zora or as having Avoda Zora elements. [See e.g. Pischei Teshuva Yoreh De'ah 147,2 for a short summary of the various viewpoints.]

(B) "Lo Yidbak"

The prohibition against benefitting from an idol is Scriptural, and

extends to the items used in the service of idols and its adornments - "Noya Umeshamsheha". It is even forbidden to benefit from the shade of an Avoda Zora.

A figure or icon or any picture which has "holy" or "sacred" attributes is considered an idol. A cross is in this category, as are icons and pictures in orthodox churches. There is a difference between a cross that is actually used ritually, such as bowed down to, or sworn by, and a cross that is merely a reminder of the Avoda Zora, such as a necklace which has never been used ritually. [See Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De'ah 141,1; Rema; Shach 6, but see also Darkei Teshuva especially No 9.]

A temple is a "Tashmish" - used in the service of Avoda Zora. It would therefore be forbidden to enter the temple for shelter, or any other purpose, including the meeting under discussion. Since, however, the meeting is not being held in the chapel but in a separate multipurpose room, it may not be considered a "Tashmish Avoda Zora" because only the rooms with an Avoda Zora inside designated for worship are forbidden. [See Igros Moshe Orach Chaim Vol 1, No 47.] Consequently, provided there is no cross in the room, and the room is not used for worship, it would be permissible to meet there.

There is an opinion that considers some modern-day churches and mosques as merely serving the needs of the worshippers, unlike the temples referred to in the Talmud which were built as "houses" for the idols. [See Darkei Teshuva 143,8.] Although it is highly questionable if one can rely on this with regard to many purpose-built churches, because of the way they are built and the reverence given to the actual chapel, [see Darkei Teshuva 145,11] one may apply this ruling to a side room in the building.

(C) "Mehaneh"-

Giving benefit to idols is forbidden, too. If gaining benefit, where one is taking from the idolatry is forbidden, all the more so when one is giving something to the idols.

If a rent, or part of it, is being paid to the religious institution for use of their premises, which is the most likely reason why they let anyone use them, is this a form of benefitting idolatry?

If the rent would go directly to the priest or clergy, there would be a question if one could use the premises. [See Avoda Zora 51b.] One solution could be in the arrangement for payment: If there is a fixed rent which is divided between all the participants, then, since if the Jew would not participate, the rent would still be paid, he is not really adding to the benefit by paying the rent. [See Yoreh De'ah 143,3 and Bais Yosef and Bach, there.]

(D) "Al Tifnu El Ha'Elilim"

If, therefore, it is impossible to attend the meeting without having to pass by the Avoda Zora, one would have to shut one's eyes or look in another direction when the Avoda Zora is in view. If there is an ornamental cross in the meeting room one would have to sit with his back to the cross. One must avoid bending down facing the cross. [Some authorities forbid being in the same room as any cross. See Darkei Teshuva 150,11 and 151,25.]

(E) "Lo Sosuru"

Being present in the meeting room will probably not cause one to think of idolatry. If one feels that he will be affected, he should not attend the meeting. [See

Igros Moshe Orach Chaim Vol 4 No 40.]

(F) "Harchek Me'Oleho Darkecho"

This prohibition is not a Scriptural violation. [See Tosafos Avoda Zora 17 beginning "Upliga".] Nonetheless, it is a most serious preventive measure. We are prohibited from walking a path leading to an Avoda Zora, meaning we have to walk at a distance of four Amos (cubits) parallel to or at an angle away from the Avoda Zora.

It goes without saying that one cannot enter the building housing an idol. Even if there is no real idol-worship in a christian church, the cross is a real idol. Therefore, the building is a "Bais Avoda Zora" - house of an idol. [See Darkei Teshuva 150,2.]

This is the most serious problem in our case. However, since only part of this building is used for services, the building as a whole might not be considered a "house of idols" as mentioned earlier.

However, in two instances we find a clear prohibition against entering a church-hall: to use the hall as a Jewish school, even if it is a separate building, and to use it as a gym to play ball. [See Igros Moshe Orach Chaim Vol 4 No 40, and Yoreh De'ah Vol 3 No 77.] It would follow that to use a church-hall for a wedding would be forbidden. The rationale to distinguish those cases from ours is that in those cases Jews are deliberately choosing the venue. This is forbidden. In our case the Jew is not able to choose the venue. Added to this is the matter of his livelihood. [See Darkei Teshuva 150,11.]

The question remains: how does one enter the building? If there is a separate entrance leading to this room, one would not be entering the temple, and there is less of a problem of Harchek. It would be best if the entrance is on another side of the building or at least eight feet from the main entrance.

(G) "Mar'is Ayin"

It is forbidden to give the appearance of serving Avoda Zora. Thus, it would have to be very clear, in our case, that the Jew is in no way worshipping the idols. If he enters the building in the company of a lot of other business people, by the side entrance, it is probably clear enough that he does not intend to serve the idol. It may be necessary for him to take some unusual measures to make it obvious that he does not intend to worship. [See Yoreh De'ah 150,2 and 3, Rema] One suggestion may be to walk into the building holding a pen and paper, or a folder or clipboard, showing that he is not there to worship. If it is appropriate, he could enter informally dressed, assuming that worship is only in "Sunday best".

NOTE:

If a person is attending a "life-saving" event such as Weight-Watchers or Al-Anon held in a church, a question arises as to whether one may heal oneself with the help of Avoda Zora. Since there is no actual Avoda Zora, only the appearance, besides the fact that even if a cross is in the room, it is probably only for show, not worshipped, we do not apply the principle of "Yehoreig V'al Yaavor" -rather die than violate. However, this is not universally agreed. [See Biur Hagro and Darkei Teshuva 150.]

ANNOUNCEMENTS

SCHEDULE:

SHABBOS MINCHA	5:20 PM
SHACHARIS SUNDAY	8:00 AM
SHACHARIS MONDAY-FRIDAY	7:00 AM
MINCHA SUNDAY-THURSDAY	5:35 PM
CANDLE-LIGHTING PARSHAS YISRO	5:33 PM
MINCHA EREV-SHABBOS YISRO	5:40 PM

SHIURIM:

GEMORO MAKOS	SUNDAY 7:15 AM
HALOCHO B'IYUN	MONDAY 9:00 PM
HILCHOS SHABBOS	SHABBOS 8:15 AM

This issue of HALOCHOSCOPE is sponsored by Mr. Leonard Bernstein to mark the Shloshim of the passing of his father, Reb Yaakov ben Dovid Shlomo A"H, which is this Shabbos.