

Be a Jewish Ambassador

Everyone has been speaking about the Jewish legacy of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Interestingly, her “Yom Kippur” story has been overlooked. A lesson from Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer, and Zalman Shazar.

When Everyone Takes Off

Good Yom Tov!

You know, Yom Kippur is the one holiday in the year that every Jew in Israel observes. If you're in Israel for Yom Kippur, you'll notice that the entire country takes the day off. The radio and television are off the air, the streets are desolate and no cars can be seen. It's truly the “Shabbos Shabboson” that the Torah describes—a Sabbath of Sabbaths. Yom Kippur is felt in every public corner of Israel.

Even in the United States, Yom Kippur is very much felt. For example, in New York or any other major Jewish population center, the public schools are closed for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—along with many other public institutions with a high Jewish percentage of employees.

Even the United States Supreme Court, the highest court in the land, also takes off for Yom Kippur.

But how is it that the highest court in the country takes off for Yom Kippur? It's in the merit of the recently deceased justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

When G-d Sets the Schedule

Let's take a brief look at the history of the Supreme Court.

For 25 years, there was not a single Jewish judge on the Supreme Court. Therefore, working on Yom Kippur was not a problem.

When the appointments of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, followed the next year by Stephen Breyer, put two Jews in the Supreme Court, the court continued to work on Yom Kippur.

Then an Israeli reporter contacted Ginsburg's office and asked if she came into the office on Yom Kippur. She answered through a spokesperson that as a judge over many years, she had always worked on Yom Kippur.

The reporter then also called Stephen Breyer's office and asked him the same question: Does he come into the office on Yom Kippur? Breyer's response was that he'll have to think about it and decide what to do.

But when the story hit the papers, Justice Ginsburg began receiving letters accusing her of being a self-hating Jew because she goes to work on Yom Kippur.

And so the two Jewish judges decided to ask the Chief Justice for permission to postpone proceedings until after Yom Kippur.

The Chief Justice denied their request, but said that they were within their legal rights not to physically appear in court but to listen to an audio recording of the proceedings of the day at a later time. But Justices Ginsburg and Breyer didn't like his

decision.

But then something interesting happened: The Chief Justice suddenly was stricken with severe back pain, and the doctors decided that he would need surgery—and they scheduled his surgery for the same day: Yom Kippur.

Now while the law allows two out of nine Supreme Court justices to not be physically present, it does not allow three to not be physically present—and in such a situation, the case must be postponed until the next day upon which at least one more is able to attend.

And so, the Chief Justice had no choice, and so he postponed the proceedings that were supposed to take place on Yom Kippur to the following day.

But here's where it gets really interesting: As soon as it was officially recorded in the official daily record of the court that the proceedings which were supposed to be held on Yom Kippur were postponed, the doctors decided that the Chief Justice wouldn't need the surgery after all—that he would indeed be able to participate in the proceedings on Yom Kippur.

But by now, it was too late, and they couldn't set the clock back. But from then on, the Supreme Court of the United States of America does not “work” on Yom Kippur.

To The Queen's Consternation

In 1965 in London, a similar story happened.

In that year, the great Winston Churchill died and,

understandably, every country sent representatives to the formal funeral. Even Israel sent two representatives: the former Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, and the President at the time, Zalman Shazar.

However, Churchill's funeral was scheduled for Saturday and Shazar, who was an observant Jew, refused to ride in an automobile on Shabbos. So he and Ben-Gurion proceeded on foot over one kilometer from their hotel until the funeral location.

Now, the British government had invited the foreign heads of state attending the funeral to a Saturday afternoon luncheon at Buckingham Palace. The only problem was, Buckingham Palace was 45 kilometers from the hotel! So the British Foreign Office was informed that President Shazar was very pained to inform them that he would not be able to participate in the lunch since he did not travel on the Sabbath, and walking by foot was too far a distance for him.

The Foreign Minister, however, called the Israeli consul general in London and said, "Her Majesty the Queen is very concerned that the President cannot attend on account of his non-usage of automobiles on the Sabbath. The Queen very much desires that President Shazar does indeed attend nevertheless, and thusly, we are prepared to put at the President's disposal a royal carriage and team of horses to transport him to the palace."

The consul general explained that the prohibition applied not just to modern motorized vehicles but also to travel by horse and carriage too. But the Foreign Minister didn't give up. As far

as he understood, travel on Saturday, for whatever reason, was forbidden—but only by ground. Thus, he proposed an original solution: since the distance between the hotel and the royal palace ran parallel to the River Thames, the British government would place a royal yacht at the disposal of the President, and the vessel would transport him from the Savoy to Buckingham Palace.

But the consul again had no choice but to politely reject the suggestion, explaining that this, too, was forbidden. He repeated that the President was indeed very pained that despite offering all possibilities, whether by land or by sea, he was compelled to refrain from joining the luncheon at the royal palace.

Forgo Your Own Honor

Now, one of the Ten Commandments is, “Honor your father and mother.”

Respecting parents is expressed in many halachos, Jewish laws. For example, Jewish law tells us that may not refute or counter one’s father’s words, even if he’s wrong. Let’s say you’re debating politics over the Shabbos table. Your father holds that such-and-such a path is the correct one, and you hold that he’s making a mistake: You’re not allowed to say to him, “You’re wrong.” In your heart, you don’t have to agree with him—but you’re prohibited from telling him that he doesn’t know what he’s talking about, even if he really doesn’t know what he’s talking about.

But here comes a very interesting halachah: “A father who

forgoes his honor, his honor is forgone.” In other words, if your father says that it doesn’t bother him that you dispute him, and on the contrary, he’s interested in hearing your opinion, then he has the right to forgo his honor and then you’re allowed to dispute his words. (Rambam, Laws of Rebels 6:8).

For your information, besides honoring a father, there is also the Torah obligation to honor a rabbi. I don’t want to tell you all the halachos involved in this, because then you’ll be afraid to approach me, so here’s just a small sample: You’re also prohibited to argue with a rabbi. (Because he’s always right, of course...)

But seriously, my friends, besides not being allowed to argue with or reject what the rabbi says, you’re also not allowed to sit in his assigned seat, and so on. However, here too halachah establishes that “a rabbi who forgoes his honor, his honor is forgone”—if the rabbi says that it’s okay and it doesn’t bother him that you sit in his place, then you’re allowed to sit in his place. (Rambam, Laws of Torah Study 8:11.)

But You Can’t Forgo the Community’s Honor

But when it comes to a Jewish king, that’s something else.

Halachah tells us that “A king who forgoes his honor, his honor is not forgone” (Rambam, Laws of Kings 2:3). That means that even if the king explicitly says that it doesn’t bother him that if you sit on his throne or put on his crown, you’re still prohibited from doing so simply because the king does not have the right to forgo his own honor.

Why? One of the reasons is that the respect bestowed upon kings is not because he's handsome or very smart, but because he represents the entire Jewish Nation—and the honor of the Jewish Nation is not something that belongs to him; it is not something he can forgo.

And this, my friends, is something that the Jewish judges of the Supreme Court, and President Shazar of Israel, understood well.

Here, the question was not whether Ruth Bader Ginsburg went to synagogue on Yom Kippur or not—the moment she was appointed to the Supreme Court, whether she liked it or not, she became a representative of the Jewish Nation and as such, she had to represent the Jewish Nation in an honorable way. Therefore, she could not appear in court on Yom Kippur, because “the Jews” go to synagogue on Yom Kippur.

And likewise was Zalman Shazar. Before he was tapped as President of the Jewish State, he had not been too religious—but at the moment he became a representative of the Jewish Nation, the people that have something called Shabbos, he felt the need to honor the Shabbos and observe it.

Be A Jewish Ambassador

My friends: We may not be Supreme Court justices (even though in today's day and age, every Jew, and especially every Jewish woman, has a chance to get there). We're not even Presidents of Israel. But the Rebbe teaches us that in essence, every Jew is a king. What does that mean? It means that in one's wider circle, among fellow employees and acquaintances,

we are the representatives of the Jewish People. Whether we like it or not, this is the fact—and so, in every display of behavior in public, we need to take into account how we are representing the Jewish People.

What a person does at home is between him and his Creator. But what we need to be careful and think about is our conduct in public. If I act like a gentleman, then not only will they admire me, but will also be more sympathetic to Jews. If they see that I stand on my principles that I don't eat certain foods because I am a Jew, then the admiration for the Jewish religion will rise in their eyes.

And so, each of us needs to remember that, among non-Jewish families and even Jewish friends, we are the ambassadors of the Jewish People.

So tonight, as we recite the Kol Nidrei to disavow ourselves of things we didn't mean, let's take this opportunity to get back to who we truly are. Tonight, let us recommit ourselves to be proud Jews in public. Let us always remember that we are ambassadors of the Jewish People. And may our new commitment this year to who we truly are bring about the coming of Moshiach in this new year, amen!