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Is One Permitted to *Daven* in the Chapel at Cedars-Sinai?

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During the winter months we often have an Orthodox mincha *minyán* in the chapel at Cedars-Sinai. One time, as we *davened* in the front of the room, a Muslim man came into the back of the room, laid down his prayer rug and began to pray. Moments later a Catholic woman sat down on the other side of the chapel and began to pray the rosary. As we concluded mincha, one of the doctors present suggested I take a picture of this beautiful moment of interfaith gathering. Seconds later, another doctor stormed past me and said, “Rabbi, I can’t continue to pray in a room like this. If you want me to attend the *minyán* again, find another prayer space!”

This incident highlights some of the challenges and tensions of creating a prayer space for multiple religions. In this article, I will detail the *halachic* status of the chapel at Cedars-Sinai, and while doing so, attempt to shed light on the status of other interfaith chapels and prayer spaces.

Cedars-Sinai’s Chapel

The chapel at Cedars-Sinai is in the exact center of the medical center. It is a large room, facing east, with an *aron kodesh* front and center, containing a huge *magen david* and *pasuk* on it, as well as two kosher *sifrei Torah* inside.¹ There are no public symbols of other religions in the chapel. There is a *shulchan* in the middle, and at the back of the room, one finds a *tallis* rack, *yarmulkes*, and two bookshelves full of numerous ArtScroll and Persian *siddurim* and *chumashim* alongside other Jewish books. There

¹ In the middle of the *magen david* there is a caduceus, the traditional symbol of healing. Although this shouldn’t be problematic since it is simply a representation of the *nachash hanechoshes* (the copper snake of healing in *parshas Chukas*), for some reason this particular caduceus is the one with two serpents twined around it, as represented in ancient Greek mythology and its design is somewhat reminiscent of a cross.

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is also a *mechitza* on wheels that is normally kept along the wall, but rolled into the center of the room when there are occasional *minyanim*, both during the week and on Shabbos. Cedars-Sinai is a Jewish hospital, and thus the chapel looks and feels like a synagogue, which it was created to be, as was recounted to me by some of the founders of that space. Indeed, one of the initial reasons for having a chapel at Cedars-Sinai was to provide a non-clinical space within the hospital where outside *mohalim* could perform a *bris mila* without having to obtain hospital surgical privileges.

However, although Cedars-Sinai is a Jewish hospital, it was never intended to be only for Jews. It is a very diverse place that welcomes people from every background, culture and faith tradition. Because the chapel is so centrally located, and space is at a premium at Cedars-Sinai, it was determined that it would not be fair to force some religious groups to pray in another part of the hospital, so the chapel is open as an interfaith space for all. It is designed and decorated to be a synagogue, but one shelf in the back corner of the chapel contains Bibles, Korans, Hindu and Buddhist reading material. Objects utilized by other faiths are temporarily brought into the chapel to facilitate their regularly scheduled prayer services, and then removed right afterwards. These services include Catholic mass four days per week, Christian worship once a week, Muslim communal “Jumua” prayers on Fridays, weekly mindfulness meditation and Reiki sessions, and occasional Bhagavad Gita classes (in addition to the ongoing Jewish classes and *minyanim*).

Responsa

When I initially became the rabbi at Cedars-Sinai, I sought to clarify the *halachic* status of this chapel and sent my questions to several leading *poskim*. The first response I received was a *teshuva* from the Eretz Hemda *kollel*,² signed by Rav Zalman Nechemia Goldberg, Rav Nachum Rabinovitch and Rav Yosef Carmel. Their *teshuva* about our chapel permits a Jew to *daven* there because these *poskim* recognize that it is essentially a Jewish synagogue which simply allows others to come pray in it,³ similar to the *Beis Hamikdash*, about which the *navi* Yeshayahu (56:7) said, “My House will be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” While they point out that it may be distasteful

2 Which was subsequently published in responsa *B'mareh Habazak* 8:15.

3 The fact that the room is run by a Jewish hospital but allows others to use it makes an important difference here. This means that those of non-Jewish religions who worship in this space are doing so only as guests, but not with authority over the space, and the space thus can't be seen as a “church,” “mosque” or “temple.” Indeed, the *Biur Halacha* (154 s.v. “*neros shel sha'ava*”) explains that those who permit transforming a house of idol worship into a synagogue do so only when the idolaters never established symbols of their idols in that space, since it thus never received the official status/name of a house of idolatry. So too here, not everyone sees our chapel as a proper synagogue, but nobody can see it as a church etc.

(“*megune*”) for a synagogue to actually be used for prayers of other religions, this does not make use of such a synagogue forbidden for Jews for two reasons:

1. According to most *rishonim*,⁴ Christianity is not considered *avoda zara* for non-Jews.⁵ A Jew is prohibited from entering a church⁶ (since Christianity is considered *avoda zara* for a Jew),⁷ for two reasons:

- a. People might suspect (*choshed*) that one entered to worship idols;⁸
- b. Maybe one will be drawn to worship that religion.⁹

However, since this room is essentially a synagogue, neither of these concerns apply, as long as one doesn't enter during the formal prayer services of the other religions.

2. Since the room was established as a synagogue,¹⁰ we can apply the principle that they are coming into our domain¹¹ and an outsider can't enter our space and

4 Whether or not this is indeed the majority opinion is debatable. The *Meiri* (*Bava Kama* 113b, *Yoma* 84a, *Avoda Zara* 2a and 6b) and *Sefer Hapardes* (268 in the name of Rashi) rule that Christianity is not considered *avoda zara*. However, the Rambam writes that Christianity is *avoda zara* (*Perush Hamishnayos Avoda Zara* 1:3; *Hilchos Avoda Zara* 9:4 and *Maachalos Asuros* 11:7, 13:11), as does the Rashbam (quoted in *Tosafos Sanhedrin* 63b s.v. “*assur*”). See the lengthy discussion in *Yabia Omer* 7 YD:12(1). The status of Eastern religions is an entirely different matter, but although we have Buddhist and Hindu reading material and occasional classes in our chapel, there is no formal worship of those religions that takes place there.

5 This is because, according to the *Baalei Hatosafos* and many *poskim*, “*shituf*” (a theology/worship of God that is not purely monotheistic, e.g., the “trinity”) is only prohibited for Jews, not non-Jews (*Tosafos* & the Rosh on *Sanhedrin* 63b s.v. “*assur*”; Ran, end of first *perek* of *Avoda Zara*; Rama *Orach Chaim* 156; *Shach Yoreh Deah* 151:7; *Mor Uktzia* beginning of 224. Additionally, Rav Rabinovitch notes in this *teshuva* that in his opinion, contemporary Christians believe in one God. See also *Techumin* 9, pg. 74 in which R. Chaim Dovid Halevi argues that since in our era most Christians do not worship in a way that would constitute *avoda zara*, even the Rambam would not consider today's Christianity to be *avoda zara*, but simply worshiping with “*shituf*”.

6 The prohibition against entering a house of *avoda zara* is based on the *mishna* in *Avoda Zara* 1:4 (see Rambam, *Perush Hamishnayos* there). See also *Iggeros Moshe* 3 *Yoreh Deah* 129(6), *Nefesh Harav*, 130, *B'mareh Habazak* 1:59 and extensive discussion of this issue in *Yabia Omer* 2 *Yoreh Deah* 11. This is prohibited even if there are no crosses or public religious symbols (*Responsa Pri Hasadeh* 2:4; *Tzitz Eliezer* 14:91).

7 *Binyan Tzion* 1:63; See also footnote in *Yechave Daas* 4:45.

8 Rashi & Rashba, *Avoda Zara* 12a.

9 *Tosafos*, *Avoda Zara* 17b

10 Indeed, the initial purpose of a space can have important *halachic* ramifications. In a *teshuva*, Rav Yaakov Ettliger ruled that a place that was built to be a house or apartment, which was then used for some time as a place of prayer for Christians, but did not contain any permanent religious symbols, ideally shouldn't become a synagogue, but in a case of need one may use it as a synagogue since it was not initially established to be a church but rather a home (*Binyan Tzion* 63).

11 *Mishna*, *Avoda Zara*, 3:4 (44b): “Proklos son of Plosfos asked Rabban Gamliel a question in Akko, while he was bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite. He said to him: “It is written in your Torah (*Devarim* 13:18): ‘And let none of the condemned cling to your hand;’ why then are you bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite? He said to him: one does not respond to *halachic* questions in the bathhouse. When he left, he said to him: “I did not come into her territory; she came into my territory.” See Rashi there and also *Avodah Zarah* 43b that Avuah D'Shmuel V'Levi prayed in one of the synagogues in Nehardea even though the non-Jews placed a statue of the

make it forbidden for us.¹²

When I showed this *teshuva* to Rav Asher Weiss (while standing with him in the chapel so he could see it for himself), he told me that he is in full agreement with this ruling. However, I also sent this *teshuva* to Rav Dovid Feinstein, who said that he did not agree with it. Rav Dovid did not give a reason for his disapproval, though I conjectured that it is in accordance with the ruling of his father, Rav Moshe Feinstein, that one may not rent out a space where inappropriate behavior happens, such as a bar or nightclub, to use for prayers on the High Holidays, and that it is better to pray alone than in such a space.¹³ Reb Moshe's argument is that we can infer from the *halacha* that it is ideal to pray in a *beis medrash* (even without a *minyan*) since it is a place of learning, which makes God more likely to hear our prayers in such a positive space, so therefore it must be that praying in a place that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* is disgusted by will make it more difficult for our prayers to be heard there.¹⁴ When I subsequently had the opportunity to ask Rav Dovid if this is indeed the reason he opposed praying in our chapel, he concurred and said that praying in a chapel is even more problematic, since *avoda zara* takes place in an interfaith chapel, which is worse than what goes on in a bar or nightclub.¹⁵

king in it, and the explanation of the *Magen Avraham* (*Orach Chaim* 154:17).

12 Indeed, Rav Ovadia Yosef (*Yabia Omer* 10:16) and Rav Waldenberg (*Tzitz Eliezer* 10:1) invoke this principle in defense of why Jews may still pray in the *ma'aras hamachpela* in Chevron even though it has been made into a mosque. Regarding the status of entering a mosque, there seems to be more room to permit doing so than there is to enter a church, since the Rambam rules that Islam is not *avoda zara* (*Hilchos Maachalos Asuros* 11:7; *Teshuvos HaRambam* 369), though not all *rishonim* agree (See Ran on *Sanhedrin* 61b s.v. "Yachol"). See extensive discussion of the status of Islam and mosques in *Tzitz Eliezer* 14:91, *Teshuvos V'hanhagos* 4:35 and *Yabia Omer* 7 *Yoreh Deah* 12(4).

13 *Iggeros Moshe Orach Chaim* 1:31.

14 In this *teshuva*, Reb Moshe also references some of the issues brought up in the Eretz Hemda *teshuva*. For example, he notes the ruling that one may continue to pray in a shul where an inappropriate deed was committed, because one cannot forbid something that doesn't belong to them (*ein adam osar davar she'eino shelo*), and if a transgression only happens occasionally in a shul (*b'akrai*) and the space isn't dedicated to that action, but remains constantly used as a synagogue, then even if a symbol of idolatry would be placed there, the synagogue would still be permissible to pray in, since the idolaters came into our domain. However, Reb Moshe goes on to argue that if the space has idolatrous practices in it on a regular (*kavua*) basis, it would be forbidden to pray there, especially if there is another place to pray in that city. Rav Eliezer Waldenberg concurs with this ruling of Reb Moshe but disagrees with his reasoning and proofs (*Tzitz Eliezer* 12:15).

Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz (*Hakoneh Olamo*, 250) quotes this ruling of Reb Moshe as one of many reasons why it is *halachically* problematic to *daven* in a house *minyan* (since Reb Moshe writes that whatever happens in a given place has an impact on the prayers said there and thus one shouldn't pray in a place of lightheadedness, which makes many rooms in a house improper places for communal prayer).

15 Indeed, it should be pointed out that despite the lenient rulings of the *Magen Avraham* (*Orach Chaim*

I also asked Rav Hershel Schachter about the permissibility of *davening* in our chapel, and showed the chapel to him in person so he could see it as well. He told me that he is opposed to praying in such a space, and that Jews should find somewhere else to pray. Rav Schachter did not detail his reasoning, though it seems to have also been the opinion of his *rebbe*, Rav Soloveitchik. In a letter to students at Cornell University who were tasked with creating an interfaith chapel with symbols from various faith traditions, Rav Soloveitchik strongly objected to the use of an interfaith chapel for *halachic* and philosophical reasons.¹⁶ He explains that the design of spaces of worship have theological implications and that every religion is best served by maintaining its own uniqueness and specialness, which the use of an interfaith chapel would undermine.

Use of General Interfaith Chapels

Those who permitted use of our chapel relied heavily on the fact that it is essentially a synagogue that is also used by others. How might some of these issues play out in other interfaith chapels that are completely neutral prayer spaces, such as in an airport or non-sectarian hospital?

In response to a question about using the chapel at Gatwick airport in England, which was created to be used by people of any religion, but includes a cross that can be covered on a table inside of it, Rabbi Shamaï K'hat HaCohen Gross (the *rav* of Kahal Machzikei HaDas in Jerusalem), wrote a responsum in which he prohibited *davening* in such a room since it was established to include prayers that are considered *avoda zara*.¹⁷

However, some have pointed out that while this stringent ruling may apply to a room that was **established** to include worship to *avoda zara*, simply praying in a room that has a cross in it (or other religious symbols) would not necessarily be forbidden, in a case in which there is no other option, as long as one covers the symbol or faces away from it.¹⁸ Moreover, this prohibition may be against regularly using such

154:17) and *Mishna Berura* (154:45), Rav Moshe was opposed to the practice of turning a burned-down Catholic church into a synagogue (*Iggeros Moshe Orach Chaim* 1:49).

16 Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, N. Helfgot Ed., *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, (Ktav Publishing, 2005), 8-10.

17 Responsa Shevet Hakehati 6:83.

18 Unpublished responsum of R. Meir Shulevitz, based on the ruling of the *Mishna Berura* (94:30), that when one is traveling and finds a spot in an inn to daven, one need not be concerned that there may be idols there, since all of our cities are full of idols, but if the idols are hanging on the eastern wall of the inn, one should pray in another direction. Similarly, *B'mareh Habazak* 2:55 rules that one may have a minyan in a hall owned by a Christian group that has crosses in it, as long as it is not a church or formal prayer space, and the crosses are covered. See also *Shut Lev Avraham* 30 for a similar ruling related to praying in a hospital room with a cross in it. Indeed, the Rama rules that a cross itself is usually considered only a religious symbol and not an actual object of worship (*Yoreh Deah* 141:1).

a space as a synagogue, but not against periodic Jewish prayers taking place in it.¹⁹ Furthermore, perhaps it can be inferred from R. Gross's answer that if the room was truly neutral, such as many "meditation rooms," "reflection rooms," or the like, that were not intended for specific use by any particular religion, but are simply meant to be quiet spaces, the reasons for this prohibition would not apply and one would be permitted to *daven* in such a room. Indeed, some *rabbonim* have approved of prayer in interfaith chapels that have no religious symbols and were intended to serve anyone who would like to pray inside of them.²⁰ In a follow-up to the *teshuva* from the Eretz Hemda *kollel* about the Cedars-Sinai chapel, Rav Nachum Rabonovitch told me that he permits prayer in any interfaith chapel nowadays, since in his opinion, today's Christianity is not categorized as *avoda zara*.

Conclusion

We therefore see that there is good *halachic* basis to defend *davening* in the Cedars-Sinai chapel, but that it is also seen as somewhat problematic, and perhaps even prohibited, in the eyes of some *poskim*. It may be, therefore, that when one has the option, it is better to *daven* elsewhere. However, if one must be in the hospital, and there is nowhere else to pray without numerous types of distractions or the only available *minyan* is there (or there is no other place to make a *minyan* without disturbing others), there are sufficient grounds to rely upon to permit *davening* there. Some interfaith chapels are more *halachically* problematic than the Cedars-Sinai chapel, and some are better, depending on what exactly goes on in them, the regularity of the various services that takes place in them, and what purpose they were initially created to serve. However, as always and particularly in cases of differing perspectives such as this, each person should seek guidance from their own *rav* on a case by case basis.

19 This suggestion was made by Zvika Ryzman, based on the *Mishna Berura* (154:45) which was quoted by the *Shevet Hakehati* above, which forbids using a space in which there was *avoda zara* as a synagogue on a regular basis (*b'kvius*), which may imply that just doing so occasionally (which is how chapels are generally utilized), would not be forbidden.

20 Rabbi Dov Aaron Brisman (*Av Beis Din* of the *Beis Din of Philadelphia*), *Eitz Chaim* (Bobov) 45, Elul 5777), 117-25. However, other *rabbonim* cited in this edition of *Eitz Chaim* forbid *davening* in a chapel such as this because of concerns about other worshipers bringing religious symbols with them while one is *davening*, and the idolatrous practices that happen within them, sending the message that all religions are equal and people are free to choose however they want, or that people might suspect one who enters such a chapel of worshipping *avoda zara* in it. I would like to thank Zvika Ryzman for pointing this journal out to me.