

The Religious Significance Of The Israeli Flag

By Rabbi SHIMSHON HAKOHEN NADEL

Living in Jerusalem, one of the highlights of my year is attending the annual Flag Parade on *Yom Yerushalayim*. Watching thousands of blue and white flags being paraded through the heart of the city, one can't help but well up with pride. But the Israeli flag is more than just an expression of national pride – the flag possesses religious significance.

Growing up in New Jersey, my first encounter with the Israeli flag was in the shul we belonged to. There it stood, adjacent to the ark, flanked on the other side by the American flag. Despite a ruling by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein against the placement of the flag in the sanctuary (*Igrot Moshe, Orach Chayyim*, vol. 1, no. 46), the Israeli flag has become a fixture in the contemporary synagogue.

We Jews have had flags for thousands of years. The Torah (Num. 2:2) describes how the Jews encamped in the wilderness, "each man by his banner." According to the *Midrash*, each flag was adorned with its tribe's unique color and symbol.

And while some may contend that the Israeli flag is a modern invention, Rabbi Ari Shvat, who has done extensive research on the flag, has shown the historical antecedents of this symbol. For example, a flag with the Star of David hung prominently in the synagogues of Prague since the mid-14th century, with the approval of their great rabbis, among them the Maharal, Shelah, Noda B'Yehudah, and Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschütz.

The late historian Avraham Ya'ari, in *Toldot Chag Simchat Torah*, his groundbreaking work on the development of the customs of *Simchat Torah*, records that for centuries the flag has been a part of the *Simchat Torah* celebration – an image we are all familiar with.

Let us not forget the obvious: The design of the

Rabbi Nadel lives and teaches in Jerusalem.

modern Israeli flag is based on the *tallit*. The blue and white motif we are familiar with today was adopted at the First Zionist Congress of 1897, even though it had earlier incarnations.

It was David Wolffsohn, a banker from Kovno who played a role in the early Zionist movement as an assistant to Herzl and later as the second president of the Zionist Organization, who made the decision to adopt the *tallit* motif. In a jubilee volume celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the First Zionist Congress, Wolffsohn wrote that the choice was obvious: "We already have a flag, white and blue – the *tallit* that we wrap ourselves up in during prayer. This *tallit* is our symbol. Let us take the *tallit* out from its case and unfurl it before the eyes of Israel and before the eyes of all the nations!"

By choosing the familiar religious motif of the *tallit*, Wolffsohn was determined to imbue the flag with religious meaning.

Rabbi Avraham Yizchak HaKohen Kook also saw religious meaning in the flag. At the rededication of the Churva Synagogue in Jerusalem on Chanukah of 1926, Chief Rabbi Kook not only allowed the flag of the Jewish Legion to enter the synagogue, in his invocation he described the flag as "holy" and a symbol of Redemption.

To many, however, the flag represents secular Zionism and a secular government at times antagonistic to religion. The truths of history, however, prove that things weren't always so black and white (or blue and white).

In an article that appeared on 22 Nissan 1949, just two weeks before Israel declared its independence, the newspaper of Agudath Israel, *Hamevaser*, called on its readers to place the Israeli flag in their windows. And in the years following the establishment of the state, the flag was proudly displayed in haredi homes on *Yom Ha'Atzmaut* – including the homes of great leaders such as Rab-

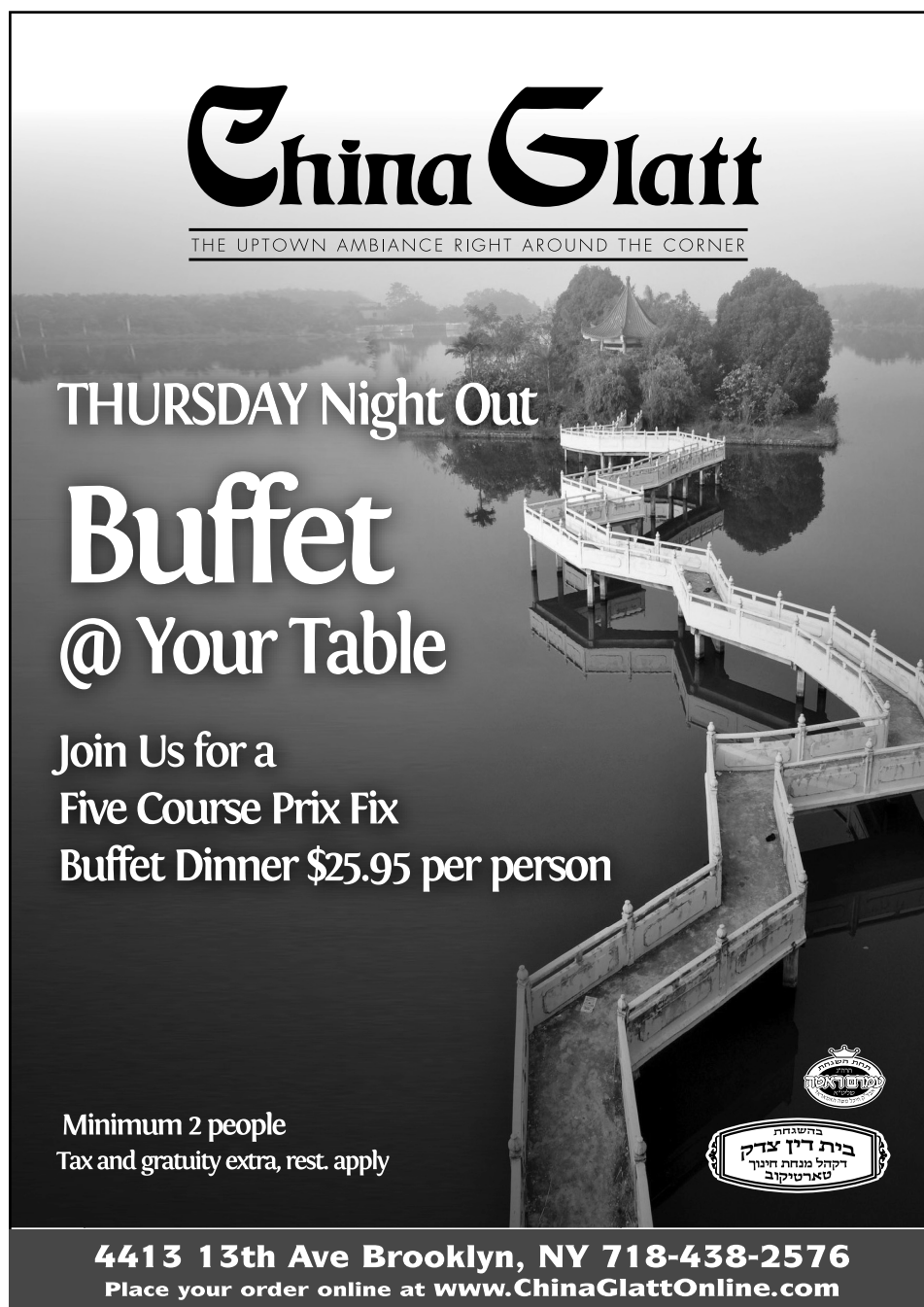
bi Yechezkel Abramsky and the Rebbes of Modzitz and Sadigura. Today the flag still flies over the Ponevezh Yeshiva on *Yom Ha'Atzmaut* out of deference to its founder, Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman, who began the practice.

For me, the importance of finding religious meaning in the flag became crystallized after an unfortunate event: One Purim, a yeshiva *bachur* who had imbibed a bit too much, noticed the Israeli flag displayed proudly above my door and remarked that it is *avodah zarah*, idolatry. I quickly responded that the Israeli flag is a symbol of tremendous sacrifice.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik tried to express the significance of the Israeli flag in halachic terms. He invoked the custom of burying a Jewish martyr in his blood-soaked clothes as they cry out for mercy and vengeance. Rabbi Soloveitchik continued and compared this to the *degel*:

The blue and white flag, soaked with the blood of thousands of young Jews who fell in the War of Independence, protecting the Land and settlements (religious and non-religious, for the enemy, *yemach shemam*, did not distinguish), has a spark of sanctity that flows from devotion and self-sacrifice. We are all enjoined to honor the flag and treat it with respect. – *Chamesh Derashot*, p. 90; Cf. *Nefesh ha-Rav*, p. 100

The state of Israel was not handed to us on a silver platter. We paid a heavy price and continue to sacrifice. We live during challenging times, complicated times – but also exciting times. We live at a unique moment in history. Our fervent hope and prayer is to see the fulfillment of the words we pray in the daily *amidah*, "Raise the banner to gather our exiles and speedily gather us together from the four corners of the earth to our Land."



China Glatt
THE UPTOWN AMBIANCE RIGHT AROUND THE CORNER

THURSDAY Night Out
Buffet
@ Your Table

Join Us for a
Five Course Prix Fix
Buffet Dinner \$25.95 per person

Minimum 2 people
Tax and gratuity extra, rest. apply

4413 13th Ave Brooklyn, NY 718-438-2576
Place your order online at www.ChinaGlattOnline.com

Self Inking and Rubber Stamps
Signature & Notary
Architect & Engineer
Hebrew & Sefer

Engraved Signs
Professional Acrylic Signs
Desk & Name plates
Building & Outdoor Signs

Laminated Plaques
Photographs
Diplomas
Invitations

Engraved Plaques
Testimonial Awards
Yahrzeit Plaques
Dinner/Melave Malke

Seals & Embossers
Notary/Corporate
Custom Logos
Hebrew and Sefer

Printing
Business Cards
Letterheads
Envelopes
Invitations
Thank You Cards

A·ABAR
STAMP & ENGRAVING CO., INC.

AUGUST 31
SAME DAY SERVICE!



Make sure your childrens clothing doesn't get left in camp.

A Abar introduces...
SELF INKING CLOTHING STAMP

- Indelible ink
- No more mess
- Same day service
- Won't rub out

We also carry iron on and sew on labels.

Let us help you preserve your memories for a lifetime!!
We laminate diplomas & invitations
GREAT GIFT IDEA!!!

4718 18th Avenue Brooklyn, NY 11204
718-871-2600/ FAX 718-851-0328
email: aabarengravers@aol.com

EST. 1952

scs.designs:917-232-5788