



# JEWISHLINK

(<https://jewishlink.news>)



Linking Northern And Central NJ, Bronx, Manhattan, Westchester And CT

---

## Foreign Rituals at Military Ceremonies

By Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Brody | May 9, 2024

Anyone who has attended the funeral of an Israeli soldier immediately notices how the IDF adopts many practices used in military funerals around the world, such as laying wreaths on the grave and the three-volley salute by a rifle party. Similarly, state ceremonies can include moments of silence, memorial sirens and the lowering of flags. While these rituals may evoke strong emotions, they also raise important halachic questions

After condemning the unethical practices of ancient Egyptians and Canaanites, the Torah demands, “You shall not walk in their ways,” (Vayikra 18:3). Commentators have interpreted this exhortation—colloquially known as “chukat hagoyim”—in various manners. Some suggest that the verse particularly targets the sexual debauchery exhibited in those ancient societies or provides additional prohibitions against ancient practices of sorcery.

The dominant strand of commentators contends that these verses proscribe imitating the behaviors of foreign cultures, including not only rituals, but also seemingly innocuous mannerisms like dress and hairstyle (Sifra Acharei Mot 9:9). Some asserted that the rationale was for Jews to bear a unique external appearance to signify their distinct worldview from idol worshippers. Most applied it more broadly to all non-Jewish cultures—including those of monotheists—with the intent of preventing acculturation and unwanted influences (Chinuch 262). Dispensations, however, were issued to “court Jews” whose frequent interaction with government authorities required them to follow general etiquette and decorum (Yoreh Deah 178:2).

Yet the Talmud permits the honorific burning of beds and

their neighbors. The Talmud elsewhere indicates that there was a biblical precedent for these honorific pyrrhic rites (Sanhedrin 52b). On this basis, the Vilna Gaon asserted that all gentile customs remain prohibited unless they have Jewish origins or could have reasonably emerged without non-Jewish influence (Gra, Yoreh Deah 178:7). Others more liberally asserted that only rituals with idolatrous associations, or rituals which are non-idolatrous but nonetheless foolish or haughty, were prohibited (Tosafot Avodah Zara 11a).

Rabbi Moshe Isserles established the normative position to only proscribe foreign rituals which are idolatrous in nature, or alternatively, those with no apparent reason (Yoreh Deah 178:1). The latter customs are prohibited because we suspect they have (forgotten) idolatrous origins, or that the otherwise senseless act is being adopted for the sake of acculturation or immodest desires. Yet any reasonable, non-idolatrous custom—ranging from honorific rites to professional uniforms like medical gowns—remains permissible when adopted for pragmatic benefits, and not just to mimic others (Bach, Yoreh Deah 178).

---

Asher Weiss has noted—some poskim have applied the strict position of the Vilna Gaon in various cases where they fear that the practice indicates bad influence or will impart a harmful message. Yet the mainstream position of the Rama permits any non-idolatrous rituals which are being done for a reasonable goal.

On this basis, a small group of religious Jews refuse to stand silently during the memorial sirens on Israel Memorial Day. This causes much animosity because it breaks the feeling of unity intended to be created by everyone standing silently together to remember the fallen. As Rabbis Yehuda Henkin and Eliezer Melamed contend, this action commemorates the mitzvah of army service. Some recite Tehillim privately during the siren. That's certainly fine, but not necessary—for as Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook argued, “Standing silently for the fallen soldiers of Tzahal contains within it the holy mitzvah of remembering the glory of the holy ones.” Unfortunately, some people don't recognize army service as a mitzvah. Yet there's no reason that all shouldn't be able to stand quietly in respect of communal sensitivities.

~~Rabbis Ovadiah Hedaya and Bezalel Zeltz (Neem 2) scorned the~~

Gaon. Yet they felt Jews should preserve their own funeral minhagim and not adopt the military culture of others. While not a fan of such wreaths, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef noted that many rites—including the use of horse-drawn caskets—were historically adopted by Jews because they found them meaningful (Yabia Omer, Yoreh Deah 3:24).

Following Rama's ruling, these practices are permissible. Many Israelis, it seems, find these popular military rituals to be profound expressions of the distinct circumstances of the death. Deaths in uniform require unique funerals. For this reason, the IDF's rabbinate participates in these rites, while also ensuring the inclusion of traditional rituals like the lighting of candles and the recitation of the Kel Malei Rachamim prayer. In this way, Israelis can unite around rites that try to capture the uniqueness of the moment and give proper tribute to the ultimate sacrifice made for the Jewish people.

---

*Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Brody is the executive director of Ematai and the author of "Ethics of Our Fighters: A Jewish View on War and Morality," (Maggid).*

