Modern Rabbis on celebrating New Year's eve

We have written in previous HOTD about the views of modern orthodox rabbis regarding the celebration of different American holidays. We have seen that all rabbis are very strict in forbidding, for example, the celebration of Halloween; while most would not oppose (and some would even encourage) the celebration of Thanksgiving. The difference between Thanksgiving and Halloween is that the latter has a clear origin in pagan culture and that some of those idolatrous customs are somehow still practiced in its celebration today (see **this**).

What about New Year's eve?

According to Christian tradition, January 1st, is the day of the circumcision of Yeshu (the eighth day counting from December 25), when his name was given to him. Five centuries ago, the rabbi Terumat Hadeshen and the Rama, both living in Christian countries, classified New Year's day as a religious gentile holiday (Darkhe Moshe and Rama, Yoreh Deah 148:12). Terumat Hadeshen refers to January First as "the eighth day of Christmas." He clearly viewed this holiday as 'religious' in nature. For the Jews living in Christian lands Christmas and new Year were not very happy days. One example: on New Year's Day 1577, Pope Gregory XIII decreed that all Roman Jews, under pain of death, must listen attentively to the compulsory Catholic conversion sermon given in Roman synagogues after Friday night services. On New Year's Day 1578, Gregory signed into law a tax forcing Jews to pay for the support of a "House of Conversion" to convert Jews to Christianity. On New Year's 1581, Gregory ordered his troops to confiscate all sacred literature from the Roman Jewish community. Thousands of Jews were murdered in the campaign (*U.S. News and World Report December 23, 1996*).

Despite all this, many modern American Rabbis have a more lenient view in regards to New Year's day. In their opinion New Year's today has lost entirely its religious overtones and can be rationally explained as a celebration of a new civil calendar's year, which we all somehow follow, for example, for taxes purposes. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (Iggerot Moshe, Eben Ha'ezer 2:13) writes with regard to New Year's: "On the question of celebrating any event on a holiday of Gentiles, if the holiday is based on religious beliefs [such as Christmas], such celebrations are prohibited …. even without [a religious intent] . . . However, the first day of the civil year [January 1] and the day of Thanksgiving are not bound to this prohibition according to the letter of the law. Pious Jews [ba'ale nefesh], however, should be stricter [and avoid its celebration]." Following Rabbi Feinstein, other rabbis assert that, since the status of New Year's day has changed in

the last three hundred years and in contemporary America there is no religious content on New Year's Day, and while there might be many problems associated with the way New Year's is celebrated (drinking, etc.) few would classify it as a religious holiday, since there is a clear secular reason to celebrate the beginning of the new calendar year.

Most Rabbis I know will not promote and would actually oppose to any public or official commemoration of the New Year's eve by their congregation. At the same time, based on some of the above mentioned considerations, they won't actively preach against its private and sober celebration by individuals, as they would do, for example, with celebrating Halloween.

READ two different opinions on celebrating New Year's eve.

Rabbi M. Broyde

Rabbi Y. Hoffman

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