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Halachic Corner
With RAV HERSHEL SCHACHTER

INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED BY
ELLIOT RESNICK, JEWISH PRESS CHIEF EDITOR

How Many Days Of Yom Tov Should One Observe In Israel?

Rav Yosef Karo writes that during his lifetime – in the 1500s in Tzfat – tourists from Arab countries would visit on shalosh regalim, and they used to observe two days yom tov. That was the practice for many centuries.

The Chacham Tzvi never lived in Eretz Yisrael, but he, along with his son – Rav Yaakov Emden – thought you only have to observe one day yom tov, even if you’re only visiting.

Rav Kook thought you should paskei like the Chacham Tzvi, and I think the Lubavitcher Rebbe thought so too. Rav Soloveitchik’s family had a compromise. They followed the Chacham Tzvi with respect to davening and leigen tefillin, but they wouldn’t do melacha on the second day. That’s what people refer to as observing “one and a half days.”

Rav Soloveitchik visited Eretz Yisrael once, in 1955, when he was a candidate for the rabbanus in Tel Aviv. Before he left America, his father told him, “Make sure you leig tefillin with a berachah the second day of Shavuos.” Rav Soloveitchik said it turned out that the second day Shavuos was be Shabbos, so he didn’t have to leig tefillin in the end.

Do you keep two days when you’re in Israel for yom tov?

People make fun of me; they say I observe two and a half days. The few times I was in Eretz Yisrael for yom tov, we davened yom tovodik and didn’t do melacha on the second day, but we heard havdalah in shul the night of the first day, and I put on tefillin the second day at home.

Rav Shlomo Zalman [Auerbach] recommends that bnei Torah put on tefillin on the second day because some say you should only observe one day yom tov when visiting Eretz Yisrael and, in general, it’s questionable why you don’t wear tefillin on yom tov sheni. Min haTorah you’re mechuyav to wear tefillin every day, so why don’t we wear tefillin on yom tov sheni?

The Ksav Sofer has a whole discussion on this question and doesn’t really come up with a satisfactory explanation. The Rogatchover discusses it too. He was asked why the Gemara doesn’t mention not wearing tefillin on yom tov sheni when it gives examples of the chachamim telling us not to fulfill a mitzvah d’oraisa - like not blowing shofar when Rosh Hashanah falls out on Shabbos or not shaking lulav when the first day of Sukkos falls out on Shabbos. The Rogatchover answered: “You’re right, you should wear tefillin.”

I remember I once mentioned this to Rav Soloveitchik, and he said, “What?! The Rogatchover wore tefillin on yom tov sheni? I don’t believe it.” But that’s what he writes in the letter. It’s printed in the collection of his letters.

Rav Hershel Schachter is a widely-respected posek and rosh yeshiva and rosh kollel at Yeshiva University’s Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary.