

May an Avowed Atheist Serve as a שליח ציבור?

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This paper was adopted as a unanimous opinion on January 14, 1987, by a vote of twelve votes in favor and none opposed (12-0-0). Members voting in favor: Rabbis Isidoro Aizenberg, Ben Zion Bergman, Elliot N. Dorff, Richard L. Eisenberg, Robert Gordis, Howard Handler, David H. Lincoln, Lionel E. Moses, George Pollak, Joel Roth, Morris M. Shapiro and Henry A. Sosland.

שאלה

A member of the congregation who is somewhat observant of the Shabbat and Festivals, but who is an avowed atheist, enjoys leading the congregation in prayer. May an avowed atheist serve as שליח ציבור?

תשובה

Although we may question his sincerity as an atheist, nevertheless, the query must be answered.

There are many sources in responsa literature that preclude preceptors of doubtful character. High standards of piety for a prayer leader were expected. In the Talmud¹ we find the following prescription: "Who should read before the congregation?... [One] whose youth was unblemished, who is meek, acceptable to the people, has a thorough knowledge, etc." The *רמב"ם* states that "[i]f the reader was an עכו"ם or אפיקורס, etc., we do not say 'amen'".² He also writes that a prayer leader should be "a great wise man...pleasant voice, fluent, etc."³ In the *Shulhan Arukh* we find that a שליח ציבור must be a fit person, i.e., free of sin and [one] who does not have a bad reputation, etc..."⁴ The *Mishnah*⁵ does speak of saying "amen" after a כותי.

The *רא"ש* also wrote a number of responsa dealing with the qualifications of readers in congregations interested only in voice, not in character, etc.⁶

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.

Our colleague, Rabbi Howard Handler, showed me a תשובה of Menahem Azariah of Fano, the great Italian Gaon (1548-1620). He discusses a problem raised in the *Yerushalmi* of answering “amen” to righteous gentiles, Jewish sectarians and even to Nebukhadnezer! All of these categories or persons, however, believed in God when they uttered the blessings in question.

I would agree with Abraham Millgram that today a reader is no longer a true שליח ציבור, the congregation’s emissary in divine worship.⁷ He or she is merely a performer of the prayer ritual. Nevertheless, it would seem to me that some basic standard should apply.

Surely, כבוד הציבור is still a factor. Are we not bringing religion into disrepute by allowing an *avowed atheist* to lead us in praying to a God in whom he does not believe? Emissary or not, there has to be a basic theological or spiritual rapport between congregation and prayer leader.

The issue in this case is not the choosing of one theology or another; our tradition includes many conceptions of God. In cases such as this, in fact, the rabbi must insure that the person in question, in claiming to be an atheist, is not simply asserting his reflection of a particular belief which he assumes to be normative. The rabbi must also do all that is possible to determine whether the person is just struggling with beliefs, especially since his desire to lead the congregation not only in its institutional activities, but specifically in prayer, constitutes a desire for action which belies his words. At some point, however, we must believe what a person says. Certainly, if the person in question publicly declares his disdain for all conceptions of God for the purpose of affronting the very congregation he purports to lead, he is not an appropriate prayer leader, not for theological reasons, but for reasons of character.

CONCLUSION

While we should be lenient in not insisting on the high standards of previous times, we should not dismiss this flagrant insult to our congregations. No one is suggesting a cross-examination of חזנים. This man, who says he is an atheist, is outspoken in his rejection of God. He should not conduct services.

NOTES

1. *Ta’anit* 16a-b
2. *Yad, Ahavah – Berakhot* 1: 13
3. *Yad, Tefillah* 8: 11
4. *Orah Hayyim* 53: 4-5

5. *Berakhot* 8: 8
6. Louis Jacobs, *Theology in the Responsa*. London, Boston: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1975.
7. Abraham Millgram, *Jewish Worship*. Philadelphia: JPS, 1971, p.335.