



APPLYING HALACHA IN ISRAEL'S POLICE FORCE

The Police is the most important security organization in Israel, even more than the IDF. If the entire police force took a week's vacation, the country would collapse, even without an external enemy.

In the Torah, there is no commandment to establish an army. The *mitzvah* is to appoint שופטים ושטרנים, judges and policemen. Not soldiers, or firefighters or even doctors. Why is this? Not only because internal security is a prerequisite for a normal society, but also because of the tendency to underestimate it. Without people responsible for public order, bribery, corruption and violence will simply erode the foundations of society.

I am often asked: can an observant Jew serve in the Police?

Imagine a religious patrol officer receiving a call on Friday night from someone complaining that a neighbor is playing his music too loudly. How does this relate to *pikuach nefesh*, the only reason one can break Shabbat?

The officer might talk to his commanders and ask them to exempt him from shifts on Shabbat, or to transfer him to assignments touching upon *pikuach nefesh* – but this is not a systemic solution.

It is important to realize that the Police bear broad responsibility for the well-being of the country's citizens. Much of its mission is to establish law and order, a new category hardly discussed in halachic discourse.

Suppose one receives a call on Shabbat from someone who needs to drive his

wife to hospital and reports a vehicle blocking their exit from the parking lot. As a local Rabbi, if such a question came to me, I would give him my vehicle. But it is impossible to run a country like that. *Halacha* cannot afford not to answer such a problem. On one hand, it is clear the police must work on Shabbat, but on the other, we cannot issue a comprehensive *heter* (permit) for all police work on Shabbat, irrespective of what that work is.

For example, is it a clear operational need for an investigative team following members of a criminal organization, gathering evidence to convict them, to continue to do so on Shabbat? Yes, because daily surveillance is key here, and the aim is to curtail crime as soon as possible.

What about public corruption cases? They often take months, if not years. In such cases there is no great urgency that demands work on Shabbat. You can stop on Friday and continue on Sunday.

In my position as Rabbi of the Israeli Police, I have to be deeply familiar with the myriad departments and assignments in order to give a halachic answer. I must understand what is clearly and urgently operational and what is not; what is societal *pikuach nefesh* and what is not. Halachic sensitivity (in the Police as much as anywhere else too) is needed to understand different roles, different situations and different people.

Ever-evolving technology also sparks a slew of new halachic questions. The classic example is body cameras. Policemen and women sometimes have a camera attached to their shirts. Is this

type of camera allowed on Shabbat? The Head of the Camera Department explained to me that the filming itself (or the fact that people know about it) often prevents violence – both by civilians and by police – and they also make a crucial contribution to gather evidence of disorder and the like.

In general, whenever we can lower the severity of a ban from *deOrayta* to *deRabbanan*, we try to do so. We want to make a police career attractive to observant Jews too and for religious people to feel comfortable going to police stations to submit complaints or calls for help on Shabbat. I am pleased to say the Police are developing halachically-based tools to accommodate the religious population.

Sabbath observance is of course not the only issue that raises halachic questions in the Police. For example, undercover operatives sometimes have to sit in Arab restaurants, where they serve non-kosher food. One of them came to me, expressing his dilemma in such a situation. I asked him if he could say he was a vegetarian, but he told me that declaring yourself a vegetarian in an Arab restaurant is something that can arouse suspicion. So I told him: "Your safety is the highest priority here. If there is the slightest doubt, there is no doubt, and your eating there is part of the *mitzvah* you are involved in in protecting the country and its citizens."

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