# Lecture Proposal: Communist Russia in Halakhic Discourse

Following the Communist Revolution in Russia, Jewish law had to respond to the change in the regime and the resulting change in the country’s culture, and to grapple with the significance of those changes from a halakhic perspective.

The main issue where the change in attitude of halakhic authorities to Communist Russia – in contrast with the Czarist regime that preceded it – can be seen, is in its reaction to atheism as a core value of the new regime and Soviet culture. As far as the Jewish religious leadership was concerned, this meant the need to fight for the ability to retain religious values and fulfill religious commandments. In terms of Jewish law, the question was to determine the significance of the change from a Christian state an atheist state. Until that time, halakhic authorities recognized the age-old phenomenon prevalent in ancient times and in the Middle Ages – a state that operated under the religious influence – and the modern state that had begun to be liberated from religion, which allowed some degree of separation between religion and state together with religious freedom for its citizens.

The establishment of an atheist state was a new phenomenon that influenced Jewish law in several ways.

In my lecture, I would like to examine the approach of decisors of Jewish law to the rule of atheism through the perspective of their attitudes towards civil marriage. It appears that the total rejection of religiosity and total secularization of the state made it possible for these decisors to view civil marriage as an act devoid of any religious or halakhic significance. This approach was not commonly found in previous legal decisions, in Christian and post-Christian countries, in Europe and America.

The point of departure for the discussion will be the ruling of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, whose first position as a rabbi was in Soviet Russia. Rabbi Feinstein rejected any religious value in civil marriage in Communist Russia. In general, he disagreed with Rabbi Henkin’s position that civil marriage had a dimension of religious marriage, regarding civil marriage in Russia, however, Rabbi Feinstein strongly emphasized that civil marriage had no significance whatsoever from the perspective of Jewish and religious law (*Igrot Moshe, Even HaEzer*, Part IV, Article 1 and in additional places). Rabbi Feinstein's rulings had a great influence on the attitude of the rabbinic authorities in Israel and around the world to the personal status of the Jews in Communist countries, immigrants to Israel, and emigrants to the Western world.

I would like to examine Rabbi Feinstein's ruling from four different perspectives:

A. Communist Russia vs. pre-revolutionary Russia.

B. Communist Russia vs. the surrounding world: Christian, post-Christian, Muslim and democratic.

C. Rabbi Feinstein, in contrast with other decisors of Jewish law, both in Russia and abroad.

D. The significance of the communist-atheistic world in other areas of Jewish law.

The focus of the lecture will not be civil marriage, but the halakhic-legal attitude toward the Soviet regime.

Sincerely,

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