OPINION

THE VIEW FROM HERE

Disagree All You Want With Presidential Family, But Keep Shabbat Out of It

BY JOSHUA RUNYAN

AS PRESIDENT Donald Trump was finishing his visit to Saudi Arabia and preparing to depart for Israel earlier this week, the Forward reported that Rabbi Haskel Lookstein was not the rabbi who reportedly granted permission to the president’s daughter and her husband Jared Kushner, to violate Shabbat as part of the presidential entourage traveling to the Middle East.

If Lookstein, the modern Orthodox leader who presided over Ivanka Trump’s conversion to Judaism, was not the source of the rabbinic dispensation, the report implied and furious social media posts sharing the article implored, then who was?

In traditional Jewish fashion, I’ll answer this question with another: Who cares?

Ever since the inauguration, when the Kushners eschewed precedent set by former Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman to travel in a motorcade after the onset of Shabbat instead of walking down Washington, D.C.’s streets, the Jewish world has gotten itself into a tizzy over the intricacies of the couple’s practices and their connection to halacha. At first glance, the musings about rabbinical supervision and whether or not “Ivanka” are Shomer Shabbat even appear well-meaning. Just how does the holy day of rest work inside a White House world? It’s an innocent-enough question.

But the majority of those asking are not really interested in any answers, simply because no one appears to actually be asking the Kushners. Instead, people are either trying to seize on their travel arrangements as evidence of their hypocrisy or approvingly holding them up as a modell for how far Jews have come, that their presence is necessary aboard Air Force One.

For myself, I choose neither to denigrate Jared and Ivanka nor see them as exemplars of Jewish living. There’s plenty else for me and others to criticize them for, whether it’s their and their family members’ conflicts of interest or the transactional way they, like the president himself, seem to regard America’s place in the world. (To be fair, there’s also what to like, such as Ivanka’s push for paid family leave, a welcome policy the administration is pushing in its nevertheless draconian budget proposal.)

When Politico, sourcing its report from the White House, broke the news on May 18 that the presidential daughter and son-in-law had reached out to a rabbi for approval of their Shabbat jaunt to Saudi Arabia, I set out to write an informative article on the issues that might go into their unnamed rabbi’s halachic determination. Tellingly, the first dozen rabbis I reached out to, all authorities here in Philadelphia and in Washington, declined to speak on the record. One pointed to his congregation’s membership, which includes former Obama administration officials and current Trump administration ones. Another laughed and said, in different words, no way in gehinnom. In New York, Lookstein himself politely but firmly refused to speak on the record. He did, however, refer me to Rabbi Michael Brody, the influential Emory University law professor and former congregational leader. Brody, who had defended Lookstein against criticisms from the Rabbinical Council of America when he chose to participate in an interfaith event at the Washington National Cathedral associated with the 2009 inauguration of President Barack Obama, was immensely helpful.

Brody distills the modern applications of Torah law in the realm of government service and Shabbat observance. Contrary to most lay people’s understanding, pikiach nefesh, the leniency grounded in “saving a life” that allows violating pretty much all Torah laws (save for three), doesn’t actually come into play at all that often when it hears of observant officials’ potential Shabbat conflicts. Instead, he said, karov Imnalchat, a leniency granted to those who are “close to the sovereign,” is frequently the basis for certain individuals choosing to violate a host of Torah prohibitions.

It “is not grounded in the idea that a life is in present danger, but in a [person’s] consistent role in which important decisions are made,” he explained. “That permits an ongoing violation of many laws of Jewish life, even though no lives immediately are saved.”

The distinction hinges not only on a person’s rank and proximity to power, but in their ability and necessity to wield it. The Kushners, if they were considered karov Imnalchat, would be far from the first.

“Are there already such people?” Brody noted. “There are people who sit in positions of enormous governmental importance, presiding over life and death matters, where they’re making policy decisions that address the safety of the United States, who are observant Jews.”

Generals, national security analysts, presidential advisers — Orthodox Jews have occupied all these roles in past administrations. And, as I recall, few in the public have subjected these officials’ relationsh to Shabbat to such a critical examination.

Some will say that Ivanka has brought it on herself, because she has written about the beauty of keeping Shabbat. Others will point to the White House, which, if Politico is to be believed, made an issue of it by trumpeting her and her husband’s rabbinic consultation. (The White House has not responded to my repeated attempts to confirm the accuracy of the Politico report.)

It wouldn’t be the first time the White House has said something stupid. And there’s a big difference between someone writing glowingly of Shabbat and how that translates into actual practice. But for the simple fact that most of the Jewish community probably doesn’t keep Shabbat even as strictly as the Kushners, we as Jews should not be in the business of, in effect, checking others’ tzitzit.

“I think that, realizing that the facts are uncertain and unclear, and the reality is unclear, people should hesitate to pass judgment on complicated situations for people who are living a life that is very far removed from your or my life,” Brody said. “That’s an important observation.”

There’s another term for doing exactly what Brody advocates against: lashon hara, the prohibition against gossip and malicious speech. Let’s keep our disagreements to ones of policy. If all of our private practices came to light, I highly doubt any one would be seen as a tzaddik.

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and legacy will continue, from one generation to the next.

The next time someone at shul says to you, "Really? I didn’t know that Jews live there," be sure to note that Jews live and thrive in places you might never have considered.

And while our hearts break over stories of anti-Semitism in parts of Europe, we in the United States can find comfort in knowing that Jews from around the world as well as in Israel are able to thrive, to lead their communities and to raise engaged and involved Zionist children and teenagers.

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belongs to Israel. This heightens the insecurity that only Trump knows what he is really thinking (and rethinking), and we should not expect this to change while he’s in office.

Third, it should be remembered that many on the political right in Israel made the mistake of taking Trump’s campaign rhetoric at face value. They might not have been as shocked by this week’s events had they not suffered from these delusions in the first place.

As long as Trump is consumed by his domestic crisis, it is unlikely a final deal between the Palestinians and Israel will remain anything more than a lofty ambition. But Trump’s crisis doesn’t change the fact that there is a realignment in the region between Israel and the Arab states — and potentially the Palestinians — based on shared interests, from economic development to confronting the Iranian threat. These opportunities really do form the basis for a meaningful peace process — one, moreover, that won’t depend on the fate of a single president.

Ben Cohen writes on Jewish affairs and Middle Eastern politics for JNS.org, which distributed this column.