

Who let Jared and Ivanka fly on Shabbat?

By Jeffrey Salkin | 12 hours ago

Don't look at me. I didn't do it. Not like they would have asked me. Neither was it the rabbi who married them — the venerable Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, the dean of New York's Orthodox rabbinate.

So, what rabbi would have given them permission (or, as some reporters put it, "dispensation") to fly to Saudi Arabia on Shabbat?

I can say with little fear of contradiction: there was simply no way that Jewish law would permit airplane travel — or any vehicular travel — on Shabbat or a Jewish holiday.

Oh, wait — there's one. That would be to save a life. When life is at stake, almost any Jewish law can be breached. That doesn't apply here.

No, a multi-billion dollar arms deal with the Saudis doesn't count. It isn't even close.

This whole flying to "Saudi Arabia on Shabbat" thing has done a great job of reviving the cynical question about Jared and Ivanka's "real" level of Jewish observance.

Are they "really" Orthodox? So it has been said. "Ivanka and husband are Orthodox Sabbath and Jewish holiday observers...She disengages from the business world and is incommunicado for 25 hours..."

Really — shouldn't they have known better?

Pondering the Kushners' Orthodoxy is almost a cottage industry. Peter Beinart* — himself an observant Jew — wonders aloud how modern Orthodoxy could have produced a Jared Kushner — someone who aligns himself with policies that seem to be at odds with Jewish values. And, hey — why doesn't Jared wear a kippah all the time, like other Orthodox men? Have you ever seen a photo of a kippahed- Jared?

Jared would not be the only Orthodox Jewish man to go bareheaded. The modern Orthodox Joseph Lieberman, reportedly on the short list for FBI director, doesn't wear a kippah in public, either. There is some history to this. It was not until relatively recently that Orthodox men wore kippot outside the home. The late Rabbi Joseph Lookstein, Haskel's father, had always taught that the kippah was an "indoor garment."

But, the point here is not the Kushners' level of observance.

No, the real issue is the still anonymous rabbi who offered the heter (permission) for travel on Shabbat.

This is not good for the Jews. I have great respect for Orthodoxy. But this move only exacerbates the intra-religious Jewish wars. Remember that Reform and Conservative rabbis have almost no religious rights in Israel, lest they upset state Orthodoxy's religious monopoly. Their marriages are not valid; their conversions are not valid; and as for what happens at the Kotel regarding women who want to publicly read Torah — puh-leeze.

Remember that those same Israeli Reform and Conservative rabbis have demonstrated more than adequate knowledge of halacha and Jewish thought. And yet, an Orthodox rabbi issues such a questionable psak din (halachic ruling). Right about now, the overwhelming majority of American Jews are experiencing a massive disconnect.

Shoutout to my friend, Rabbi Uri Regev, and his organization, Hiddush, that has been fighting for religious equality. But if you really want to get into "bad for the Jews" territory, you need only see how some gentiles are responding to this on Facebook.

I am talking about some of my gentile Facebook friends — especially the Catholics. Some have cynically suggested that Rabbi Ploni (a classic Hebrew way of saying Rabbi Whoeverstein) must have received some kind of bribe for offering this ruling. In this rabbinical move, they see all the hypocrisy that they associate with the worst aspects of the Catholic church. Some have snickered and compared this ill-founded rabbinical decision to "selling indulgences" — the medieval practice of reducing the amount of punishment for sin.

It was precisely the sale of indulgences that led Martin Luther, exactly five hundred years ago, to nail his ninety-five theses onto the church door in Wittenberg, sparking the Protestant Reformation.

I do not know — no one knows — if Rabbi Anonymous wound up with a handsome pile of dollars or shekels in exchange for a halachic decision that a day school kid wouldn't have made. It's actually worse than financial bribery. It could have been a different kind of bribery — the bribery of fame.

What is the bribery of fame?

You see it all the time: the way that some religious leaders automatically fawn over the rich and famous — even if those rich and famous people espouse political positions that are utterly at odds with the most sacred teachings of a particular faith.

In Judaism, it would be a violation of the Torah teaching of *lo takir panim* ("do not recognize faces") — do not show deference to the rich in legal disputes.

Ask yourselves: if some poor or even middle-class Jew had approached this rabbi, and asked if it was permissible to fly to, oh, say, Florida on Shabbat to visit an aged parent — what do you think the rabbi would have said?

Exactly.

***How Could Modern Orthodox Judaism Produce Jared Kushner?**

Peter Beinart January 31, 2017

In our annual progression through the Torah, we are now deep into slavery in Egypt. And each year, around this time, as I read the first Torah portions in Exodus, the same thought occurs to me: Why is all this necessary? By the end of Jacob's life, he's back in the Land of Israel, the land God has given him and his progeny. Why must the Jews leave, become slaves in Egypt, wander through the wilderness, and fight their way back to the place where, at the end of Genesis, they already reside? Why the big detour?

Obviously, there are many answers. It is in Egypt that Jews evolve from a family into a nation. It is in Egypt that God displays to that nation his awesome power. It is in the wilderness that God gives the Torah.

But in their Haggadah, "Go Forth and Learn," Rabbi David Silber and Rachel Furst offer another reason. They suggest that "one purpose of the Egypt experience was to sensitize the People of Israel to the suffering of others, to teach them what it means to be alienated and oppressed, so that when they set up their own society, they will be sure not to impose such suffering on others."

President Donald Trump will host a White House Seder, but it's unclear whether Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner (right) will attend.

Slavery, in other words, was meant to ensure that Jews would remember powerlessness once they gained power. Jared Kushner is what happens when that memory fails.

Rae Kushner was the daughter of a furrier in the Belarusian town of Navahrudak. The Nazis murdered her mother, her elder sister and her younger brother. She survived, with her father and younger sister, by climbing through a tunnel out of the ghetto and then living in the forest for a year.

Jared Kushner, her grandson, has lived a very different life. He attended Harvard after his father gave the university \$2.5 million; he bought a newspaper company when he was 25, and now he advises his father-in-law, the president.

Their lives illustrate the revolution in Jewish fortunes that has occurred over the past 75 years. In remarkable ways, modern Jewish history echoes the passage from powerlessness to power that begins in the Book of Exodus. Therefore, the challenge for Jared Kushner, and everyone in our extraordinarily privileged generation, is to remember our ancestors' suffering and honor their memories by defending the weak, vulnerable and oppressed today.

How could Kushner — a Modern Orthodox golden boy — fail to internalize that? How could he invite Donald Trump's Cabinet to his house for Shabbat dinner only hours after his father-in-law's executive order banning refugees from entering the United States? How could he pose in a tuxedo alongside his wife, Ivanka Trump, on Saturday night as that executive order wreaked havoc on

innocent people's lives simply because they hailed from the wrong countries?

Kushner's failure is not his problem alone; it should chill every Modern Orthodox educator, rabbi and parent in the United States. How could the Modern Orthodox community, a community that prides itself on instilling in its children Jewish knowledge and ideals, have failed so profoundly?

The Frisch School, the prestigious New Jersey yeshiva from which Kushner graduated, should conduct the kind of after-action report that the military conducts when its operations go awry. Every synagogue where Kushner prayed regularly should ask itself whether it bears some of the blame for having failed to instill in him the obligations of Jewish memory. Even if it is too late to influence Kushner, Modern Orthodox leaders still can work to ensure that they do not produce more like him in the years to come.

Obviously, not all Modern Orthodox Jews share Kushner's moral indifference. Last November, the Orthodox social justice organization Uri L'Tzedek organized a remarkable letter condemning "Trump's hateful rhetoric and intolerant policy proposals." On Monday, Rabbi Kenneth Brander, a vice president of Yeshiva University, sent out a tweet congratulating the Cardozo Law students who were working to help people hurt by Trump's ban.

But these are the exception, not the rule. Kushner's moral failure challenges the Modern Orthodox community — a community for which I have enormous admiration — to ask why it is often more stringent about ritual lapses than it is about ethical ones. Why do many Modern Orthodox Jews shudder at the thought of eating nonkosher cheese, yet proudly support Trump?

In his book "Spiritual Radical," Edward K. Kaplan tells a story about the Kopitzinitzer Rebbe. One day, a friend introduced the rebbe to a man whom he proudly declared to be shomer Shabbat, observant of the Sabbath rules. The rebbe looked at the man and asked, "Are you shomer hol?" He was asking him how he behaves during the week.

At this ugly and frightening moment in our country's history, that's the question Jared Kushner, and the community that produced him, should be urgently asking itself right now.

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More on Jared, Ivanka and that Friday night flight

By Ben Sales May 25, 2017 7:41am

(JTA) — Last week, Politico reported, citing “White House official,” that Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump got special permission from a rabbi to fly to Saudi Arabia on Shabbat as part of President Trump’s first foreign trip. My coverage earlier this week tried to suss out who that rabbi was.

But readers’ responses have focused on a few different questions: Why does Jewish law prohibit flying in a plane on Shabbat? Why might Jared and Ivanka have been allowed to fly?

And finally, should JTA be reporting at all on their religious conduct?

Based on conversations with a few Orthodox rabbis — and my own knowledge — I wrote that flying on Shabbat is prohibited because flying the plane involves igniting a combustion engine, thereby lighting a fire. Lighting a fire is one of the few actions expressly prohibited on Shabbat by the Torah.

But while that might be true for the pilot, it isn’t, really, for the passenger. After all, if I’m sitting in coach, I’m not literally flying the plane, much less turning it on or off. (Although some make the case that the additional weight of each passenger causes the engine to consume more fuel.) The reason observant Jews abstain from flying on Friday night and Saturday is because Jewish law prohibits traveling too far outside a city (essentially, from wherever one intends to spend the 25 hours of the Sabbath) on Shabbat.

Unlike lighting a fire, that prohibition is mandated by rabbinic sources, not the text of the Torah itself — and therefore is less severe. That’s why Conservative Rabbi Noah Bickart said the anonymous rabbi’s ruling is no surprise.

“I’d have given any government employee with a serious national security portfolio carte blanche to violate [rabbinic prohibitions], as would most anyone,” Bickart, who’s also a post-doctoral fellow in ancient Judaism at Yale, wrote in a Facebook comment. “This is dog bites man for [Jewish law]. No news here.”

But what was the reason Ivanka and Jared’s rabbi give in granting that permission? I wrote that such exceptions are granted — say, to a physician or to someone who can intervene in a medical emergency — in the interest of “pikuach nefesh,” or the obligation to save a life, even if it means breaking Shabbat prohibitions. My conversations with Orthodox rabbis seemed to reinforce that that was one likely answer. But that might not be the only explanation, either.

A couple rabbis told me that Jared and Ivanka’s national security duties might fall under the umbrella of pikuach nefesh — dealing with matters of life and death. But a few essays suggest that they might be exempt on different grounds: simply because they’re senior advisers of the president.

That concept is called “karov l’malchut” — roughly, “confidants of the king.” It allows observant Jewish advisers of a ruler (or president) to violate rabbinic prohibitions in order to do their jobs. Because the advisers’ actions can safeguard (or endanger) Jewish welfare, they’re given more flexibility.

“Since their unique status required them to make themselves available to the ruler, they were allowed to violate various rabbinic prohibitions,” Orthodox Rabbi Jeffrey Woolf, a Talmud professor at Israel’s Bar-Ilan University, told the site Jew in the City. “Overall, they amount to a recognition that a Jew in high government office has the ability (and the obligation) to do good for the community, and to prevent harm.”

Lastly, why write about this at all? Isn’t this just “frum-shaming,” in which busybodies try to embarrass observant Jews for their own unseemly reasons?

While it may be uncouth to scrutinize the religious practices of private individuals, Jared and Ivanka are two of the most powerful people in the country. As public officials, their actions affect hundreds of millions of people across the country and world.

Nor is their Judaism private. Ivanka has written about her Jewish observance regularly, and Jared invoked his family’s Jewish heritage in an op-ed defending his father-in-law last year. Trump’s Jewish supporters have pointed to Jared and Ivanka’s religion as proof that the president must be Good For The Jews.

Some within the Orthodox fold have argued — perhaps less persuasively — that as highly visible Orthodox Jews, the couple have an obligation to serve as religious role models.

So when a White House official makes a public comment about Jared and Ivanka’s Jewish observance, it’s only natural that a Jewish wire service would report on it — and explore the issues surrounding it.

Maybe, someday, we’ll even find out who that rabbi is.

Jared and Ivanka do their own thing as observant Jews. And that's normal.

By [Ben Sales](#) | June 15, 2017 5:04pm

421 SHARES



Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump walking down the West Wing Colonnade, Feb. 10, 2017. (Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

([JTA](#)) — So apparently Jared and Ivanka play golf on Shabbat. [Cue the handwringing.](#)

The New York Post [reported](#) Wednesday that the president's Jewish daughter and son-in-law like to hit the links on the holy day, and stay within the bounds of the Sabbath rules by walking the course (instead of driving a cart) and tipping the caddie the next day (instead of handling money). Of course, the newspaper also

noted that even according to the “less strict” Conservative movement, merely playing the game is a violation of Shabbat.

Articles of this type — I've [written](#) a [couple](#) — are premised on the idea that if Javanka are Orthodox Jews, they should be observing Jewish law, called halachah, strictly by the book. Anything less is hypocrisy or blasphemy.

On the surface, that assumption seems to make sense. But it's wrong.

That's because Jared and Ivanka have never claimed to strictly observe halachah. And among Jews who identify with Orthodoxy and belong to Orthodox synagogues, they are far from alone.

In general, Orthodox Jews tend to structure their lives around obligations and restrictions called mitzvot, from observing the Sabbath and [praying three times a day](#) to making sure their clothes don't include a [mix of wool and linen](#). But a broad spectrum of observance exists among the country's half-million Orthodox Jews, according to the Pew Research

Center's 2013 "[Portrait of Jewish Americans](#)," the study every American Jewish journalist is statutorily required to cite at least twice a month.

Unsurprisingly, haredi Orthodox Jews — the fervent "black hats" who populate enclaves like Monsey, New York, and Lakewood, New Jersey — abide by halachah. Indeed, a whole subculture has grown around adopting "chumrahs," or more stringent ways to observe Jewish law.

But among self-identified modern Orthodox Jews, the picture is more diverse, says Pew. Nearly a quarter say religion isn't "very important" in their lives, more than a fifth aren't certain of their belief in God and 18 percent hardly attend services.

When it comes to Judaism's legal particulars, nearly a quarter of modern Orthodox Jews don't light candles on Friday night, 17 percent don't keep kosher in the home and about a fifth handle money on Shabbat. Alas, the survey did not ask about golfing.

Orthodoxy is theoretically centered around halachic obligation, and today's modern Orthodoxy is represented by strictly halachic institutions like Yeshiva University and the Orthodox Union. So what to make of these apparently non-Orthodox Orthodox Jews? Actually it's not all that strange. There are any number of reasons to affiliate with a movement whose rules you occasionally or even often break. Maybe it's how you grew up. Maybe you appreciate Orthodoxy's aesthetic of rigor and tradition. Maybe you like the local Orthodox rabbi or synagogue.

Or maybe, when you do observe Jewish customs, you prefer to do so in what feels like a more traditionalist atmosphere — praying a full service in Hebrew with a text mostly unchanged for centuries. There's a long-running joke in Israel — which isn't really a joke — that the synagogue secular Israelis don't go to is Orthodox.

"A lot of people really enjoy the intensity of commitment in the Orthodox community, but they would provide confidentially that they don't agree with the doctrines or dogmas," said Rabbi Moshe Grussgott of Congregation Ramath Orah, an Orthodox synagogue in New York City. "They socially find meaning in that community. Every Orthodox rabbi knows such people exist, but there's an openness. We don't check to see who believes

what.”

Chabad, the sprawling Hasidic outreach movement, has built a global empire on the idea that Orthodox ritual and affiliation can appeal to non-Orthodox Jews. Chabad emissary couples accept that many of those who attend their synagogues are picking and choosing among the mitzvot, perhaps enjoying a Friday night meal and the Saturday morning service before heading off to the golf course or the garden.

Jared and Ivanka undoubtedly adhere more to traditional Jewish customs than most American Jews (Pew says only one in seven Jews avoids handling money on Shabbat; only 25 percent of Jewish parents say they have a child who was enrolled in a yeshiva or Jewish day school in the past year).

But despite the swirling rumors, they’ve – wait for it – never actually claimed to fully observe halachah. Ivanka has discussed her Shabbat observance at length at least twice in the past couple of years, and neither time did she say the family observes Shabbat in the most traditional sense.

In a 2015 [Vogue profile](#), Ivanka said “We’re pretty observant, more than some, less than others.”

She went on to say: “Yeah, we observe the Sabbath ... From Friday to Saturday we don’t do anything but hang out with one another. We don’t make phone calls ... We don’t do anything except play with each other, hang out with one another, go on walks together. Pure family.”

Jared added that they both “turn our phones off for 25 hours. Putting aside the religious aspect of it; we live in such a fast-paced world.”

Ivanka repeats this description in her new book, “Women Who Work,” writing that “From sundown Friday to Saturday night, my family and I observe the Shabbat. During this time, we disconnect completely – no emails, no TV, no phone calls, no internet. We enjoy uninterrupted time together and it’s wonderful.”

(A 2016 [New Yorker profile](#) of the couple did call them “shomer Shabbos,” a term that

denotes full halachic observance, but never quotes them to that effect. Like Jared and Ivanka themselves, the article mentions unplugging and family time.)

So let's break that down. Jared and Ivanka say they unplug for Shabbat: no phone, no computer, no TV. Nowhere do they mention forgoing sports (or not [flying in a plane!](#)). Nowhere do they mention Jewish commandments.

Instead, they talk about the thing many observant Jews value about Shabbat: the chance to disconnect from work stress and their numerous devices, and reconnect with family.

Yes, Jared grew up in Orthodox institutions. Yes, the family now attends an Orthodox synagogue. Yes, they play golf on Shabbat, eat at non-kosher restaurants and don't dress in "Orthodox" garb. And yes, there are many other observant Jews like them — you can find them living in Jewish communities from New York to California to Jerusalem. Frum-shaming people like this doesn't really make sense when they've never actually claimed to be frum.

"Orthodox rabbis have to have that balance," Grussgott said. "We uphold what halachah and observance should be in the abstract — we don't compromise on that — but we have to be accepting of everybody."

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