



Academy of Shem



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The Magnificent Seven

The Seven Laws of Noah are, at their basic level, the most uncomplicated and straightforward religious concept known. No idolatry, no blasphemy, no murder, no stealing, no illicit sex (hold marriage between a man and a woman sacrosanct), do not eat the limb of the living (be kind to animals), and create laws and courts to enforce these laws. That's all there is to it — just be a good, law-abiding person (as the Bible defines it.) What is hateful to yourself, do not do to another. Be a *mensch*, not a *schmuck*.

Yet the concept of the Seven Laws of Noah seem confusing to those who first hear it. Where do the Seven Laws come from? Why not keep the Ten Commandments? Where are the Seven Laws in the Bible? To the non-observant Noahide, it seems odd that the Seven Laws of Noah are not listed in the *Tanach* the way the Ten Commandments are. Why are the Seven Laws not listed in the Torah?

When G-d told Adam, *And G-d commanded man [saying]: "From every tree of the garden you may indeed eat..."* He was transmitting an oral teaching to Adam, who then transmitted it orally to *Havah*, his wife. Likewise, when G-d instructed Noah and his sons, it was an oral teaching. It is obvious that Noah knew more about the Torah than the book of Genesis lets on; Noah knew the difference between *clean* (kosher) and *unclean* animals, for example (Genesis 7:2.) Not until the revelation on Sinai, and the forty years after when Moshe wrote down the Torah, did the Law become a written law. Yet there was much more to the Law than what was in the Written Torah, as Rabbi S. R. Hirsch explains:

“The relationship between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah is the same as that between brief written notes taken on a detailed scientific lecture, and the lecture itself. Students of a discipline who have attended the lecture require only their brief notes to recall the entire lecture at any time. They often find that a word, a question mark, an exclamation mark, a period, or the underscoring of a word is sufficient for this purpose. But for those who did not attend the instructor’s lecture these notes would be of no use whatsoever. If they were to attempt to reconstruct the entire lecture solely from these notes, they would of necessity make many errors. Words, marks, etc., that serve the students who listened to the lecture as most instructive guiding stars for the retention of the truths expounded by the lecturer appear completely meaningless to the uninitiated. The non-initiate who will attempt to use these same notes in order to construct (as opposed to *reconstruct*) for himself the lecture he did not attend and

could not have understood will only dismiss the points of the Law as baseless mental gymnastics and idle speculations leading nowhere.”¹

The task of teaching the Law — the entire Law, both Oral and Written — was also given to the nation of Israel at this time. To teach the *B'nai Noah* was now the responsibility of the Nation of Israel; they were to be the “priests” of mankind, and the Noahides were to be the “laymen” (Exodus 19:6). This was the role that was Divinely appointed for the Jewish people, to not only be an example of what G-d expects of righteous behavior, but to teach the nations the precepts of G-d’s Torah.

Anyone who reads the *Tanach*, what the Christians call the “Old” Testament, knows that G-d holds mankind to a certain level of moral behavior. The punishments meted out to Adam, Cain, the generation of the flood, Sodom, etc., were not arbitrary or illogical punishments of “sinners in the hand of an angry G-d,” but the consequences of violating G-d’s Moral Law that He gave to mankind. Although G-d gave man a moral code, the Torah in its entirety was given to Israel, and many of the 613 *mitzvot* found in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are only for Israel to observe, such as the laws of the *kohanim*,² or the dietary laws such as forbidding the eating of pork, or the sacrificial laws. However, there are also many other laws that have to do with righteous behavior; laws about how one should treat their neighbor, the poor and the widowed and the orphan, how one should conduct business, or how one should respect other people’s property. Individuals (such as Esau,) cities (Sodom and Nineveh,) and even entire nations (Amelek) who fall far short of G-d’s moral standards are contrasted with those that exhibit good moral behavior.

The Torah teaches “*Justice, justice shall you pursue.*” (Deuteronomy 16:20). What is “justice” as the Torah explains it? It is clear in the Torah, and all through the *Tanach*, that the non-Jew is required to have a level of moral behavior, not just in matters of idolatry or illicit sex, but in business transactions, property, wages, etc. *Ramban* wrote: “[G-d] commanded them [Noahides] concerning the laws of theft, overcharging, withholding wages, the laws of bailees and of the rapist or the seducer of minors, the various categories of damages, personal injury, the laws of creditors and debtors, the laws of buying and selling, etc., comparable to the civil laws about which Israel was commanded.” (cf. *Ramban’s* commentary to *Bereishis* 34:13). Not only are Noahides to observe what we view as “religious” laws (such as the laws pertaining to idolatry and blasphemy) but laws that are outside the realm of what we consider “religion.” Noahides are not required to follow the laws of the Torah as strictly as the Jews, but they must be “comparable;” i.e., an approximation if not something quite similar. “[Noahides] are obligated to observe a system of civil law based on returning either the exact amount owed to its rightful owner or arranging a suitable compromise.”³ The question is: how many of the 613 *mitzvot* are the non-Jews supposed to observe? What level of observance are the Noahides to keep in order for them to be “righteous Gentiles?” How much of the Torah’s moral teaching — not spreading slander, for example, or helping an animal in distress, or duty towards one’s parents and children, modesty in dress, not standing idly by if a neighbor is in harm’s way, etc., the things the Torah teaches that separate the righteous from the wicked — were the non-Jews, the Children of Noah, to observe?

When the Oral Law was finally committed to writing about 1800 years ago, the debate about the Noahide Law was not about whether or not there was a moral code for the non-Jew—it is clear to anyone who reads the *Tanach* that there is a standard for moral conduct for all mankind—the debate was: what are the *basic requirements* for being a Righteous Noahide? What laws are the

essential, rock-bottom, bare minimum the *B'nai Noah* must observe to be considered righteous in the eyes of G-d? It was up to the rabbis, the sages of the Talmud, the keepers and teachers of the Oral and Written Torah, to decide what the bare minimum of these laws should be. Therefore the sages of the Talmud determined, through rabbinic exegesis of the Hebrew in *Bereishis* (Genesis) 2:16, that there were seven basic laws for the non-Jew to keep in order to be considered “righteous.” This is why the Seven Laws are not listed in the Written Torah: in order to be a righteous Noahide, it should be obvious that the great body of moral laws in the Torah — laws that cover not only what our society considers “religion” but matters such as business, wages, courts of law — should be followed, if not to the exacting standards expected of the Jews, at least something comparable. The Seven Laws of Noah are the bare minimum, the fundamental “letter of the law” that all non-Jews are responsible for keeping. These seven simple laws; to refrain from idolatry, blasphemy, murder, theft, illicit sex, harming animals unnecessarily, and to establish courts of law, are all that non-Jews are *required* to do. However, the Noahide can (and should) go beyond the letter of the Law and emulate the righteous behavior that is taught in the Torah. Since the applicable Noahide Code in its entirety theoretically encompasses a vast area of the Torah, going far beyond the role of what our secular culture ascribes to “religion,” the particulars (as far as Noahides are concerned) are not worked out in the Talmud. The prodigious number of disparate Noahide societies would have made the working out of the particulars in each society an impossible task — the Talmud is voluminous enough as it is. The nation of Israel was given the responsibility⁴ of teaching the nations the Torah as it applied to the non-Jew. Although it was the responsibility of the rabbis to decide the minimum duties of the Children of Noah rather than the particulars, this freedom of choice was left to the *B'nai Noah*, and the details of the Torah were to be worked out by the Noahides themselves in each and every Noahide society.

To explain what the Noahide Code *is* as far as the Torah is concerned, it would be easier to list what the Noahide is *not* allowed to do:

1. Do not observe the Sabbath in the manner of the Jews
2. Do not observe any of the Jewish holy days in the manner of the Jews.
3. Do not write a Torah scroll.
4. Do not receive an *aliyah* to the Torah at a public gathering.
5. Do not make, write, or wear *tefillin*.
6. Do not make, write, or affix a *mezuzah* to the doorposts of a Noahide dwelling.
7. Do not study the parts of the Torah that do not apply to the Noahide’s service to G-d.⁵

This is the list of what a Noahide is strictly forbidden. The area between the Seven Laws of minimal observance and the list of what is forbidden constitutes large amounts of both Oral and Written Torah. There is so much for the Noahide to learn — the study of the lives of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs in *Bereishis* itself covers a tremendous amount of moral teachings applicable for the Noahide.⁶

G-d, in His infinite wisdom, did not list the Seven Laws in the Written Torah, since Noahides would assume that the Seven Laws were the beginning and end of righteousness, much the same way many Christians believe that all the Law constitutes are the Ten Commandments. The Seven Laws of Noah are certainly the beginning and foundation of righteousness, but it is equally certain that they

are not the fulfillment of righteousness. The path to righteousness is a life-long task, and the Torah is the guide to one's self-improvement; the moral lessons in the Torah are the steps one must climb in order to be closer to G-d. There is always something a person can do to improve their behavior and to become more righteous in the eyes of G-d, and the Seven Laws of Noah are only the foundation and beginning of this goal, not its end.

Notes

1. S. R. Hirsch, commentary to *Shemot* 21:2.
2. The High Priests
3. Schottenstein Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 56b, note 35.
4. An example of this would be Jonah being sent to the *Ninevites* in order to teach them to turn back to the moral conduct expected of them from G-d.
5. There are *mitzvot* in the Torah that only apply to certain groups or individuals, such as the laws of the king of Israel that protect him from the "lust after military glory, after women and after wealth." (Hirsch, *Devarim* 17:16); laws in the Torah such as the laws of the *Kohanim* (High Priests) that do not apply to the rest of the Levites; the laws of the Levites that do not apply to the other eleven tribes of Israel. Some of these *mitzvot*, such as the prohibition of the king (or leader) of Israel to succumb to lust or avarice, seem good for the Noahide to study, particularly to those in a position of leadership; others, such as the *mitzvot* of the priestly service, do not apply to the Noahide's service of G-d. The Noahide's service of G-d consists of *dinin*, the law of social justice, which is in the realm of politics, property, business, etc., not "religion" as we define the term.
6. Artscroll's splendid two-volume *Bereishis* is 2232 pages long, and is the perfect *starting place* for the Noahide's study of the Torah. <http://www.mesorah.com/Books/berh.html>