

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH PROJECT

# The Noahide Laws - Lesson One

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## *Origin and History of the Noahide Laws and the Noahide Movement*



### **A Purposeful Creation**

Existence is purposeful and the life of man has purpose. Obviously, G-d created us for some reason. Without such a reason all existence and life would be without meaning. Therefore, every created thing, both among man and nature, is meaningful because it was created by a purposeful being.<sup>1</sup>

How do we come to understand the meaning of the world around us? How do we find our purpose? G-d revealed to man His vision and expectations in the form of the Torah. By striving to fulfill the Torah's expectations, we fulfill G-d's will and thus realize the meaning and purpose of our existence.

### **Preface**

*These are the products of heaven and the earth... Now all of the trees were not on the earth and all the herb of the field had not yet sprouted, for G-d had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the soil... And Hashem, G-d, formed man of the dust of the earth and blew into his nostrils a living soul; and man became a living being.*

Genesis 2:4-7

G-d created the primordial world unfinished and raw, desiring a partner in its completion. This partner was Adam, the first man, whom G-d charged with His divine commands – His operating rules for the new world.

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<sup>1</sup> *Mesillas Yasharim* 1; Introduction to *Klach Pischei Chochmah*; *Handbook of Jewish Thought* 1:1-3.

**THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH PROJECT  
THE NOAHIDE LAWS | INTRODUCTION TO THE NOAHIDE LAWS | LESSON ONE**

*And the L-rd G-d commanded the man, saying: "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat; for on the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*

Genesis 2:16 – 17

*...accursed is the ground because of you; through suffering shall you eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you... By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread until you return to the ground from which you are taken: For you are dust and to dust shall you return.*

Genesis 3:17 – 19

Despite G-d's hopes, Adam failed. He gave into his own desires over those of G-d, and thus moved the world further from its ideal condition.

G-d, however, is patient. He waited and watched, hopeful that mankind would still uphold His will.

In the ten generations following Adam's sin, man amassed tremendous material victories. However, human society was spiritually and morally corrupt.

*HaShem saw the wickedness of Man was great upon the earth, and that every product of the thoughts of his heart was but evil always. HaShem reconsidered having placed man on the earth, and his heart weighted with sadness.*

Genesis 6:5 – 6

It had chosen a path of rebellion, relegating its Creator and His desires to shadowy memory. From this chaos emerged a single man who remembered.

*But Noah found grace in the eyes of HaShem...Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noah walked with G-d.*

Genesis 6:8-9

This man, Noah, recalled and remained loyal to G-d's initial covenant with His creation. As the surrounding world descended to depths beyond salvation, Noah's star shone out ever brighter among the darkness. G-d realized that Noah was the only hope for His creation. Noah was the only conduit through which the Divine covenant could endure.

*G-d said to Noah: The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with their robbery; behold, I am about to destroy them from the earth... everything that is upon the earth shall expire. But, I shall establish my covenant with you, and you shall enter the ark..*

Genesis 6:13 – 18

The world was thus destroyed, reborn, and entrusted to Noah as its keeper. As the flood waters abated, G-d reaffirmed his covenant with mankind through Noah. This covenant, known as the Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noah – the Seven Divine Commandments of the Children of Noah – is forever known in Noah's name for he, in merit of guarding that covenant, was saved and granted the world anew.

Upon giving the Torah at Sinai, G-d reaffirmed through Moses that the Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noah – the Seven Divine Commandments of the Children of Noah – remained G-d's covenant with the rest of the world.

Due to persecution and exile, the details of the Noahide covenant were reduced to a veiled area of rabbinic study. However, starting in the 20th century, the world has witnessed a resurgent interest in the original covenant between man and his creator. This project is devoted to raising the Noahide laws from their literary sources and creating a complete exposition of their fulfillment. By doing so, we hope to provide the world with a roadmap guiding it back to G-d's original covenant and vision.

## **The Torah's Vision for Mankind**

*G-d made me at the beginning of His way, the first of His works of old.*  
Proverbs 8:22

*I was an Amon beside Him and I was his delight every day, playing before him all the time.*  
Proverbs 8:30

In these verses the Torah speaks in first person, describing its ancient origins. The Midrash gleans two very important points from these verses.

First, from **Proverbs** 8:22, the Midrash learns:

That the Torah was G-d's very first creation, predating G-d's creating of anything else.<sup>2</sup> Why did the Torah need to pre-exist the rest of creation?

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<sup>2</sup> *Bereshis Rabbah* 8:2; *Midrash Tehillim* 90:4. See Rashi to *Mishlei* ibid.

This question is answered by **Proverbs 8:30**:

“I was an *Amon* beside Him and I was his delight every day, playing before him all the time.” The Hebrew term *Amon*, though understood by many commentators as meaning “nursling,” is an ambiguous term. The Hebrew language, especially as used in the holy writings, is extremely precise. Ambiguous terminology is only used when the intent is to convey multiple meanings or layers of meaning. The Midrash explains that *Amon* is a term meaning “an instrument of expertise.”

In the context of a builder or an architect, it would imply a blueprint. Says the Midrash:

*The Torah is saying: I was the instrument of God's expertise. It is the way of the world that when a human king builds a palace, he does not do so from his own knowledge. Rather, he takes counsel with an expert. And even the expert does not build based on his own knowledge, rather from blueprints and diagrams, to know how to lay out the rooms and doorways. So too the Holy One, Blessed is He, looked in the Torah and then created the world...<sup>3</sup>*

From here we learn a fundamental principle of belief: the Torah is the blueprint of creation. It is an expression of G-d's will for the entire universe. All mankind is therefore subject to the Torah's vision for creation and every person, has role to play.

As we know, the Torah codified its expectations for the Jewish people in the form of the 613 commandments. But what is the Torah's vision for the non-Jewish world? The Torah must have one. After all, anything that exists must have been created with purpose. The Torah's expectations for non-Jews are called the *Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noah* – the Seven Commandments of the Children of Noah.

## **The *Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noah* – The Seven Commandments of the Children of Noah**

*And the L-rd G-d commanded the man, saying: “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat; for on the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”*

Genesis 2:16 – 17

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<sup>3</sup> *Bereshtis Rabbah* 1:1

This verse is apparently superfluous since G-d already stated such in 1:29:

*And God said: 'Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed--to you it shall be for food.'*

What is the purpose of such a repetition? The Talmud in Tractate Sanhedrin 56b explains the reasoning, but some words of introduction are needed.

It is an axiom of Torah interpretation that nothing is ever repeated. If one finds a repetition, the repetition must add something new, or be learned differently than the original statement.<sup>4</sup>

In English, these two verses, **Genesis** 2:16 and 1:29 seem to be saying the same thing: you may eat of every tree. However, comparing their Hebrew originals reveals some unusual features. The language of 2:16 viewed against 1:29 is very specific and, indeed, legalistic in tone. The Talmud in **Sanhedrin** 59b, struck by the unusual wording of 2:16, breaks the verse down word-for-word and examines its implications:

Number	Hebrew	Transliteration	English Translation	Talmudic Explanation
1	וַיֹּצַו	<i>Va-yatzav...</i>	And He commanded...	The word <i>va-yatzav</i> is typically used for commandments of civil justice, as in Genesis 18:19. It is out of place in this context and understood by the Talmud to imply the existence of some larger civil code.
2	יְיָ	<i>...Adonoy...</i>	<i>...the L-rd...</i>	This apparently superfluous use of G-d's holy name implies a teaching about the holiness of G-d's name.
3	אֱלֹהִים	<i>...Elohim...</i>	<i>...G-d...</i>	Here, a generic term for god is used. When this term is used for

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<sup>4</sup> The rules and methods of Torah study will be elaborated upon in a future lesson.

				the One True G-d, it is in reference to G-d's attribute and role as judge. However, it is sometimes used generically as a reference to false G-ds, as is <b>Exodus</b> 20:3: "You shall have no other gods..." Used in this context and adjacent to G-d's true name, the Talmud understands it as a reference to the prohibition of idolatry.
4	עַל הָאָדָם-	... <i>al ha-Adam</i> ...	...unto Adam...	The word <i>Adam</i> means both the name of the first man and is the generic term for humankind. Used here in conjunction to two divine names, it implies the sanctity of human life, as in <b>Genesis</b> 9:6: "Whoever sheds the blood of man..."
5	לְרַמָּא	... <i>laymor</i> ...	...saying...	This word is doubly redundant. It doesn't need to state "saying" in this verse, nor do we need the verse in the first place! Therefore, it must be referring to something especially vital. Among the most serious commandments of the Torah are those involving sexual misconduct. We see the term <i>laymor</i> used often in reference to these commandments,

				as in <b>Jeremiah</b> 3:1, for example.
6	מִכֹּל עֵץ-וְגֵן	... <i>mi-kol eytz ba-gan...</i>	...of every tree of the garden...	G-d qualified His permission to eat of “every tree,” limiting it to those “of the garden,” implying that the fruit of other trees is prohibited. This restriction of benefit, by virtue of G-d’s rights as owner, implies the concept of theft.
7	אָכַל תַּלְכָּא	<i>Akhol tokhayl.</i>	...you shall surely eat.	This expression is what is called <i>lashon kafula</i> , a double expression, where a verb is doubled in two forms. These unusual expressions always imply something else in the form of: “you may do _____, but specifically not _____.” In this case, the verse implies that one may eat of the trees of the garden, but specifically may not eat of a limb taken from a living animal.

Through further examination and analysis, the Talmud derives additional proofs, sources, and examples for the existence of a universal code of religious law governed by seven general concepts. We enumerate them here based on their derivation in the above table:

1. Man must establish courts of justice and maintain law.
2. It is prohibited to curse the name of G-d.
3. It is prohibited to worship false gods.
4. It is prohibited to murder another human being.
5. It is prohibited to engage in immoral sexual relations.

6. It is prohibited for one to benefit from property that is not his (meaning stealing and theft are forbidden).
7. One may not eat of a limb torn from a living animal.

In future lessons we will explore the derivation of these seven laws in extensive detail. We will also see, due to the nature of their derivation, that they are categories and not individual laws. These categories break down into further subcategories and laws<sup>5</sup>.

## Ancient Noahide History

It is obvious that there was a divine law in place prior to the giving of the Torah. After all, murder must have been prohibited, for Cain was punished for killing Abel.<sup>6</sup> The generation of the flood was punished for widespread robbery, among other lapses.<sup>7</sup> The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed for extensive wickedness<sup>8</sup> and, in particular, sexual misconduct.<sup>9</sup>

We see, therefore, that G-d had expectations for man prior to the giving of the Torah. Though ancient sources are scarce, there are references from the time of the second temple onwards regarding non-Jewish worshipers of Hashem. These non-Jewish worshipers, known as the **Phebomenoi** (φοβουμενοι τον θεον), or Heaven-Fearers,<sup>10</sup> apparently adhered to the Noahide laws. Besides Talmudic and Mishnaic references, their existence is also cited in the first century C.E. writings of **Josephus Flavius**.<sup>11</sup> At about the same time, the Roman satirists Gaius Petronius Arbiter and **Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis** mocked those Romans

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<sup>5</sup> In many ways, the *Sheva Mitzvos* may be conceived as *avos* which extend into further *toldos*, similar to the laws of Shabbat.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 4:1-12

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 6:5-13

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 13:13, 18:20 – 22; See Yalkut Shimoni: Bereishit 83, Sanhedrin 109a and Genesis Rabbah 48 for further examples of the cruelty and sin of Sodom and Gemorah.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 19:5.

<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, known as *sebomenoi* (σεβομενοι), *theosebēs* (θεοσεβης) or *theophobēs* (θεοφοβεις) in some sources.

<sup>11</sup> *The Jewish Wars* II: 454, 463, and VII: 45; *Antiquities* XIV: 110 and XX: 41; *Against Apion* I:166,167, and II:282.

who adopted Jewish beliefs and philosophy yet refused circumcision and full conversion.



The most important archaeological evidence of Noahide practice was discovered in 1976 in Aphrodisias, Turkey. Two inscriptions (see image, left), dating from approximately 210 C.E., were discovered in an ancient synagogue. The first inscription is a list of synagogue founders, all with Jewish names common to the period. The second inscription, however, is a list of non-Jewish names such as Zeno, Athenogoras, and Diogenes. This inscription is prefaced with the words: “And these are those who are G-d Fearers...” A similar inscription was discovered in the ancient ruined synagogue of Sardis, Turkey. This inscription lists three groups: Jews, converts, and observers of the Noahide laws.

However, with the gradual ascent of church power and ever increasing persecution and dispersion of the Jewish community, the observance of the Noahide faith fell by the wayside. With the exception of a few individual cases, the Noahide faith did not reappear again until the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Aimé Pallière & Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh

Noahide practice reemerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the fortuitous meeting of **Aimé Pallière** (1868-1949) and Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh (1822-1900). Pallière had lost faith in Catholic doctrine and began a personal search for religious truth. After being exposed to authentic Torah study in his home town of Lyon, he became interested in conversion to Judaism. For family reasons, conversion was a remote option and Pallière found himself in deep spiritual conflict. His friends in the Jewish community suggested that he contact Rabbi **Eliyahu Benamozegh**, Rabbi of the Sephardic community of Leghorn, Italy. **R' Benamozegh** offered **Pallière** a solution to his crisis in the form of the Noahide laws:

*We Jews have in our keeping the religion destined for the entire human race, the religion to which the Gentiles are subject and by which they are to be saved, as were our Patriarchs before the giving of the Law. Could you suppose that the true religion which God destines for all humanity is only the property of a special people? Not at all. His*

*plan is much greater than that. The religion of humanity is no other than "Noachism," not because it was founded by Noah, but because it was through the person of that righteous man that God's covenant with humanity was made. This is the path that lies before your efforts, and indeed before mine, as it is my duty to spread the knowledge of it also.*<sup>12</sup>

Though they only met once, Pallière and R' Benamozegh corresponded extensively over the next three years until R' Benamozegh's passing. Their exchanges formed the core of Pallière's book *Le sanctuaire inconnu*, 'The Unknown Sanctuary, which develops many ideas proposed by R' Benamozegh in his *Israël et l'Humanité*, Israel and Humanity.

Pallière and Benamozegh's thought influenced many to consider the Noahide faith. Subsequently, a few Noahide societies appeared in Europe devoted to the study of Pallière and Benamozegh's ideas. However, this movement came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of World War II.

It is important to note that, while Pallière and Benamozegh's conception of the Noahide laws is of historical importance, it is not entirely consonant with standard Jewish theology and outlook. Throughout his career R' Benamozegh, and Pallière to a large extent, worked to create a "universalist" theology of Judaism.

This view sought to resolve conflicts between Jewish, Christian, and Moslem beliefs into a single unified Jewish theology.<sup>13</sup> Benamozegh used the Noahide laws as an important element in accomplishing this goal. Though their conclusions on Noahide practice and identity are not definitive,<sup>14</sup> their work was nevertheless of great importance.

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<sup>12</sup> Aimé Pallière in *Le sanctuaire inconnu*.

<sup>13</sup> The liberality of Benamozegh's theology, as evidenced in *Israël et l'Humanité* and in his other voluminous writings, is deeply problematic and needs to be studied in greater detail. Despite their popularity in Noahide circles, Benamozegh's writings are almost entirely unknown to mainstream Judaism. They have only recently become known to contemporary authorities and experts as a result of increased interest in the Noahide laws.

<sup>14</sup> An example is Pallière's own conception of Noahide practice, which was somewhat different than what might be expected. Though a Noahide, he admits in *Le sanctuaire inconnu* that he remained a practicing Catholic, even accepting regular communion. Several explanations have been proffered of Pallière's apparently dual religious allegiances. However, these explanations all fail for one of two reasons: either 1) they are based on erroneous assumptions about Christianity, or 2) they are based on a flawed understanding of the laws of idolatry as they apply to non-Jews. Indeed, there is no satisfactory way of explaining Pallière's practice within the context of standard Torah thought. However, his situation is acceptable, perhaps even laudable, within the universalist thought of R' Benamozegh. This is one example of the many difficulties underlying R' Benamozegh's theology.

## Vendyl Jones (1930 – 2010)



Vendyl Jones became, somewhat unintentionally, the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest spokesperson for Noahide observance.<sup>15</sup>

In 1956 Jones resigned his position as pastor of his Baptist church, having begun to question his faith. Though he held advanced degrees in theology and biblical studies, Vendyl decided to restart his entire religious education from scratch. Moving his family to South Carolina, he started taking classes at a local Talmud Torah (Jewish elementary school). As he gained facility in Torah study and Hebrew, he sought guidance from local rabbis in observance of the Noahide laws. Jones steadily developed a very sophisticated Noahide religious identity.

In the 1960's Jones became deeply involved in archaeological pursuits, eventually moving his family to Israel to continue his studies at Hebrew University. Over the next three decades he embarked on a number of important excavations.

Although his primary mission was his archaeology, his personal religious example reignited interest in the Seven Mitzvos. It is difficult to overstate Vendyl's importance to the modern Noahide movement. He not only inspired innumerable non-Jews to explore the Torah's expectations, but also brought the Noahide laws back onto the rabbinic radar. Since the destruction of the temple, Noahide observance had become exceedingly rare. Naturally, rabbinic knowledge of these laws became correspondingly scarce. Vendyl's personal quest to understand the Noahide obligations inspired many rabbis to reopen these long abandoned areas of study.

As a result of his sincere beliefs and honest quest for truth, Vendyl became the de facto father of the modern Noahide movement.

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<sup>15</sup> Jones confided to this author, and others that knew him well, his surprise that the public was more interested in his Noahide identity than his archaeology. Vendyl was strongly principled, yet exceedingly humble in his religious faith, and seemed almost unaware of the deep impression his example had made on the world.

## The Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century Rabbi Moshe Weiner of Jerusalem published, in Hebrew, the first major compendium of Noahide laws and beliefs: the *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem*. Intended for rabbinic scholars, this three-volume work is the first coherent presentation of the foundational principles of Noahide practice.

In 2011, selections of the work were translated and published in English as *The Divine Code*.

The publication of the *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem* and *The Divine Code* mark an important turning point in the Noahide movement. Although the Noahide movement has been growing for the past several decades, it has had difficulty attracting the attention of mainstream Judaism's leaders and scholars. Rabbi Weiner's book provides a point of contact between mainstream Judaism's scholarly community and the Noahide movement, reintroducing Noahide scholarship to the arena of *halachic* (Jewish legal) discourse.

In the next lesson we will further examine the origins of the Noahide laws, how one becomes a Noahide, and the comparative roles of Jews and Noahides.

## Summary of the Lesson

1. G-d has a purpose for both Jews and non-Jews. Jews discover and fulfill that purpose through the 613 divine commandments given to them, while non-Jews do so through the 7 commandments given to them. These 7 commandments encompass an array of details beyond the 7 basic principles that they appear to be.
2. There is evidence, both written and archaeological, of communities of Noahide adherents from biblical times through the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. The Church's ascent to power eliminated these communities. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Noahide observance and identity would remain rare.
3. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Aimé Pallière & Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh reintroduced Noahide observance to Europe. Their writings on the role of the Noahide laws in modern society are important.

However, their vision of Noahide identity and practice is heavily colored by Universalist religious thought prevalent in Europe at the time.

4. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vendyl Jones became the impetus and rallying point for the resurgent interest in Noahide observance, leaving a deep impact on the course of the Noahide movement.
5. Rabbi Moshe Weiner, in 2001, began compiling the *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem*, the first major compilation of authentic sources pertaining to the Noahide laws.

## Questions and Answers

1. **I do not understand the need for this program. We have Rabbi Weiner's *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem* – a *Shulchan Aruch* (authentic code of law) for Noahide observance. What can this program possibly add?**

Rabbi Weiner's *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem* is a monumental work of Torah scholarship and one which deserves a place of honor in the literature pertaining to the Noahide laws. It will be quoted from and discussed in many places in this program. Its weight rests primarily upon the *Geonic* and *Rishonic* derivations of the Noahide laws, yet does not delve into the extensive body of *sheelos u-Teshuvos* (response literature) pertaining to these laws. In this respect, it is comparable to the *Shulchan Aruch* – it is a foundational work, requiring further analysis and commentary, yet is by no means the end of the conversation.