

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH LEARNING  
PROJECT

# The Noahide Laws – Lesson Two

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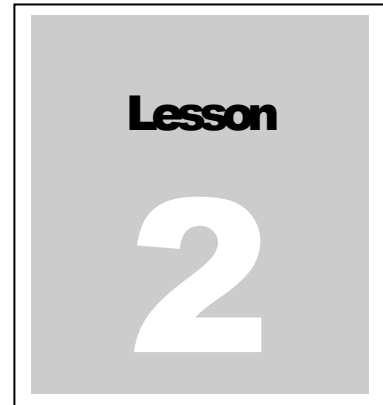
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## *An Overview of Noahide History*



### **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>1</sup> The generation of the flood was punished for widespread robbery, among other lapses.<sup>2</sup> The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed for extensive wickedness<sup>3</sup> and, in particular, sexual misconduct.<sup>4</sup>

We see, therefore, that God had expectations for man prior to the giving of the Torah. The Torah itself enumerates these expectations in many places:

*God blessed them and God said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply..."*  
Genesis 1:28 see also Genesis 9:1

*...but of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad you must not eat...*  
Genesis 2:17

*But flesh, with its soul, its blood, you shall not eat.*

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

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 6:5-13

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 13:13, 18:20 – 22; See [Yalkut Shimoni](#): Bereishit 83, [Sanhedrin 109a](#) and [Genesis Rabbah 50](#) for further examples of the cruelty and sin of Sodom and Gemorah.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 19:5.

Genesis 9:4

Though ancient sources are scarce, there are references from the time of the second temple onwards to non-Jewish worshipers of the Jewish god. These non-Jewish worshipers, known as the *Phebomenoi* (φοβουμενοι τον θεον), or Heaven-Fearers,<sup>5</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 [Joesphus Flavius](#).<sup>6</sup> At about the same time, the Roman satirists Gaius Petronius Arbiter and Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis mocked those Romans who adopted Jewish beliefs and philosophy yet refused circumcision and full conversion.



The most important archaeological evidence of a Noahide community 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 God 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. We know almost nothing about these ancient groups or their specific modes of observance.

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

<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, known as *sebomenoi* (σεβομενοι), *theosebes* (θεοσεβης) or *theophobes* (θεοφοβεις) in some sources.

<sup>6</sup> *The Jewish Wars* II: 454, 463, and VII: 45; *Antiquities* XIV: 110 and XX: 41; *Against Apion* I: 166,167, and II: 282.

## Aimé Pallière & Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh



Noahism reemerged a religious identity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the meeting of Aimé Pallière (1868-1949, photo below) and [Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh](#) (1822-1900, photo left). 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 converting to Judaism. For family reasons, conversion was a remote option and Pallière found himself in deep spiritual crisis. 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 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 "Noahism," 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>7</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 developed 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. However, this movement came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of World War II.

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<sup>7</sup> Aimé Pallière in *Le sanctuaire inconnu*.

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 Jewish theology and outlook. R' Benamozegh's theology could be, generously, called unconventional. Throughout his career R' Benamozegh, and Pallière to a large extent, was trying to create a "universalist" theology of Judaism.

This idea sought to resolve conflicts between Jewish, Christian, Moslem, and even pagan beliefs into a single unified Jewish theology.<sup>8</sup> Benamozegh used the Noahide laws as an important element in this goal. Their writings are of some historical importance. However, their vision of Noahism, both in practice and identity, present many issues.<sup>9</sup>

## Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a few major Torah scholars authored studies on the Noahide laws. These are important touchstones for anyone looking to attain a thorough understanding of the Noahide precepts. The two most significant are the *Kuntres Ner Mitzvah*, by [Rabbi Meir Dan Plotzki](#) (published in his larger work, the *Kli Chemda*) and the discussion of the Noahide Laws in the *Mitzvos HaShem* by [Rabbi Yonasan Shteif](#).

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Noahide issues were discussed sporadically by a number of Torah authorities. Most notably, [Rabbi Moshe Feinstein](#), one of Judaism's greatest decisors of Torah law, wrote a number of important responsa on the Noahide laws. This material is found in many places in his *Igros Moshe* and is foundational to a practical understanding of the Noahide laws.

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<sup>8</sup> The liberality of Benamozegh's theology, as evidenced in *Israël et l'Humanité* and in his other writings, is deeply problematic and needs to be studied in greater detail. Despite their popularity in Noahide circles, his 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>9</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 context of R' Benamozegh's universalist vision of religion. This is one example of the many difficulties underlying R' Benamozegh's theology.

## Vendyl Jones (1930 – 2010)

Vendyl Jones is arguably the most important figure in the resurrection of Noahism as a religious identity. His impact and importance as a scholar, teacher, and, especially, as personal example are difficult to overstate.

Jones began his career as pastor of a Baptist church. He resigned his pulpit in 1956 after wrestling with deep doubts as to his Christian 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 enrolled in 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 grounded firmly in Torah study and worldview.



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.

Through his lectures on biblical archaeology, publications, lectures, and weekly classes, he not only inspired innumerable non-Jews to explore Noahism, but also brought the Noahide laws back onto the rabbinic radar. Since the destruction of the temple, Noahide observance had become exceedingly rare and 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 is regarded by most Noahides and many Rabbis as the father of the modern Noahide movement.



## Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (1902 - 1994)

In 1984 [Rabbi Schneersohn](#) (the last leader of the Chassidic court of [Lubavitch](#)), called upon the larger Rabbinic community to engage in the study and dissemination of the Noahide laws. His article, published in the rabbinic journal *HaPardes*,<sup>10</sup> made a deep impression within his own movement, Chabad Lubavitch. Many Chabad Rabbis began studying and teaching the Noahide laws in earnest (indeed Chabad Lubavitch has long held an edge in the study and teaching of Noahism). The Rebbe also spoke and

wrote on the Noahide laws, outlining many of the fundamental principles. His teachings were collected and published as *Kol Bo'ai HaOlam* by Rabbi C. Miller.

The Rebbe further encouraged the creation of authoritative compendia of Noahide law. However, for a number of reasons such a work did not materialize.

## The Aftermath of the Rebbe's Call

Though many in Chabad Lubavitch embraced the Rebbe's call-to-action, Rabbi Schneersohn's article was largely ignored by the rest of the Jewish world. This lack of response must be viewed in the context of the time. 1984 was only 39 years after the catastrophic destruction of European Jewry. At that time, the Jewish world was engaged in an intense struggle to re-establish Torah education and observance in the US. As well, the Jewish community was deeply involved in outreach to the vast population of unaffiliated American Jews. It was "all hands on deck" time for the Jewish community. Given limited resources and pressing needs, Noahide outreach was not a priority.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the rabbinic community did

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<sup>10</sup> *Sheva Mitzvot Shel Benai Noach, HaPardes* 59:9 (5745)

<sup>11</sup> Lubavitch, it should be noted, was far ahead of other Jewish groups in post-holocaust rebuilding. If any group was, at that time, in a position to reach out to Noahides it certainly would have been Lubavitch,.



not find Rabbi Schneersohn's key argument (that there exists today a Torah obligation to seek non-Jewish observance of the Noahide laws) convincing.<sup>12</sup>

While the Jewish mainstream did not embrace Noahide outreach, the fringe of the Jewish world took a deep interest in it. These groups, however, taught interpretations of the Noahide laws that were heavily colored by their own ideologies and beliefs. Additionally, many of these organizations realized that, by teaching Noahism in a way that catered to what Noahides wanted to hear, they could build a support base among non-Jews. These groups, for the most part, had not succeeded in building support within the Jewish world. With the Noahide laws, they had a tool to build support and following for their beliefs among non-Jews.

What do we mean by fringe organizations? There are a number of movements within the Jewish world who view the establishment of the State of Israel as proof that we are in messianic (or semi-messianic) times. These groups advocate that Jews and non-Jews should behave, to various degrees, as if we are in Messianic (or semi-messianic) times.<sup>13</sup>

However, justifying such positions requires extensive re-interpretation of classic Torah texts and beliefs. It also requires novel and questionable interpretations of Torah law. Because of their extreme reinterpretations of established beliefs and texts, the mainstream views of these groups have ranged from them being harmless eccentrics to espousing dangerous corruptions of the Torah.

## The Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century

By the late 1990's and early 2000's, a number of things were occurring in the Jewish and Noahide worlds:

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<sup>12</sup> For a critical survey of the sources involved, see [Rabbi Michael J. Broyde's "The Obligation of Jews to Seek Observance of Noahide Laws by Gentiles: A Theoretical Review"](#) in *Tikkun olam: social responsibility in Jewish thought and law*. Edited by David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman and Nathan J. Diament. Northvale, N.J. : Jason Aronson, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> All Jews certainly hope and pray that the establishment of the State is part of the redemption. However, a number of specific things must occur before we can say with certainty whether or not we are in the actual redemption (we will discuss this more in a future lesson). To date, no events proving such have occurred. However, many groups have re-written or reinterpreted the standard understanding of the redemption to argue that we are, in fact, in the redemptive era. To believe such, and to act upon that assertion, requires stepping outside the boundaries of normative Jewish thought and practice.

- **Among Non-Jews** – Beginning in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the non-Jewish world has experienced a wave of disillusionment with Christianity. Many ex-Christians, feeling betrayed by their religious upbringing, sought connection with the Torah, coming to view it no longer as the “Old Testament,” but as the “Original Testament.” In the American south and southwest, in particular, non-Jews began approaching Rabbis seeking to understand the Torah.
- **In the Jewish Mainstream** – Although the Jewish world is still engaged heavily in establishing itself and reaching out to unaffiliated Jews, increasing interest from non-Jews has pushed Noahism “onto the radar.” A number of important Torah scholars and experts on Torah law have recently turned their attention to Noahism.
- **Awareness of the Fringe** – As the Jewish mainstream has become increasingly aware of the Noahide movement; it has also become aware of the extreme problems and inaccuracies in way the Noahide laws have been presented to date. Unfortunately, due to the mainstream’s two-decade absence from Noahism, the Noahide movement had become dominated by fringe groups. These groups have succeeded in selling themselves to Noahides as valid authorities on Torah and Noahism. In the early 2000’s, these fringe groups started to come under fire from the Jewish mainstream. Their response has been to wage increasingly desperate and eccentric campaigns to hold onto their Noahide supporters.<sup>14</sup>

Between the increasing numbers of Noahides, and the problems with how Noahism had been presented by many groups, it became clear that something was missing. To date, no one had undertaken a significant, practical analysis of the totality of Torah literature on Noahism. Without such an analysis, anyone discussing the Noahide laws was doing so “in a vacuum.” It also meant that there was no standard by which ideas could be compared to determine their legitimacy. This situation confirmed the Rebbe’s tremendous foresight in calling for a full, authoritative compendia of Noahide law.

## **The *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem* – The Seven Divine Commandments**

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ask Noah International (ASI) took the initiative to fulfill the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s desire for a complete exposition of Noahide law. They

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<sup>14</sup> These antics include attempting to reestablish the Sanhedrin and even entirely redefining established concepts in Torah law (such as *ger toshan* and *ger tzedek*).

tasked the well-known Jerusalem scholar, Rabbi Moshe Weiner, with the halakhic (Torah law) research and writing of the work. This monumental project cumulated with the publication in Hebrew the first major *halakhic* (practical) exploration of Noahide laws and beliefs: the *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem*. This three-volume work was the first major presentation of the foundational principles of Noahism.

His work is a survey of nearly everything every written in classical Torah sources on the Noahide laws, how they are to be understood, and how they are to be fulfilled. The most important achievement of the *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos* is that it successfully distills a framework for determining legitimate Noahide practice and identity.

We must keep in mind that for over 1500 years Noahism did not exist as a religious identity. Whatever Noahism may have once been, it effectively went extinct in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Like Judaism, Noahism has foundational principles upon which it is built. These principles are found in the core texts of the Torah and Talmud. In order to rebuild Noahism, these foundational principles must be brought out into the light. Any attempt to resurrect Noahism without a solid textual foundation is doomed to failure. Yet, with these foundations in place, the beliefs and identities of Noahism can be rebuilt and made to flourish.

Before the publication of the *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem*, the Noahide movement had no scholarly basis upon which to grow and rebuild.

The publication of the *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem* is also important in that it provided a point of contact between mainstream Judaism's scholarly community and the Noahide movement, reintroducing Noahide scholarship to the arena of *halakhic* (Torah law) discourse.

In 2011, selections of the *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem* were translated and published in English as *The Divine Code*.

Since its publication a number of further studies have been produced. Of particular importance is the *Toldos Noach* by Rabbi Eliezer Baruch.

## The Current Situation in Noahide Outreach

Noahide outreach today has become deeply polarized. There are essentially two approaches:

- **Approach #1: Noahism as Judaizing** – The approach advocated by many groups outside of the Jewish mainstream has been one of Judaizing; encouraging Noahides to imitate Jewish practices and symbols (such as

Shabbat observance, building *sukkot*, etc.) This approach is problematic for two reasons:

- 1) **Torah Law** – There are a number of principles of Torah law, established from time immemorial, that restrict Judaizing, the imitation or adoption of Jewish practices by non-Jews. The transgression of these rules is severe; some even carry the penalty of death at the hands of heaven! Rather than help and assist Noahides in developing and establishing a positive, uniquely Noahide identity, many of the aforementioned fringe groups have simply offered Noahides Jewish rituals and claimed that they are legitimate Noahide observances. When challenged as to the legitimacy of this approach, these groups have resorted to increasingly strange defenses of their actions.
- 2) **An Existential Contradiction** – Advocating the imitation of Jewish practices as an expression of Noahide identity creates a deep existential contradiction. If Noahism is God’s will and the Torah’s relevance for all of mankind, then it must have universal meaning. Why then, define Noahism using the narrow, specific experiences of the Jewish people? For example, let’s look at the Torah’s festivals. The Jewish observances of the festivals are uniquely bound up with the history and experience of the Jewish people. Yet, the Mishnah<sup>15</sup> tells us that the festivals also have universal relevance. The universal meaning and the Jewish meaning of the festivals, though, is not always the same. Sukkot is an excellent example of this duality. The Mishnah<sup>16</sup> tells us that the world is judged for water on Sukkot. Additionally, Sukkot is also the holiday on which Israel gave offerings to gain atonement for the non-Jewish nations. These aspects of the holiday are universal and directly relevant to Noahides. However, the building of and dwelling within a *sukkah* (the festive booths built on the holiday) is unique to Israel alone. After all, dwelling within a *sukkah* commemorates the return of the clouds of glory after the building of the tabernacle. By encouraging Noahides to adopt Jewish observances (i.e. building a sukkah), the universal meaning of the holiday is constricted and supplanted with the specific Jewish meaning. If Noahism is universally relevant, then its meaning must be kept universal and not constrained to the Jewish experience. Encouraging Noahides to imitate Jewish rituals creates an

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<sup>15</sup> Rosh HaShanah 1:2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

existential conflict. Is Noahism about the universal experience of mankind, or is Noahism defined only by the Jewish experience?

- **Approach #2: Defining Boundaries** – In what appears to be a reaction to the first approach, many in the mainstream Jewish world have taken a very conservative stance. These groups have sought to define Noahism primarily by what it is not and what it cannot be. Their mission is to explain where the boundaries lay between Judaism and Noahism, and the lines that Noahides may not cross. From a scholarly perspective, the details of this approach are absolutely correct. However, this approach overlooks an important need in the modern Noahide community: **Noahides today crave positive expressions of their faith.** There is great value and necessity in defining the boundaries of Noahide identity. However, such a negative definition does not provide a route for positive religious expression. This craving for positive religious expression has been specifically exploited by the first approach. The first approach offers Noahides positive affirmations of their faith via imitations of Jewish ritual. Though illegitimate from a perspective of Torah law, this imitation of Jewish ritual fulfills a vitally important need within the Noahide heart. Additionally, by not providing a positive model for the growth of Noahism, this second approach may drive away Noahides looking for an authentic Torah approach to the Noahide laws.

In summary, the central issue in Noahide outreach today is that of finding positive, acceptable, modes of Noahide religious expression. Approach #1 offers Noahides a positive expression of their faith by encouraging them to imitate Jewish ritual. Though deeply problematic, this approach fills an important need. Approach #2 is absolutely correct from a perspective of Torah belief and law, yet does not meet the religious needs of modern Noahides.

## The Approach of this Course

This course does not seek to enter into the debate between the two aforementioned approaches (although we may occasionally point out issues and questions raised by both approaches). This course takes a practical, source-based approach with the following goals:

- To clarify the exact definition and identity of a “Noahide” in our times,
- To explain the fundamental principles of Noahism and the derivation of the Noahide laws,

- To explain the universal themes of the Torah and holidays and the ways in which Noahides may give legitimate, positive expression to these themes within the expectations of Torah law,
- To define which areas of Noahism need more growth on behalf of the Noahide community to create positive expressions of their faith.

The goal of this course is not to be the definitive, final word on Noahism. Instead, this course seeks to provide Noahides and the rabbinic community with a foundation, a sense of direction, and with clearly defined goals.

Noahism must be viewed realistically. It has been functionally extinct for 1500 years, denied the opportunity to develop and grow. While Judaism developed liturgies, customs, and symbols of its faith, Noahism did not. It will take many, many decades for Noahism to fully resurrect itself and come to a religious consensus. As things stand now, there are numerous gaps in Noahism. These gaps will eventually be filled in via cooperation between the Rabbinic and Noahide communities. This course seeks to outlay a course for this growth and cooperation.

## **Summary of the Lesson**

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson in 1984 called upon the rabbinic community to study and teach the Noahide laws to gentiles. While Rabbis within his own movement embraced this call, most of the rabbinic community did not follow suit.

5. There are two polarized approaches to Noahism today. One, from outside the Jewish mainstream, encourages imitation of Jewish ritual. The other, seeks to define the boundaries of Noahism. Both approaches contain flaws and merits. The biggest issue with them both, however, is that they do not provide guidance for legitimate, positive expressions of Noahide faith.
6. Rabbi Moshe Weiner, in 2001, began compiling the *Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem*, [the Seven Divine Commandments] the first major compilation and analysis of authentic sources pertaining to the Noahide laws.