

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH LEARNING
PROJECT

The Noahide Laws – Lesson Three



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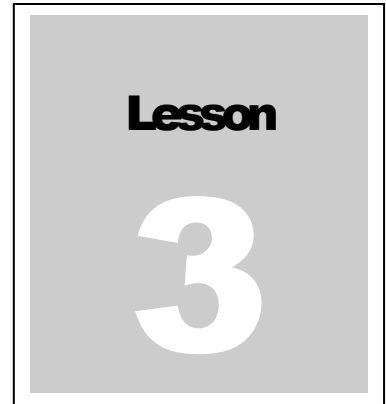
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Gentile Identities in the Torah



Introduction

The exact meaning of Noahide identity is a deep matter that will be examined in detail in future lessons. However, it is important at this point, to provide working definitions of the various non-Jewish identities found throughout the Torah and Talmud.

Non-Jews in the Torah: Many Identities

Words have very different meanings when used in technical versus colloquial contexts. For example, “accurate” and “precise” are used in everyday speech to mean the same thing. However, they have very different meanings in a scientific context. Similarly, most people hear “challah” and think of the braided loaves of bread used on the Sabbath. However, in the Talmud and other works that determine religious practice “challah” refers specifically to the dough tithed given to *Kohanim*, priests, in the times of the temple (see Numbers 15:17-21).

The Torah uses many terms for non-Jews and, within the context of Jewish law, these terms have very specific meanings. However, the use of these terms in Kabbalistic (mystical), [Midrashic](#), and other non-legal writings is much less controlled. It takes a trained, experienced Rabbinic scholar to determine when these terms have their legal and practical meanings versus colloquial and metaphoric connotations.

Idolaters & Idolatry

The Torah and Jewish law are, by necessity, very concerned with defining idolatry and the identity of the idolater. Anyone who worships idols is, of course, an idolater.

Idolatry, however, manifests itself in a number of forms. It can be either modes of worship or systems of belief. Engaging in idolatrous practices, such as bowing before a statue, are prohibited even if one doesn't believe in what he is doing.

Similarly, idolatrous beliefs, such as believing that God manifests or has ever manifested Himself corporeally, are prohibited.

An idolater is referred to using a variety of terms in the Torah and Talmud, the most common being *Akum*. *Akum* is an acronym for *Aveid Kokhavim U-Mazalos* – one who serves stars and constellations. However, it is used to refer to any idolater and is sometimes a general term for non-Jews. A lesser known term is *nochri*, which carries a similar connotation.

***Ger Tzedek* – A Righteous Convert**

The word *Ger* has many meanings. The verb root from which it derives implies sojourning. However, in its noun form it means a stranger or outsider. When used alone, *Ger* almost always means a convert. When *Ger* is in any way used together with the word *Toshev*, it means a *Ger Toshev*, something entirely different than a convert (we will discuss *Ger Toshev* at length in this lesson). The Talmud devotes extensive analysis to determining correct interpretations of the Torah's use of the term *Ger*. For clarity, the Talmud qualifies its own use of *Ger* with the term *Tzedek*, meaning a righteous convert. The term *Ger Tzedek*, as used in the Talmud and codes of Jewish law, means exclusively a full convert to Judaism.¹

If a *ger tzedek* is a full convert to Judaism, then why does the Talmud call them a *ger tzedek* and not simply a “Jew?” The reason is that a convert is not 100% identical to a born Jew. For example, a female convert may not marry a *Kohen* (descendant of Aharon).² A convert may also not serve in a position of communal authority (such as being a synagogue Rabbi)³ nor sit on a *beis din* (Rabbinic tribunal). For the purposes of discussing the laws involved, the Talmud must have some way to distinguish a convert from a born Jew. We should note also, that is no other term in Hebrew for convert – only *ger tzedek*.

¹ The term *Ger Tzedek* is used in five places in the Babylonian Talmud ([Bava Metzia 71a](#), [Bava Metzia 111b](#), [Gittin 57b](#), [Yevamos 48b](#), and [Sanhedrin 96b](#)) and twice in the Jerusalem Talmud ([Bava Metzia 5:4](#) and [9:10](#)). It's only meaning here and in all later *halakhic* codes is a full convert to Judaism.

² Maimonides, *Issurei Biab* 18:1.

³ Maimonides, *Hilchos Melakhim* 1:4.

Many articles and lectures have been recently produced that attempt to expand the definition of *Ger*. However, the methods and conclusions of these authors are without merit and beyond the pale of mainstream Torah thought. The fact that their conclusions are contradicted by the preceding 2000 years of Torah scholarship is one of many strong rebuttals to such a position.

Ben Noach, Bat Noach, Bnei Noach

Ben Noach and *Bat Noach* mean, respectively, a Son of Noah and a Daughter of Noah. *Bnei Noach* is the plural form of both of these terms. In English, the term used for a *Ben* or *Bat Noach* is Noahide. These are generic terms for any non-Jew who keeps the Seven Mitzvos for any reason or motivation. There are different types of *Bnei Noach*:

- *MiChakhamei Umos HaOlam*
- *MiChasidei Umos HaOlam*

MiChakhmei Umos HaOlam – The Wise Ones of the Nations

One who keeps the Seven Mitzvos because they are logical and make societal sense is called *MiChakhamei Umos HaOlam* – From the Wise Ones of the Nations. Such a *Ben Noach* receives only a very limited portion in the World to Come⁴ for his observance. He receives most of his merit in this world.⁵

MiChasidei Umos HaOlam – The Pious Who Receive a Share in the World to Come

The Talmud in [Sanhedrin 105a](#) proves that the *Umos Ha-Olam*, the gentile nations, have a share in the World to Come if they are *Chasidim*, pious. Therefore, a non-Jew who keeps the Seven Mitzvos [Commandments] is called *MiChasidei Umos HaOlam*, of the Pious Non-Jews, and he receives reward in the World to Come. However, he only merits this reward if he accepts and observes his *mitzvos* from the viewpoint that they were transmitted and reaffirmed to the world via Moses at Sinai.

⁴ The future messianic era.

⁵ The nature of the reward for “The Wise Ones” is subject to many interpretations. The many discussions of the subject would certainly agree, though, to the description we have provided here. See Maharal in *Tiferes Yisrael* and *Derech HaShem* II:4

One who keeps the Seven Mitzvos only on account of the original covenant with Adam and Noah will still receive reward. However his reward will be of a lesser form and he will not be considered *MiChasidei Umos HaOlam*, of the Pious Non-Jews.

How Does One Become a *Ben Noach*?

To become a Noahide, one must accept the Seven Mitzvos upon himself from a conviction that they are divinely ordained, having been commanded to the world by God, through Moses, who reaffirmed the covenant sealed with Adam and then Noah. By accepting the Seven Mitzvos as such, one becomes *MiChasidei Umos HaOlam*, a Pious Gentile, and the highest status attainable by a *Ben Noach*.

While any personal acceptance of the Seven Mitzvos is sufficient, it makes logical sense to capture the intention of the acceptance in the form of a verbal oath enumerating the 7 mitzvos and stating one's motivation in accepting them. Any text accomplishing these goals is sufficient.

For example:

I accept upon myself the Seven Commandments of the Children of Noah, including the general and specific prohibitions of idolatry, murder, theft, sexual immorality, blasphemy, eating of flesh torn from a living animal, and the general and specific commandments to establish a system of justice, as commanded to Noah, Adam, and their descendants, by the mouth of The Holy One, creator of the universe, as reaffirmed and transmitted by His servant Moses at the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

One is not required to accept the mitzvos before any Jewish Court (*Beis Din*),⁶ court, or assembly of other persons. Any personal or private acceptance of the Seven Mitzvos is sufficient. Nevertheless, it is a good idea to make a verbal acceptance before witnesses.

***Ger Toshav*- A Non-Jew who resides in the land of Israel**

The term *ger toshav* has created special confusion for modern Noahides and will be discussed at length in a future lesson.

The *ger toshav* is referred to in many places in the Torah:

⁶ A Jewish rabbinic court of three judges. A *Beis Din* judges matters of religious and monetary law in the Jewish community.

- Exodus 12:43-45 – *This is the decree of the Passover offering... a resident [Toshav] and a hired laborer may not eat of it.*
- Lev. 25:6 – *The land's yield of the sabbatical year shall be yours to eat, yours... and the residents' [Toshav] who sojourns [Ger] among you.*
- Lev. 25:35 – *...you shall strengthen him, the convert or the resident [Toshav].*
- Lev. 25:40 – *Like a laborer or a resident [Toshav] he shall be with you, until the jubilee year he shall work with you.*
- Lev. 25:45 - *...also, from among the children of the residents [Toshav] who dwell [Ger] with you...*
- Lev. 25:47 – *If the means of a sojourner [Ger] who resides [Toshav] among you...*
- Num. 35:15 – *For the children of Israel, the convert, and the resident [Toshav] among them...*

The term *ger*, from the Hebrew root *gar*, meaning “to sojourn,” refers to an alien, a stranger, or an immigrant. *Toshav* means “reside.” A *ger toshav* is, therefore, a resident alien: a non-Jew who resides in the land of Israel among the Jewish people. However, the Torah tells us:

They [idolaters] shall not dwell in your land lest they cause you to sin against Me and worship their gods.⁷

We see that a *ger toshav* must give up his idolatrous beliefs and practices in order to live in Israel.

How is this accomplished practically? How far must a non-Jew go in disavowing idolatry so that he may reside in Israel? The Talmud⁸ explains that the prospective *ger toshav* must come before a *Beis Din* (Jewish religious court) and accept upon himself to faithfully observe the seven Noahide laws.

However, the Talmud⁹ and later authorities tell us that there is no status of *ger toshav* in our days.

⁷ Exodus 23:33.

⁸ [Avodah Zarah 64b](#).

⁹ [Arakhin 29a](#)

Nevertheless, some rabbis have instructed Noahides to accept the status of *ger toshav* even today. Others have not sought to confer *ger toshav* status, but have required potential Noahides to nevertheless accept their commandments before a *Beis Din* (Jewish Rabbinical court). Both of these are unnecessary as we will see in future lessons.

The *halakhah* (decisive religious law) is that there is no need or benefit for one to accept the Seven Mitzvos before a *Beis Din*. Such an acceptance before a *Beis Din* will have no effect whatsoever on the *Ben Noach's* religious status, ability to fulfill the mitzvos, or the merit he receives for fulfilling the mitzvos.

Summary of the Lesson

1. Idolatrous thoughts, practices, and beliefs are all prohibited. An idolater is called an *akum*. Sometimes the term *nokhri* is used, but it is uncommon.
2. A *ger tzedek* is a non-Jew who has undergone conversion to Judaism. It has no other definition.
3. A *Ben Noach* is a male Noahide. A *Bat Noach* is a female Noahide. *Bnei Noach* are Noahides.
4. *MiChasidei Umos HaOlam* – a Pious One of the Nations – is a *Ben Noach* who has accepted the Seven *Mitzvos*. His acceptance is tied to the revelation at Sinai – he accepts the Noahide laws as an extension of this revelation. In return, he receives the full merit of “one who is commanded and fulfills” and merits a share in the World to Come.
5. One, who accepts the Seven *Mitzvos* based upon logic or moral (yet non-religious) basis is praised, yet receives no reward in the World to Come.
6. One becomes a *Ben Noach* by accepting the Noahide laws upon himself. There is no special form of this acceptance. However, a verbal oath makes sense. For practical reasons, it is a good idea that the oath be made before a witness.