

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH LEARNING
PROJECT

The Noahide Laws – Lesson Seven



**Written by Rabbi Avraham Chaim
Bloomenstiel**

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164 Village Path, Lakewood NJ 08701 732.370.3344
164 Rabbi Akiva, Bnei Brak, 03.616.6340

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1. Introduction

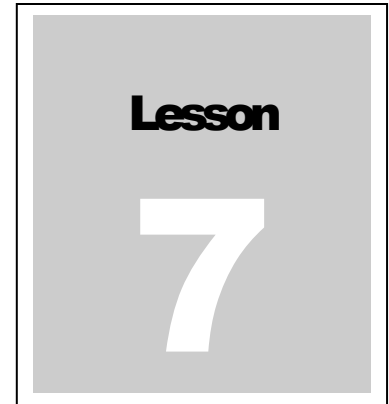
2. Blasphemy

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Deriving the Noahide Laws III



Introduction

In the last lesson we reviewed some general principles of the Noahide laws. Most importantly, we saw that the seven categories include both positive and negative commandments. In this lesson we will continue with the commandments of Blasphemy and Idolatry and look at the unique aspects of each.

Blasphemy

Definition

This specific prohibition of blasphemy is called such only for lack of an appropriate English term with which to translate the original Hebrew. In English, the word “blasphemy” is often used interchangeably with “heresy.” Alternatively, many use “blasphemy” to mean “taking the L-rd’s name in vain.” However, neither of these uses conveys the intent of the actual Hebrew prohibition. The definition of this prohibition is found in *Leviticus 24:15-16*:

...*Isb ish ki yekaleil elokav ve-nasah cheto.*
Venokeiv sheim HaShem mos yumas.

“...Any man who **curses [yekaleil]** God shall bear his sin.
And one who is **nokeiv** the name of God shall be put to death.”

The first time the Torah mentions this sin it uses the word *yekaleil*, which clearly means *he curses*. In fact, this is the term used most often in connection with this transgression. However, in verse 16 the Torah uses the odd word *nokeiv*.

The *Mishnah*¹ explains that *nokeiv* refers to cursing God using His own divine name in the formula of: may XXXXX curse (or smite) XXXXX. This is the specific definition of blasphemy warranting the death penalty.

The Talmud² expands the scope of this prohibition to include all divine names or appellations for God's divine attributes.

Numerous other prohibitions are included under the umbrella of blasphemy. These include not desecrating, destroying, or erasing God's name, using God's name inappropriately, and many others.

Belief in God

As we noted in the previous lesson, the Seven Noahide laws are enumerated according to their negative ("thou shalt not") aspects. Nevertheless, they contain many positive ("thou shalt") qualities.

[Rabbi Reuven Margolies](#), an eminent 20th century scholar, observes an important such nuance in *Margolios HaYam*,³ his masterful commentary on tractate Sanhedrin (where most of the Noahide laws are discussed):

It is astonishing that there is no mention here [in the Seven Noahide] laws of the foremost principle, the fundamental of all fundamentals: belief in God! ... It is belief in God that must serve as the foundation for all mitzvos and prohibitions... It seems as though belief in God is subsumed in the category of blasphemy.

That belief in God is required of Noahides is iterated by many authorities;⁴ however the proposition that it falls under the category of blasphemy is surprising. Wouldn't it make more sense for belief in God to be subsumed within the laws of idolatry?

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, in his book *The Seven Laws of Noah*, asks the same question and offers a very good answer.⁵ The laws against idolatry regulate man's relationship to the physical world, keeping this world's meaning and value in perspective. However, the laws against blasphemy define the nature and

¹ [Sanhedrin 56a.B](#)

² Sanhedrin 56a.

³ *Margolios HaYam* on Sanhedrin 56a #25.

⁴ See Rabbeinu Nissim Gaon's *Hakdama* to Tractate Berachos, where he says that belief in God is required via logic, being implicit in the very fabric of the Noahide code. The *Sefer HaChinuch Aseh* 430 likewise lists it as part of the Noahide code, but does not state his reasoning.

⁵ P. 78.

boundaries of man's relationship with his Creator. Therefore, belief in God and all other elements of the man/God interaction are included under blasphemy.

Prayer Prayer, following this rule, should therefore be included under blasphemy. However, is there an obligation for Noahides to pray? [Rabbi Nissim Gaon](#)⁶ implies such, writing:

*Not all of the Seven Laws and their derivations require revelation. For example – the obligation to recognize God, to obey Him, and the obligation to **serve** him – all of which are rational and can be logically derived.*

The Hebrew term used by Rabbi Nissim for serving God, *le-avdo*, usually refers specifically to prayer. The *mitzvah* of Prayer for Noahides is further implied by *Isaiah 56:7*:

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

On this verse Rashi notes: *Not for Israel alone.* Also, Rabbi Shmuel ben Chofni Gaon, in his exposition of the Noahide laws,⁷ includes prayer as an obligation as do many later authorities. Yet, even those few later authorities who do not reckon prayer an actual obligation nevertheless agree that it is proper and that Noahides are rewarded for it.⁸

The study of Torah, being intrinsic to the man/God relationship, is also included under the rubric of blasphemy.⁹ By extension is the *mitzvah* to honor the Torah and its Torah scholars.

Idolatry

Definition The prohibition of idolatry, for both Jews and non-Jews, contains many nuanced details explaining the distinction between idolatrous thoughts and idolatrous deeds. Both of these are prohibited in different ways.

The exact details involved in pinning down idolatrous thoughts vs. deeds will be covered in this course in the appropriate place.

Maimonides writes that any act of idol worship that is a capital offense for Jews is likewise a capital offense for Noahides.¹⁰ In general, this establishes similarities

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Discussed in an earlier lesson.

⁸ [Igras Moshe](#) OC II:25.

⁹ See the Rama MiFanu's list of the 30 Noahide laws brought at the end of Lesson 6.

between Jews and Noahides with regard to the laws of idolatry. We say “in general” because there are a few important exceptions. One of these differences is the issue of *Shituf*. *Shituf* is the belief in some other (false) deity in addition to believing in the one true God.¹¹

Shituf

While *Shituf* is a prohibited belief for Jews, its relevance to Noahides and non-Jews is nuanced and often a source of much confusion.

[Maimonides](#)¹² and many later authorities¹³ condemn *shituf* belief as outright idolatry even for Noahides. However, this conclusion is hard to reconcile against [Tosafos](#)¹⁴ and other [Rishonim](#).¹⁵ These authorities discuss a section of the Talmud that discusses if gentiles may swear oaths in the name of God and/or other deities. It is strongly implied that *shituf* is not a prohibition for non-Jews. The majority of later authorities¹⁶ conclude that *shituf* is permitted for non-Jews.

However, it is permitted only according to very specific conditions:

- 1) The Torah views non-Jewish belief in another god in addition to the true God to be mistaken. It is not a prohibition, but it is unrighteous and one who does so, though not viewed as a sinner, is not considered *MiChasidei Umos HaOlam*¹⁷ – of the Pious Nations of the World - and will not receive his full reward for observing the Noahide laws.
- 2) *Shituf* pertains only to **belief** in a secondary divine being, not to the **worship** of a secondary god. Any expression of worship for this secondary deity is prohibited as idolatrous practice.¹⁸
- 3) It is only the belief in another god in addition to the true God that is not punishable. Conflation of the true God with another entity or the

¹⁰ [Hilchos Melakchim 9:2](#).

¹¹ It should be noted that there is a vast amount of literature on this topic – enough for many, many books.

¹² See [Hilchos Avodas Kokhavim 1:2](#), [Hilchos Teshuvah 3:7](#), and many other places.

¹³ [Noda b'Yehudah II YD 148](#); [Sbaar Efraim 24](#); [Pri Megadim YD 65:45](#); [Shut Chasam Sofer OC 84](#).

¹⁴ Sanhedrin 63b and Bechoros 2b.

¹⁵ [Piskei HaRosh Sanhedrin Ch. 7](#) and others.

¹⁶ See [Darkhei Moshe OC 156](#); [Shulchan Aruch OC 156](#); [Pischei Teshuvah](#), Y.D. 147:2; [Mor u'Ketziyah 224](#); [Shoel u'Meishiv Tanina I:51](#); [Seder Mishnah Yesodei HaTorah 1:7](#).

¹⁷ See [Sefer Sheva Mitzvos HaShem I:1 haara 9](#).

¹⁸ This is the universal conclusion of the authorities. See [Noda BiYehudah II:148](#); [Minchas Chinuch 26 & 86](#); [Sbaar Efraim 24](#). See also [Chasam Sofer gloss to Shulchan Aruch OC 156](#).

assigning of corporeality to the true God creates issues of actual idolatry. The Torah definition of idolatry is not only limited to the worship of idols, but pertains to how we conceive and represent the nature of the one true God.

***Shituf*,
Christianity &
Islam**

Many have tried to qualify Christianity as an acceptable belief for non-Jews using the concept of *shituf*. Though true that many authorities have stated Christianity is acceptable for non-Jews, this opinion must be put in context.

The status of Christianity in the eyes of the Torah is difficult to determine. There have been thousands of pages written on this topic, and even a basic survey of the literature is far beyond the scope of this course. In short: Christianity has many elements that are clearly idolatrous from a Torah perspective (i.e. its various rituals and modes of worship), but some that are difficult to pin down (i.e. is it truly monotheistic or poly-theistic?) Its difficult status makes its classification doubtful and uncertain.

Historically, Sephardic Rabbis, living in Muslim-ruled lands, were free to rule stringently. They criticized Christian belief as outright idolatry. However, rabbis living in Christian lands had to be very clever and cautious in what they said and wrote. Given the shadow of the church and the constant threat of exile and death, they were not free to classify idolatry as outright idolatry. Given their precarious situation, they had to take a tempered position. In these Rabbis' theological writings they often declare Christian belief *shituf* and therefore acceptable for non-Jews. However, in their writings on *halakha*, Torah law, they held that Christian ritual and worship was to be treated as idolatry.¹⁹ They were often able to get these views past censors because *halachic* (legal) writings were not so thoroughly vetted as the church censors usually lacked sufficient understanding of the material.

Were it not for the threat of the church, these Ashkenazi rabbis very well may have taken the stringent view of their Sephardi co-religionists and condemned Christianity as idolatry.

Nevertheless, even if Christian belief is *shituf*, the practice of Christianity would remain idolatrous. The practical conclusion, for a number of reasons, is that Christianity is to be treated as absolute idolatry.²⁰

¹⁹See Rama YD 141:1 and 150 who rules that crosses to which a non-Jew has bowed are prohibited as idolatrous images. This is a subtle yet definitive statement since such a conclusion is only possible if, fundamentally, the Rama believes that the concept of the trinity is idolatry.

²⁰ See *Hilchos Avodas Kokhavim* 9:4, *Maachalos Assuros* 11:7, *Hilchos Melachim* 11:4. See also Rambam's *Perush HaMishnayos* to the beginning of tractate *Avoda Zarah* (note, however, that the modern editions are heavily censored). See also *Minchas Elazar* I:53-3; *Yechaveh Da'as* IV:45. An extensive list of opinions is brought in *Yayin Malchus*, pp. 234-237.

Namely, it is not merely the worship of another secondary deity, but is an idolatrous conception of God Himself.²¹ Therefore, Christianity is to be treated as absolute idolatry for Noahides in both belief and practice.²²

What about Islam? Islam is not idolatrous²³ and, rather, has a strong theological resonance with Torah thought and belief.²⁴ From the perspective of the prohibition of idolatry, it is 100% monotheistic and an acceptable belief system²⁵,²⁶ However, Islam presents a different problem altogether.

Creating New Religions

Both Jews and non-Jews are enjoined against the creation of new religions.²⁷ One who creates a new religion is, by default, rejecting belief in the truth of the Torah, Moses (the greatest prophet in history), and in God's authority. The Torah,

²¹ See the *Viknuach* of Nachmanides. See also his commentary on the Torah to Deut. 16:22. The idea that God ever took on corporeal manifestation, had a mother, was born, or exists as a tripartite deity are all heretical concepts according to the Torah.

²² It should be pointed out that believing Christians do not themselves have the status of full idolaters. See *Shulchan Aruch*, Y.D. 148:12; *Shut Yehudah Yaaleh* YD 170.

²³ *Maachalos Assuros* 11:7; *Tur* YD 124; *Beis Yosef* YD 146; *Rama* YD 146:5; YD 124:6; *Taz* YD 124:4; *Shach* YD 124:12; See *Ben Ish Chai* on *Parshas Balak* for a discussion of the issues. There are a few who hold that Islam is prohibited as idolatry. It seems that this is due to certain customs of the Haj. See note 24.

²⁴ For example, a Jew or Noahide may not enter a Church for any reason because it is a place of idolatry (see *Ieros Moshe* YD 3:129-6 and many, many others), yet it is permissible to enter and even pray within a mosque (*Arnei Yashfei* 1:153 quoting *Rav Elyashiv*, זצ"ל; *Yabia Omer* VII YD 12:4; and others). In fact, a Muslim contemporary of Maimonides, the historian *Ibn al-Qifti*, records that in Egypt the Maimonides would occasionally pray in a Mosque (see al-Qifti's *Tarikh al-Hukama*). Of course, this is not an ideal situation and may have been done only in special circumstances. One recent authority, Rabbi Boruch Efrati, has advised traveling Jews to pray in airport mosques (a common amenity overseas) rather than pray among the hustle and bustle of the terminal. This ruling, though, pertains only to praying in the physical space of the mosque. One may not take part in actual Islamic prayer services. It should be noted that another recent authority, the *Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer* XIV:91, cites the Ran (see note 26 below) and prohibits Jews, or for that matter Noahides, from entering mosques. Although his opinion is not agreed to by other authorities, all agree that one should not enter a mosque without a compelling need or reason.

²⁵ While the belief system of Islam is acceptable theologically, many customs of the Haj are problematic. This may be the reasons for the *Ran* Sanhedrin 61b and other dismissals of Islam. See *Meiri* to *Avodah Zarah* 57a.

²⁶ However, an interesting difference emerges with regard to teaching Torah. Maimonides writes in a responsum (ed. Blau #149) that because Christians accept the Torah as part of God's revelation (as the "old testament"), there are unique permits and leniencies with regard to Jews teaching them Torah. Yet, because Islam rejects the Torah's authenticity (substituting the Quran), Jews may not teach Torah to Moslems.

²⁷ *Hilchos Melachim Perakim* 8 & 10.

containing both the Noahide and Jewish laws, were given to stand for all eternity. The Torah states this in no fewer than 24 places!²⁸

New religions denying the eternal authority of the Torah are not to be given legitimacy. This principle would apply equally to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or any religion coming after the Torah, regardless of whether or not these religions observe all or part of the Noahide laws.²⁹

In the same vein, neither a Noahide nor a Jew may alter the religion set forth for him by the Torah. To do so is also a rejection of the Torah, God's will, and the de facto creation of a new religion. For example, a Noahide may not observe holy days not commanded to him. This would include such holidays as the Sabbath or Passover; these days were commanded only to the Jewish people.³⁰ Similarly, the *mezuzah* and *Tefillin* are symbols commanded only to Jews and not to Noahides.³¹ To observe them would constitute the creation of a new religion and one would receive no reward for their observance.

However, Noahides may observe any commandment given to the Jews that:³²

- 1) Has a logical reason behind it, and
- 2) Is of positive benefit to the person or society.

However, his intent cannot be to undertake the commandment solely because he believes it is a religious commandment.³³ If that were his underlying reason, he would be in error, for the commandment is only for the Jews and not for Noahides.

The foremost authority on Jewish Law in the 20th century, [Rabbi Moses Feinstein](#) ztz"l, emphatically wrote that a Noahide who decides to keep Torah

²⁸Exodus 12:14, 12:17, 12:43, 27:21, 28:43, Leviticus 3:17, 7:36, 10:9, 16:29, 16:31, 16:34, 17:7, 23:14, 23:21, 23:31, 23:41, 24:3, Numbers 10:8, 15:15, 19:10, 19:21, 18:23, 35:29, Deuteronomy 29:28.

²⁹ See *Igros Moshe* YD II:7.

³⁰ See [Hilchos Melachim 10:9](#); Meiri to Sanhedrin 58b.

³¹ See [Radvaz](#) to *Hilchos Melachim* 10.

³² [Hilchos Melachim 10:10](#)

³³ See [Radvaz](#) to *Hilchos Melachim* 10.

commandments intended only for the Jews receives no reward or blessing for his actions.³⁴ Rather, he transgresses by creating a new religion!

As we shall see, though, this does not preclude Noahide observance of any other mitzvos of the Torah. We will examine this issue in great depth in a future lesson.

To summarize: One cannot be a Christian Noahide because Christianity is idolatrous in both belief and practice. One cannot be a Moslem Noahide because Islam is a new, post-Torah religion and therefore denies the eternity of Torah. What is more, one cannot even be a “Jewish” Noahide. The Noahide path is not a way for non-Jews to participate in Jewish ritual or religion. It is a way for them to be non-Jews according to God’s will: as Noahides.

In the next lesson we will continue our overview of the seven categories.

Summary of the Lesson

1. The specific sin of blasphemy is cursing God, or any of his attributes, with one of His own divine names. For Noahides this is expanded to include the desecration of God’s name and other prohibitions.
2. Among the positive aspects of the category of blasphemy are the requirements of prayer, belief in God, and other fundamentals of faith.
3. The prohibition of idolatry exists in both thought and deed.
4. Most of the laws of idolatry are the same for Jews and Noahides. A significant difference is *Shituf* – the belief in the true God plus other subordinate deities. *Shituf* is permitted for non-Jews, yet not for Jews.
5. *Shituf* is only permitted to non-Jews as a system of belief. Non-Jews may not, however, worship in practice any God other than the One True God.
6. There are no religions today that are *Shituf*. Even Christianity is not *Shituf*, but actual idolatry.
7. Islam is theologically acceptable to Torah belief, however it is an erroneous faith for non-Jews in that it was created after the Torah was given.

³⁴ *Igros Moshe YD II:7.*

8. The creation of new religions is prohibited in that it is de facto rejection of the Torah. Furthermore, neither Jews nor non-Jews may add to what has been bequeathed to them.
9. Noahides may accept any additional *mitzvos* provided that those *mitzvos* are logical and beneficial to society and the individual. Furthermore, they cannot accept these *mitzvos* solely from religious motivations. Otherwise, their acceptance would constitute adding to their Noahide faith.