

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH LEARNING
PROJECT

The Noahide Laws – Lesson Eighteen



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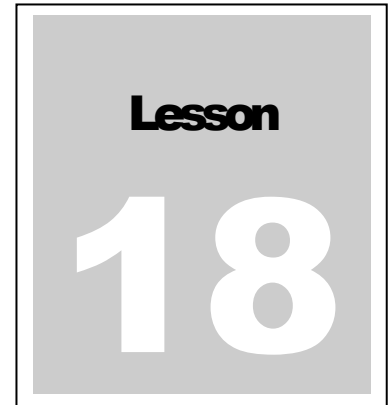
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Noahide Prayer: Blessings I



Introduction & Types of *Mitzvos*

NOTE: Throughout this lesson, references such as (*Siddur, p. 31*) refer to page numbers in the *Artscroll Classic Edition of the Siddur, Nusah Ashkenaz*.

As mentioned in previous lessons, Noahides may adopt any Jewish *mitzvah* in all its details provided that the *mitzvah* is logical or provides a tangible benefit to society, oneself, or the world as a whole.

Among the *mitzvos* compelled by logic, for example, is prayer.

However, these *mitzvos* compelled by logic or benefit are of a different nature than other Noahide *mitzvos*.

Mitzvos, in general, are divided into three classes:

**THREE
CLASSES OF
MITZVOS**

- 1) *Mechuyeves* – *Mitzvos* that one must do. For example, the *mitzvos* involved with establishing justice and courts are *Mechuyeves*. They are obligatory and one is liable for their neglect.
- 2) *Reshus* – *mitzvos* that are optional. This means that the *mitzvah* exists and applies to a person; however one is not punished or liable for neglecting the *mitzvah*. If one performs such *mitzvos*, then he is accorded reward and merit for doing so.
- 3) *Mitzvos* which have no application to a person. Some *mitzvos* are entirely inapplicable to some people. For example, Kohanim, the temple priests, have commandments unique to them alone. Their *mitzvos* are inapplicable

to other Jews. Other Jews may not even adopt these *mitzvos* voluntarily. It is very risky and spiritually dangerous to adopt mitzvos to which one has no connection. At best, one receives no merit for doing so. At worst, one may receive divine punishment. This is true for both Jews and Noahides. One should be very cautious when adopting practices to which one has no obligation or connection.

The 7 *Mitzvos* of Noah and their subdivisions generally fall into the first category – those of obligatory *mitzvos*. Jewish *mitzvos* which have no connection to Noahides (i.e. most dietary laws or the observance of many Jewish holidays) fall into the third group.

Noahide *Mitzvos* compelled by logic or practical benefit generally fall into the second category. One does not need to perform such mitzvos, but it is preferable and logical to do so.

The Source of Blessings

It is an obligatory (a *Mechuyeves*) *mitzvah* for Jews, before partaking of any benefit this world has to offer, to give blessings (*Brachos* in Hebrew) to God for providing such benefit. What is the origin of this practice? Is it from the Torah or from the Rabbis?

Blessing after Meals

With regard to one blessing (*bracha*) in particular, the *Birkas HaMazon* (*Blessing After Meals* – Siddur, p. 184 at the bottom) we know its obligation comes from the Torah. The Torah states:

*You shall eat, be satisfied, and bless God your Lord
for the good land that He has given you.¹*

From here we learn a biblical obligation to bless God after meals.²

¹ Deuteronomy 8:10.

² The Talmud clarifies that a proper meal is one at which bread is eaten.

**Blessing For
Torah & Certain
Species**

Two further blessings, the one said before learning Torah (Siddur, p. 17) and the *MaEyn Shalosh* (Siddur, p. 201), a blessing said after eating certain species of fruit, grains, or wine, *may* be biblical in origin. However, pinning it down precisely is difficult.³ Very generally, most authorities view the blessings for learning Torah as biblical in origin. However, there is no clear consensus as to the origin of the *MaEyn Shalosh*.

Other Blessings

What about the many other blessings (see Siddur, pp. 223, 225, 229 – 231)? The Talmud concedes that all other blessings, though obligatory, are only rabbinic in origin. Their authority is compelled by logic alone, not by any particular biblical decree, as the Talmud states:

*Though not a command of God, it is a logical obligation upon a person.*⁴

God gave us this world to partake of and to serve Him through it. Every time that we benefit from this world, we are partaking of God’s kindness as Creator. It only makes sense, therefore, to acknowledge God the Giver. As support for this line of reasoning, the Talmud invokes a subtle contradiction in the verses of the Psalms:

Rabbi Levi noted a contradiction between two verses. One states, “The earth and its fullness belong to God.”⁵ Another verse says, “The heavens belong to God, but the earth He gave to man.”⁶ He resolved the contradiction by stating that one verse refers to the status of the world before reciting a Bracha and the other to after its recitation. Said Rabbi Chanina Bar Pappa: When one derives enjoyment from this world without a Bracha, it is as if he has stolen from God!

Before one eats a fruit, the fruit belongs to God – He created it, nurtured it, and brought it to this place in its existence. One cannot partake of that fruit unless he “redeems” it by making a blessing upon it, thanking God for the benefit one is about to receive. Otherwise, his partaking of the fruit is akin to stealing!

³ The nature of the *Maeyn Shalosh*, the blessing said after certain grains, fruits, and wine, is difficult to determine because of a biblical ambiguity. Deuteronomy 8:10, which states the command to bless after a meal, also includes a list of the items for which one is recited to recite this blessing. For this reason, the Rashba and Rosh hold it is biblical in origin (see Bais Yosef 209). However, the Rambam, Taz (209:3) and others hold of a different reading of the verse, and conclude that it is rabbinic in origin. There is no clear consensus on the matter. With regard to the blessings over learning Torah, although the source is very unclear, most authorities treat them as biblical in origin. The question of rabbinic vs. biblical origin is more than merely academic; it has occasional practical applications for Jews.

⁴ Berachos 35a.

⁵ Psalms 24:1

⁶ Psalms 115:16.

Incidentally, this Talmudic passage illustrates a concept mentioned back in Lesson 5. We saw there that *mitzvos* are only learned and proved from the Torah and not from the Prophets and Writings. The Prophets and Writings exist to elaborate and elucidate our understanding of the Torah. They also provide support and insight into Rabbinic decrees. Note that the Talmud does not use these Psalm verses as “biblical” proof for making blessings. Instead they are used as support to a Rabbinic proposition based on religious logic.

The Jewish Obligation vs. the Noahide Obligation

For Jews, making blessings over benefit is an obligatory *mitzvah*. Even though almost all blessings are rabbinic in origin (with the exception of the blessing after a meal and, possibly, a few others), a Jew is nevertheless required to make them. Neglecting *Brachos* is considered a transgression for a Jew.

Since the whole idea of *Brachos* is rooted in religious logic, for Noahides it falls into the second category mentioned above: *Reshus*, voluntary *mitzvos*.

What about the blessing after meals, though? Isn't this blessing biblical in origin? Yes – it is. However, this blessing was only commanded to Jews, not to Noahides. Nevertheless, the idea of making a blessing after meals is compelled by the same religious logic that compels all other blessings.

Types of *Brachos*

The Maimonides,⁷ based upon the Talmud, identifies three categories of blessings/*Brachos*:

- 1) **Blessings over benefit** (Siddur p. 225). These include blessings over food, drink, spices, etc.
- 2) **Blessings over *mitzvos*** (Siddur p. 227). Since God's commandments exist to benefit mankind, Jews make blessings when coming to fulfill the commandments. The formula of these types of blessings is the well-known: *Blessed are you are God, ruler of the universe, who has hallowed us with His commandment of...*
- 3) **Blessings of thanks, praise, and gratitude** (Siddur p. 229).

⁷ *Hilchos Brachos* 1:4

Categories 1 and 3 are the most relevant to Noahides. The second category, however, is complicated even for Jews. There are many details as to the exact wordings of these types of blessings. Furthermore, not all *mitzvos* require blessings at all times. Some never do. Since the second category is generally inapplicable for Noahides, we will focus our attention on the first and the third.

What Does It Mean to Bless God?

Before going further, let's stop for a minute and consider a basic question: What does it mean to "Bless God?"

If the idea of *Brachos/blessings* is to express gratitude and thanks, then why blessings are worded "Blessed are you..." instead of "Thanks and gratitude unto you...?"

Furthermore, if God is the source of all blessings, then who are we to "bless" God? God, after all, has no lack or deficiency. He is perfect!

This question has been asked by many scholars and many answers have been provided, all of which point in the same direction:

- **Yad Ketanah:**⁸ Saying *Blessed are you...* is an acknowledgement that God is the source of the concept of blessing.
- **Rashba**⁹: Included in the concept of a *bracha* is the admission that He is ruler over all, and everything is from Him. As it says in the Talmud: *A person must bless God for the bad just as he must bless Him for the good.*" This is because the word *bracha* comes from the word *breicha*, meaning *reservoirs of water* – an allusion to the primordial waters of creation and the source of all things.
- **Chizkuni:**¹⁰ The word *Baruch*, when applied to God, is used like a greeting implying supreme praise. It is not to be understood in the regular sense of the word *blessed*.

⁸ Commentary on Maimonides by Rabbi Dov Berish Gottlieb, d. 1796.

⁹ Responsa I: 423. Rashba is an acronym for Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet, d. 1310. Rashba was a prolific commentator on the Talmud and a renowned posek.

¹⁰ To Genesis 24:27. The Chizkuni is a famed commentary on the Torah written in c. 1240 by Rabbi Chizkiyhu ben Manoach.

- **Chaim of Volozhin:**¹¹ The word *bracha* implies burgeoning abundance. Even the letters of the world, **Beis**, **Reish**, and **Kaf**, imply such. The numerical value of the letters is a progression of multiples of 10.¹²

Beis = 2

Kaf = 20

Reish = 200

This sampling of interpretations all indicate that *blessed*, when referring to God, is a statement of praise for God as the source of all blessing and abundance. It implies not only acknowledgement and gratitude, but the recognition that God is the unique, sole provider of all things.

Texts of the Blessings

The text of the blessings was first recorded by Ezra and his assembly in about 350 B.C.E. Their texts were the result of tremendous study, contemplation, debate, and prayer. This effort imbued the texts of the blessings with a holiness and authority that endures until today.

Writes the Rambam and many others:

*It is not appropriate to alter them [the texts of the blessings] or to add or subtract from any of them. Anyone who deviates from the text that the Sages instituted for blessings is mistaken.*¹³

However, the sages instituted their texts for the Jewish community, not for the Noahide community. So, what texts should Noahides use for their blessings?

On one hand, Noahides may use any text for blessings provided that it satisfies the core idea of a blessing: to acknowledge God as the creator of all things who bestows benefit to His creation.

However, let us recall for a moment that the compelling reason for blessings is the same for both Noahides and Jews: a compelling religious logic. Considering this, the texts formulated by Ezra should be sufficient for Jews as well as Noahides. For this reason it is not only permissible, but perhaps even preferable, for Noahides to use the established texts of the blessings as found in the Jewish

¹¹ *Nefesh HaChaim* II: 2. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (d. 1821) was the foremost disciple of Rabbi Elijah Kramer, the famed Vilna Gaon.

¹² See Maharal *Tiferet Yisrael* 34 and *Netzach Yisrael* 45.

¹³ *Ibid.* 1:5.

siddur. Furthermore, it is also preferable to make the blessings according to the same rules that govern Jewish practice.

The Blessing after Meals

An exception to using the Jewish texts exists with regard to the blessing said after meals (Siddur p. 185, bottom).¹⁴ This blessing was originally a single paragraph composed by Moses. Over time, three more paragraphs were added. Each of the four paragraphs speaks of matters pertaining solely to the Jewish obligation to bless after meals and the unique connection between the Jewish people and the land of Israel. It is therefore incorrect for Noahides to use this text.

A Noahide Grace after Meals

A little known fact is that the Midrash actually records a Noahide blessing for after meals! We are taught that Abraham, who excelled in offering hospitality to guests, would never ask his guests to thank him or pay him. Rather, Abraham only asked that his guests recite a blessing of thanks to God. The blessing he taught them was:

*Blessed is the God of the universe from whose bounty we have eaten.*¹⁵

It appears that this was recited after any filling meal, whether or not bread was eaten. For Noahides, it is advisable that this blessing be said after any filling, sit-down meal, following the precedent of Abraham.

This blessing may be enhanced by adding Psalms 67 or 104 before it.

Recently, many texts have been composed for Noahides for after meals.¹⁶ Many of these texts are very good, yet should be used in addition to the blessing mentioned above and preferably recited before it.

In the next lesson, we will explore the actual blessings to use and the rules governing their use.

¹⁴ Another exception exists with regard to the blessing *MaEyn Shalosh*, said after certain fruits, grains, and wine. We will look at this exception in a future lesson.

¹⁵ Bereshis Rabbah 54.

¹⁶ Rabbis Moshe Weiner and J. Immanuel Schochet have written an excellent text that may be found in their pamphlet: *Prayers, Blessings, Principles of Faith, and Divine Service for Noahides*.

Summary of This Lesson

1. There are three types of mitzvos: 1) Obligations one must do, 2) *Mitzvos* that one should do, yet for which one is not liable for neglecting, 3) *Mitzvos* to which one has no connection.
2. Noahide practices compelled by logic or adopted voluntarily for practical benefit fall in the second category of *mitzvos* mentioned above. This includes prayer and making blessings on benefit.
3. Very few blessings have their sources in the Torah. Most blessings were decreed upon the Jewish community by the Rabbinic authority. However, no blessings were ever required of the Noahide community.
4. Nevertheless, the logic that compelled the Rabbinic decree requiring Jew to make blessings applies equally to the Noahide community. However, making blessings is not obligatory – it is, rather, a preferable and meritorious practice.
5. Blessings are either made over benefit, over mitzvos, or as praise. Only the first and last types are applicable to the Noahide community.
6. God does not need us to bless him because he is perfect and needs nothing. When we “bless God” it is an acknowledgment of His role as the source of all blessing and benefit.
7. The texts of the blessings as established by Ezra and his assembly are, for the most part, applicable to both Jewish and Noahide blessings.
8. There are a few notable exceptions to use of Jewish *bracha*/blessing texts by Noahides. A major one is the Jewish text for the blessing after meals, *Birkas HaMazon*. This blessing speaks of concerns unique to the Jewish spiritual position. Instead, Noahides should use the Noahide text recorded in the Midrash. This text may be enhanced by adding psalms or especially composed texts.