

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH LEARNING
PROJECT

The Noahide Laws – Lesson Twenty One



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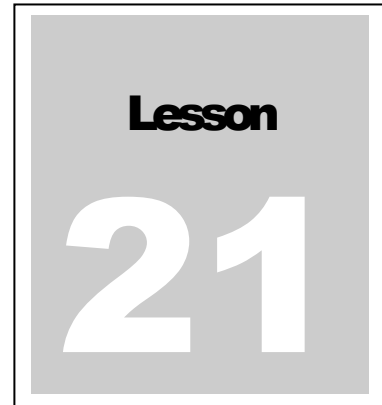
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Torah Study II



Introduction

In the previous lesson we learned the Talmud in tractate Sanhedrin 59a that teaches that a non-Jew who delves into his laws deserves honor and respect like a [Kohen Gadol](#), a high priest. However, a non-Jew who delves into Torah that he may not learn deserves death. This latter law applies only to in-depth or analytical Torah study. Superficial explorations of any part of Torah are permitted to anyone. In this lesson we are going to look at non-Jewish Torah study from “the other side:” the Jewish prohibition of teaching parts of Torah to non-Jews. While this prohibition devolves on Jews, it has implications for Noahides and is therefore important to know.

Chagigah 13b: Teaching Torah to Non-Jews

In [Chagigah 13b](#) the Talmud states the following:

Said Rav Ami: Do not give over the words of the Torah to a non-Jew for it is written: ‘He did not do so to any other nation and of His laws they were not informed [Psalm 147:19-20].’

[Tosafos](#)¹ to *Bava Kamma* 13a understands this verse as commanding a positive *mitzvah* to Jews to safeguard their unique relationship with their Torah.

[Tosafos](#) to *Chagigah* 13b asks a very good question: If the Talmud has already stated an injunction against non-Jewish Torah study (Sanhedrin 59a), then Jews should be prohibited from teaching non-Jews Torah because of [lifnei iver](#) – placing a

¹ *D.h. Karu.*

stumbling block before the blind (see Lev. 19:14). After all, was a Jew to teach a non-Jew Torah, the Jew would be causing the non-Jew to transgress! Why then does *Chagigah* 13b instead learn the prohibition from Psalm 147?

Tosafos proposes the only answer that makes sense given the circumstances: the Talmud must be talking about a case where there is another Jew available who is willing to teach the non-Jew Torah. *Lifnei iver* – placing a stumbling block – only applies when a Jew directly enables another’s transgression.

If the transgressor could accomplish their deed without the Jew’s involvement, then there is no prohibition of *lifnei iver*. *Tosafos* understands our case as one in which there are Jews around who are willing to teach prohibited Torah to non-Jews. In such a case, there is no issue of *lifnei iver*. Nevertheless, the Talmud teaches that there is another prohibition in effect. That prohibition is this one learned from the words of Psalm 147.

From this selection and from *Tosafos*² we learn two things:

- 1) A Jew cannot teach Torah to non-Jews because of *lifnei iver*. However, if there are Jews available and willing to teach non-Jews Torah, then *lifnei iver* does not apply. In such a case,
- 2) All Jews are nonetheless prohibited by Psalm 147 from teaching Torah to non-Jews.

Bava Kamma 38a: A Contradiction

The Talmud [Bava Kamma 38a](#) records the following:

The Roman government sent two officers to the sages of Israel. They said “Teach us your Torah!” They read it once, reviewed it, and then read it a third time³...

In light of what we have just learned, this Talmud presents an obvious problem! What is the resolution? *Tosafos* again comes to the rescue, proposing two answers:

- 1) The decree against teaching Torah does not require one to give his life or suffer hardship rather than transgress. Since the teaching of these two officers was a decree of the Roman government, the sages acceded. Or,

² [Tos. Rid](#) to *Bava Kama* 38 proposes the same understanding as our *Tosafos* here.

³ The [Rashba](#) explains that they either studied it with the Sages three times, or that the sages taught them three things: Tanakh, Mishnah, then *Gemora*.

- 2) Perhaps the two officials converted, in which case teaching them was certainly permitted.⁴

The [Yam Shel Shlomo](#) notes that *Tosafos* only provides two answers to a problem when one of the answers is somehow insufficient. The problem with *Tosafos's* first answer, he explains, is that it is far from certain that it represents actual *halakhab*, practice. Perhaps the teaching of Torah to non-Jews is prohibited even upon pain of death? Hence we need another explanation: perhaps the two romans converted.

From this *gemora* (section of the Talmud) and its commentaries, we learn a number of possible exceptions to the prohibition of teaching Torah to non-Jews.

A Curious Omission

Though all of the Talmudic commentaries agree that there is a prohibition of teaching Torah to non-Jews, it is not recorded in any of the major *halakbic* (legal) codes. Many people who make their careers from teaching Torah to non-Jews have claimed to rely upon this omission to justify their actions. However, they are in grave error. Many, many [Acharonim](#) (later scholars) explain that this law is, in fact, not omitted in the later codes. [Maimonides](#)⁵ and [Shulchan Aruch](#)⁶ both codify a general prohibition against teaching Torah to those who should not receive it.

Later [poskim](#) understand that the prohibition against teaching Torah to non-Jews is subsumed within this general prohibition.⁷ Furthermore, the *Shulchan Aruch*⁸ records that it is forbidden to teach Torah to an *eved Kenaani* (a Canaanite

⁴ Despite the text making no reference to conversion, it is entirely possible that they did convert. We can infer this by contrasting our passage with [Megillah 9a](#). *Megillah 9a* teaches that the sages were forced to translate the Torah into Greek. However, to disguise the true meaning of certain passages, the sages made a number of subtle textual changes. Yet, *Bava Kamma* goes on to tell us that the sages taught the two officers the exact Torah. Why didn't the sages alter certain passages? It must be that the officers had converted. This answer has its own vulnerabilities, however.

⁵ [Hilchos Talmud Torah 4:1](#).

⁶ YD 246:7.

⁷ See also [Igras Moshe](#) YD III:89; [Minchas Chinuch](#) 232:3; See also *Beer Sheva Beer Mayim Chayim* 14. Though the *Beer Sheva* is doubtful as to the final *Halacha*, he acknowledges a prohibition of teaching to those who are unworthy. He notes that Moshe smashed the tablets because the Jews who participated in the sin were unfit to learn Torah. He goes on to draw a comparison between the Jews who participated in the golden calf and non-Jews to conclude that non-Jews are in the category of “not fit to study.”

⁸ YD 267:71.

indentured servant). This prohibition would naturally include teaching Torah to a non-Jew.

Just as the prohibition enjoining a non-Jew from learning Torah is not something to be taken lightly (it is punishable at the hands of heaven!), so too Jews should not take lightly the prohibition against teaching Torah to non-Jews.

To reinforce the seriousness of the issue, Rabbi Shlomo Luria, author of the aforementioned *Yam Shel Shlomo*, writes⁹:

*Woe to those who teach Torah to non-Jews! Their sin is greater than they could ever possibly bear and they will not see the redemption of Zion.*¹⁰

What May and May Not Be Taught

All of the scholars agree that the Oral Torah may not be taught to non-Jews. The status of the written Torah is not so clear.

Famously, [Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Chayes](#) wrote in his commentary on the Talmud¹¹ that the *poskim* (decisors of Torah law) have decided that it is forbidden to teach the Oral Torah yet permitted to teach the Written Torah. Yet, for over 150 years scholars have been mystified as to what Rabbi Chayes is talking about. There are no prior *poskim* who make such a distinction!¹²

Support, however, might be implied in an earlier source. The aforementioned *Yam Shel Shlomo*¹³ seems to understand the Talmud's prohibition as directed only at teaching the Oral Torah.¹⁴ We may infer that the *Yam Shel Shlomo* would permit teaching the written Torah.

There are plenty, though, who oppose teaching even the written Torah to non-Jews. Most important is the [Sheiltei Gibborim](#)¹⁵ who holds that one may not teach the Chumash but may teach the Prophets and Writings.

⁹ To *Bava Kamma* 4:9.

¹⁰ In all fairness, his statement may only be in opposition to those who teach Oral Torah to non-Jews.

¹¹ To *Sotah* 35a.

¹² See [Sdei Chemed](#), [Yabia Omer](#), and many others.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ This is how the [Tzitz Eliezer](#) XVI: 55 understands the *Yam Shel Shlomo*.

¹⁵ To *Avodah Zarah* 6a, in the Rif.

The *poskim* have not reached a clear consensus on the issue. These are some of the opinions:

- [Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin](#) (the *Netziv*) holds¹⁶ that it is permitted to teach the written Torah to non-Jews because God commanded Joshua to write the Torah in 70 languages. Therefore, it must be permissible to teach if God himself has ordered it made accessible to the non-Jews.
- The [Yehudah Yaaleh](#) permits teaching the Written Torah because the Talmud only prohibits non-Jews from “delving,” which implies studying the Oral Torah.
- [Rabbi Ovadia Yosef](#) in his *Yabia Omer*¹⁷ – Prohibits teaching Oral or Written Torah to non-Jews.
- [Rabbis Moshe Feinstein](#)¹⁸ and [Eliezer Yehudah Waldenburg](#)¹⁹ declined to decide completely between the *Yam Shel Shlomo* and the *Shiltei Gibborim*. Their conclusions are hedged: Ideally one should not teach the Written Torah to Non-Jews. If one does, he should not be rebuked because he has support upon which to rely. One may definitely teach the Prophets and Writings to non-Jews. Their view is the most widely relied upon.
- [Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv](#)²⁰ - Based upon the Zohar, Rabbi Elyashiv states that one may teach no part of Torah whatsoever to non-Jews other than what is relevant to the Noahide laws.²¹

¹⁶ *Meromei Sadeh, Chagigah*.

¹⁷ VII YD 7.

¹⁸ *Igros Moshe* YD III 90.

¹⁹ *Tzitz Eliezer* XVI 55.

²⁰ *Kovetz Teshuvas* III YD 142.

²¹ This is a very strange conclusion. The Rav decides according to the Zohar (unusual in and of itself), yet without taking into account or discussing the *Shiltei Gibborim* or other classic sources. In general, many of Rav Elyashiv’s printed works are treated with suspicion; it is well known that he had no editorial control over their preparation or publication. This issue is discussed in Artscroll’s biography of Rav Elyashiv.

Teaching Noahides

The sages conclude²² that Jews are permitted and even encouraged to teach non-Jews the parts of the Torah relating to their Noahide obligations. However, the extent of what may be taught is subject to some disagreement. The [Mabarsba](#)²³ is strict that only the basic tenets of what is permitted and forbidden may be taught to Noahides, but not anything else. They should be left on their own to delve deeper. Others, such as Maimonides, are much more lenient.

The degree of instruction that Jews may provide in the Noahide laws is a matter of varying opinions.

Attending Torah Classes

Non-Jews may only attend classes on material that is permitted for them to learn. Therefore, Noahides may attend classes on the weekly *parsha* or very basic classes in Mishnah or Torah law. However, classes on Talmud, Midrash, or Kabbalah are prohibited. If a non-Jew does sit in on such a class, must the Jewish teacher stop teaching until the non-Jew leaves?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein was asked a very similar question²⁴. He answered that the prohibition of teaching Torah applies only when the instruction is actually directed to or intended for non-Jews. If the instruction is intended for and directed to Jews, yet a non-Jew happens to sit-in, there is no transgression committed from the side of the Jew. However, the non-Jew is transgressing his own prohibition by studying that which is prohibited to him.

²² See *Yabia Omer*, *Dvar Moshe*, *Tsafos Chagigah* 13a, and many others. Note, however, that there are some who opine that even teaching non-Jews the Noahide laws is forbidden. The *Yad Eliezer* and *Divrei Yissaschar* acknowledge that, even though a non-Jew who delves into his obligations is like a *Koben Gadol*, it is still forbidden for Jews to teach him the Noahide laws. [Eyn Yaakov](#) on *Chagigah* quotes a *Tsafos* which states that teaching non-Jews about the Noahide laws was only a *mitzvah* before the giving of the Torah. After Sinai it became prohibited for Jews to teach them any Torah. This *Eyn Yaakov* must be discounted, however, because the *Tsafos* he quotes has never been located. See *Igros Moshe* YD III 89.

²³ To *Chagigah* *ibid*.

²⁴ *Igros Moshe* YD II 132.

Summary of Lesson 21

1. Jews are prohibited from teaching Torah to non-Jews.
2. The sages agree that Jews should instruct non-Jews in the Noahide Laws
3. There is significant disagreement as to the extent and depth of this instruction. While non-Jews may delve as deeply as they wish into their obligations, many authorities do not permit Jewish assistance in this. There is a variety of contemporary rabbinic opinions and practices.
4. Jews may not teach the Oral Torah to non-Jews.
5. Whether or not Jews may teach the written Torah to non-Jews is a matter of some dispute. Nevertheless, it is accepted today that they may teach them the written Torah (including the prophets and writings).
6. Non-Jews should not attend any Torah classes that teach material prohibited to them.
7. If a non-Jew does attend such a class, the teacher does not need to stop teaching. However, his continued teaching should not be seen as condoning the non-Jew's participation.