

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH PROJECT

The Noahide Laws - Lesson Thirty Four



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Table of Contents:

1. Introduction
2. The Noahide Covenant & Man
3. Judgment on the Fruit of the Trees
4. Observances for *Shavuos*
5. *Tisha B'Av* – the 8th of Av
6. Jewish Observances of *Tisha B'Av*
7. *Tisha B'Av* & Noahides – Mourning the Temples
8. Summary

Sivan & Av

Lesson

34

Introduction

The next important holiday is [*Shavuos*](#), which is on the 6th of Sivan. For Jews, *Shavuos* is primarily the *zman matan Torosaynu* – the time of the giving of the Torah. However, for Noahides it carries a different yet equally important connotation. In this lesson we will look at *Shavuos* and the remaining holidays of the year from a Noahide perspective.

The Noahide Covenant & Man

To understand the Noahic significance of Sinai, we must place it within the context of God's historical relationship with man. When God created man, He did so with a number of hopes and expectations. However, God also gave man free will. By giving man free will, God also gave man the ability to disappoint Him as well as to please Him. As a result the God/man relationship is never a static one; is it constantly in flux as man provokes and God responds, or God provokes and man responds. The history of humankind, since the beginning of creation, is a chronicle of this dynamic and evolving relationship.

- **Year 1 / - C3760** – God creates Man. The Noahide laws, either all or in part, are communicated to Adam and Eve. This constitutes the first covenant with man.

- **Year 1536/-2225** – By this time man had completely forgotten, or willfully ignored, the original covenant. The world is completely corrupted and man follows his desires with no thought as to God’s will. In this year, Noah began construction of the Ark.¹
- **1657/-2104** – Noah and his family had remained in the Ark for a full solar year (the equivalent of one lunar year and 11 days).² Noah, his family, and all that was with him exited the Ark on the 27th or 28th of Cheshvan. Sometime during the waning days of Cheshvan and the first days of Kislev, Noah and his sons named the constellations in the sky.³ Noah also gave offerings from the clean animals. At this time, God was appeased and resolved to never again destroy the world on account of man. God designated the rainbow as a sign of this covenant. God also commanded (or, according to some, only modified) the last of the Seven Universal Laws – the commandment against eating meat from the limb of a living animal.⁴ Noah and his descendants were also granted all living things as food.
- **1996/-1765** – Within only a few hundred years the world had fallen back into idolatry and, with the exception of a very few individuals, the Noahide laws had been forgotten. In this year the peoples of the world were dispersed and their languages mixed as a result of the Tower of Babel.⁵ According to many, it was at this time that Abraham recognized God’s complete unity.⁶ God also recognized the uniqueness of Abraham.

¹ See *Zohar, Bereshis 58b*; Rashi to Gen. 5:29.

² *Midrash Rabbah, Bereshis 33:7*.

³ *Mishnah Torah, Yesodei HaTorah 3:7*.

⁴ According to Maimonides, *Hilchos Melachim 9:1*, the first six Noahide laws were given to Adam and the remaining one given to Noah after the flood. *Tosafos*, however, holds that all seven were given to Adam and only modified in the times of Noah.

⁵ See *Midrash, Yalkut Divrei HaYamim I 1073*.

⁶ *Midrash Rabbah Bereshis 64:4* and *Seder HaDoros*. Although Abraham rejected idolatry earlier in his life, it appears that it was not until age 40 or 48 that he came to a fully developed, monotheistic recognition of God. See Maimonides, *Hil. Avodah Zarah 1:3* with *Hagabos Maimonios* and *Kesef Mishnah*.

- **2018/-1743** – God’s relationship with Abraham ascended as the world fell deeper and deeper into idolatry and immorality. Therefore, God chose to make a new covenant with Abraham alone. In this year, the *Bris Bein HaBvarim* (Covenant of the Parts) is made with Abraham.⁷
- **2048/-1714** – The covenant of circumcision is made with Abraham.
- **2084/-1677** – Abraham and Isaac, his 36 or 37 year old son⁸, were tried by the *Akeida* – the binding of Isaac. Their special relationship is further established with God.
- **2185/-1576** – Jacob dreams of the ladder. At this time, God continues his covenant with Jacob.
- **2238/-1523** – Jacob and his family descend into Egypt. Egypt is a furnace of idolatry, magic, necromancy, and everything antithetical to the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Nevertheless, in this, the capital city of spiritual impurity, despite 210 years of slavery and oppression,⁹ the descendants of Jacob (known now as the Children of Israel) maintained their monotheism and allegiance to God.
- **2448/-1313** – God redeems the children of Israel from Egypt. He leads them to Sinai, where He establishes an eternal covenant with the entire people and reveals the Torah. Although Israel was God’s primary concern at Sinai, it was not God’s only concern. By the time of Sinai, the rest of the world had entirely abandoned the Noahide laws. With Israel’s triumph of faith, God took new hope in the future of his creation. As He commanded Israel in the Torah, He also seized the opportunity to reaffirm the Noahide laws and command them anew to the world.

From Sinai onwards, God’s expectation for humanity was to observe the Noahide laws not because of their having been commanded to Adam or Noah, but because

⁷ See *Mechilta Shemos* 12:40; *Tosafos Berachos* 7b & *Shabbos* 10b; *Maharsha* to *Megilla* 9a; *Seder HaDoros*.

⁸ This is based on the accepted chronology found in the *Midrash* and *Seder HaDoros*.

⁹ Abraham is told that his ancestors will go into exile for 400 years; however this count began with Isaac and not with the actual descent into Egypt. The actual time of Israel in Egypt was only 210 years. See *Mechilta, Shemos* 12:40-41; *Seder HaDoros*.

of their having been affirmed by Moses at Sinai. From this time onwards, the Noahide laws would be bound up with and subject to the interpretation and study of the Torah as revealed and entrusted to the Jewish people at Sinai.

Although the Seven Noahide Laws were commanded to the world in the times of Noah and Adam (as part of God's evolving relationship with man), their final form was established at Sinai. For Noahides today, Sinai is the origin, purpose, and motivation for keeping the Noahide laws.

This is the reason for Maimonides's words in the Mishnah Torah:¹⁰

All who accept the Seven Mitzvos and are careful to observe them are called MiChasidei Umos HaOlam (of the Pious Peoples of the World) and they have a share in the World to Come. This is provided that one accepts and observes them because they were commanded to him by the Holy One, in his Torah, and reaffirmed by Moses. However, one who observes them based on intellectual reason alone is neither called a Ger Toshav nor MiChasidei Umos HaOlam (of the Pious Peoples of the World). He is, rather, "of the wise ones" of the gentiles.¹¹

Shavuos, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah is the time to connect with the obligation of observing the Noahide laws, accept them anew, and celebrate the fact that God affirmed them anew at Sinai.

Judgment for the Fruits of the Trees

Our Mishnah, which we have seen many times, states:

At four junctures, the world is judged: on Passover for grain, on Shavuos for fruits, on Rosh Hashanah all pass before him like sheep of the flock, as it is written, "He form their hearts as one, he understands all of their deeds." (Psalms 33). On Sukkot, the world is judged for water.

¹⁰ **Hilchos Melachim** 10:11.

¹¹ The text of this last phrase differs in the *editio princeps* (Rome, 1480) and almost all subsequent printed editions. These versions read : ... *one who observes them based on intellectual reason alone is neither called a Ger Toshav nor MiChasidei Umos HaOlam (of the Pious Peoples of the World), and is not "of the wise ones" of the gentiles.* This is almost certainly the error of a careless copyist (the mistake being in the transcription of a single letter). Many of the earliest manuscript versions read ... *He is, rather, "of the wise ones" of the gentiles.* Later scholars also cite this version of the text as correct. See [Teshuvos Maharam Alashkar 117](#), [Rav Yosef ben Shem Tov's Kevod Elokim 29a](#), and, more recently, [Iggros Reiyah I:89](#). Recent critical editions of Maimonides have corrected this text to read ... *He is rather "of the wise ones" of the gentiles.* See Rabbi Shabtai Fraenkel's edition of the *Mishneh Torah*. See also the editions prepared by [Rabbi Yosef Qafih](#) and Yeshivat Or Vishua.

On *Shavuos*, the world is judged upon fruits. As such, it is an appropriate time to pray for the produce of trees.

Observances for *Shavuos*

Shavuot will next fall on May 24, 2015. Like all the holidays, it actually begins at nightfall on the preceding evening.

Decorating the Synagogue

There is a custom to decorate the Synagogue with greenery and flowers in commemoration of the revelation at Sinai, a mountain “full of greenery.” The *Bnei Yissaschar* further connects this custom to the Midrash, which states the following:

To what can this [the revelation at Sinai] be compared? A king had a garden that had become overgrown with thorns. The king brought in gardeners to cut down the entire garden. Just then, the king saw a single rose blooming. He said: “For the sake of this rose, let the entire garden be saved!” Likewise, God declares: “In the Merit of the Torah, the entire world shall be saved!”

In giving the Torah to Sinai, God took renewed hope in the world. This is confirmed by the fact that the Noahide laws were re-commanded to the World at Sinai. It is, therefore, appropriate for Noahides to decorate their places of worship or homes for the holiday in accordance with this Midrash and the other reasons that we have stated.

Renewed Acceptance of the Noahide Laws

Since this is the anniversary of God’s affirmation of the Noahide laws to the world, this is an appropriate time to both individually and communally accept and affirm the Noahide laws. This acceptance does not require a Beis Din or witnesses, but may be done individually or personally. There is no set text for this acceptance; indeed Maimonides says that this is a matter entirely dependent upon the heart. However, should one wish to make a public declaration of his faith, we suggest the following text:

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.

Prayers

Prayers should express the desire that the entire world acknowledge the revelation at Sinai and come to accept the Noahide laws.

Prayers should also include petitions for favorable judgment upon the produce of trees.

A Vigil of Torah Study

There is a Jewish custom to remain awake for the entire night of Shavuos, studying Torah in anticipation of the arrival of daybreak. There are a number of reasons for this custom, many of which connect it directly to events relevant to Israel. The *Magen Avraham*, for example, explains:

The Zohar says that the early pious ones would stay awake all night on Shavuos and learn Torah. Nowadays, our custom is for most learned people to do so. Perhaps the reason is based on the fact that the Israelites slept all night long and God had to wake them when He wanted to give them the Torah, as it says in the Midrash, and therefore we must repair this.¹²

The Midrash records that Israel overslept on the Morning of receiving the Torah. For this reason, proposes the Mogen Avrohom, the Jews remain awake all night on *Shavuos*.

However, the Zohar records other reasons for this custom:

*R. Shimon used to sit and learn Torah at night when the bride joined with her spouse. It is taught: The members of the bride's entourage are obligated to stay with her throughout the night before her wedding with her spouse to rejoice with her in those perfections (*tikkunim*) by which she is made perfect. [They should] learn Torah, Prophets and Writings, homilies on the verses and the secrets of wisdom, for these are her perfections and adornments. She enters with her bridesmaids and stands above those who study, for she is readied by them and rejoices in them all the night. On the morrow, she enters the canopy with them and they are her entourage. When she enters the canopy, the Holy One, blessed be He, asks about them, blesses them, crowns them with the bride's adornments. Blessed is their destiny.¹³*

This passage describes the giving of the Torah as a “wedding” of The Holy One to His Presence, the *shekhina*. Kabbalistically, this refers to the rectification and restoration of God’s kingship in the world. This spiritual wedding is accompanied by the bridesmaids, the Jewish people, who learn Torah all night as an adornment of the bride. The Zohar offers further descriptions of this custom:

Therefore, the pious in ancient times did not sleep that night but were studying the Torah, saying, “Let us come and receive this holy inheritance for us and our children in both worlds.” That night, the Congregation of Yisrael is an adornment over them, and she comes to unite with the King.

¹² *Mogen Avraham* OC 494.

¹³ *Zohar* I:8a

Both decorate the heads of those who merit this. R. Shimon said the following when the friends gathered with him that night: Let us come and prepare the jewels of the bride... so that tomorrow she will be bejeweled... and properly ready for the King.¹⁴

It appears that the custom of staying awake all night is unique to the closeness of Israel and God. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to increase Torah study on this day and to prepare spiritually for the morning of Shavuot. It is, therefore, appropriate to gather and study the Noahide laws and Midrashim pertaining to the Noahide laws and the giving of the Torah until late at night. The morning prayers should be held early as well.

Tisha B'Av – the 9th of Av

Tishav B'Av, the 9th day of the month of Av, is the darkest day on the Hebrew calendar. On this date, innumerable tragedies befell the Jewish people throughout their history. Most importantly, both of the holy temples were destroyed on this day, albeit 500 years apart.

However, this day was fixed as a time of mourning long before, while Israel still wandered in the wilderness:

The Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Send out for yourself men who will scout the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel. You shall send one man each for his father's tribe; each one shall be a chieftain in their midst." So Moses sent them from the desert of Paran by the word of the Lord. All of them were men of distinction; they were the heads of the children of Israel...

*They returned from scouting the Land at the end of forty days... They brought them back a report, as well as to the entire congregation, and they showed them the fruit of the land... They spread an [evil] report about the land which they had scouted, telling the children of Israel, "The land we passed through to explore is a land that consumes its inhabitants, and all the people we saw in it are men of stature... **The entire community raised their voices and shouted, and the people wept on that night.**"¹⁵*

The Midrash explains that God, upon hearing the people weep, said: "Since you have cried on this night for no reason, I will give you a reason!"

¹⁴ Parashat Emor 88a.

¹⁵ Numbers, chapters 13 & 14.

Because of the *lashon bora*, evil speech, that was perpetrated on this day against the land of Israel, the 9th of Av became designated as a day of sadness for all future generations.

Jewish Observance of *Tisha B'Av*

Tisha B'Av, the 9th day of Av, is a day of mourning for the Jewish people - not only for the Temple, but for all the tragedies of their history. Although a Holocaust memorial day has been recently established, it is not acknowledged by most observant Jews. Rather, they remember the Holocaust along with all other tragedies on *Tisha B'Av*. This is because *Tisha B'Av* is the root, the source, of all of these tragedies.

On this day, Jews fast from sundown until after sundown. Additionally, they gather in the synagogue and recite laments while seated upon the floor. There are a number of other observances expressing mourning that are kept as well. For example, Jews do not greet each other on this day. Additionally, they do not wear leather shoes or bathe.

For Noahides, who do not share in the tragic history of the Jewish people, they cannot relate to much of the meaning of this day. However, Noahides do have a share in the most fundamental concern of the day – mourning the destruction of the Holy Temple.

***Tisha B'Av* & Noahides – Mourning the Temples**

Though the service and responsibility of the Temple was given to the Jewish people, the Temple was of benefit to the entire world (as we have discussed much in our previous lessons). In fact, the sages tell us:

*If the nations of the world had only known how much they needed the Temple, they would have surrounded it with armed fortresses to protect it!*¹⁶

On *Tisha B'Av*, Noahides, should they wish to fast in mourning for the temple, may certainly do so. However, it is suggested that this only be a half-fast, from sunset until noon of the following day. Additionally, it is appropriate to compose and recite laments upon the destruction of the temples. These should be appropriate to the Noahide relation to the temples.

¹⁶ *Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:3.

**Point of Action:
Noahide *Kinnos***

The Jewish laments for *Tisha B'Av*, called [*Kinnos*](#), are mostly relevant only to Jewish history and Jewish experience. It is appropriate for Noahides to compose their own *kinnos*, laments, for the day. These should be recited both at night and morning prayers.

Tisha B'Av is an opportunity to recognize the importance of the Temple, and to express to God the desire to right the wrongs of the world.

A service for the Noahide commemoration of *Tisha B'Av* is being drafted as part of this course.

Tisha B'Av will next fall on Sunday, July 26, 2015. As will all holidays, it actually begins on the preceding evening at nightfall.

Summary of the Lesson

1. While Jews celebrate Shavuot as the giving of the Torah, Noahides celebrate it as the day upon which the Noahide laws were renewed and a day of judgment for the fruit of trees.
2. The place of worship or the home should be decorated with greenery.
3. It is a time for reaffirmation and acceptance of the Noahide laws.
4. Torah study should be increased on this day.
5. On *Tisha B'Av* it is appropriate for Noahides to mourn the loss of the Temple and to meditate upon its meaning for the Nations of the world.
6. If Noahides wish to fast on *Tisha B'Av*, it should only be until midday on the day of *Tisha B'Av*.
7. It is appropriate for Noahides to recite laments for the destruction of the two Temples. This is a point of action for Noahides – to compose laments appropriate to their relationship with the temple.