

UTHE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH PROJECT

The Noahide Laws - Lesson Forty-Seven



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Introduction

Lifecycle X: Death, Burial & Other Issues



For Jews, the laws of death and burial are wrought in tremendous detail. Many of these laws are Rabbinic, yet predicated on values and beliefs expressed in the written Torah; beliefs as to the nature of body and soul, faith in the eventual resurrection, the afterlife, etc.

Unlike Jews, Noahides do not have any specific commandments on treatment of the dead. However, the value statements and beliefs found in the written Torah (upon which much of the Jewish laws are based) apply equally to Noahides. Therefore, while Noahides do not have specific religious duties to their dead, their actions are informed and guided by Torah beliefs and values.

Although there are many verses and episodes in Tanakh that imply burial practices for Noahides, these instances do not create any actual obligations. The Tanakh's many references to burial and treatment of the dead are discussed at length in the Torah literature. However, a full exploration and explanation of these references would require far more than one (or even several) written lessons. We will provide only a general overview of the issues here and save specific questions for the live class.

Body & Soul

Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.¹

¹ Gen. 2:7.

This verse teaches us the most important dichotomy of the human condition: we are both physical and spiritual beings. The creator “breathed” a soul into man and, like breath, it is ethereal, invisible, and absolutely essential. The body, however, was molded from the earth. It is dense, physical, and entirely material.

When God decides that a person’s time has come, the two elements that comprise man return to their primordial sources. The soul returns back to its completely spiritual existence while the body rejoins the earth:

By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread until you return unto the ground; for out of it you were taken; for you are dust and unto dust you shall return.²

This verse does not command us to bury our dead;³ it merely describes the natural decay of the body as part of God’s design.

Created in the Image of God

*And God said, "Let us make man in our **image**, after our **likeness**, ... And God created man in His own **image**, in the **image** of God created He him...⁴*

As we know, God and the Angels have no physical form or shape. What is meant by the terms **image** and **likeness**? Rashi summarizes the interpretations for us:

...after our likeness...;

Meaning that man, unlike the other creations, is similar to his creator in that he has the ability to understand and discern.

And God created man in His image...

Meaning that God created man in the form that was made for him. Everything else was created with a commandment ["let there be"], whereas man was created by God's own "hands," as it is written

² Gen. 3:19.

³ The Jewish commandment for burial is learned from Deut. 21:23. See Sanhedrin 46b.

⁴ Gen. 1:26 to 27.

(Psalms 139:5): "...and You placed Your hand upon me." Man was made with a stamp, like a coin, which is made by means of a die.⁵

...in the image of God He created him...

It explains to you that the image that was prepared for him was the image of the likeness of his Creator.⁶

Rashi is teaching us that man is unique from all other creations in two primary aspects. First, unlike all other creations, man has the ability to understand, discern create, etc. This is describing the nature of the human soul and mind. Second, we were made in the "image" of God. The Hebrew here, *tzelem*, is a difficult word to translate. It can mean diagram, picture, or mold. Rashi is pointing out that God Himself directly designed, shaped, and formed man. This is in contrast to all other elements of creation that came about via the verbal command of God: *Let there be...* God simply ordered something to exist and it was so. However, He never ordered the existence of Man. Rather, as Rashi writes *...man was created by God's own "hands"...*

While the "likeness" of God refers to the spiritual, mental, and creative aspects of man, the "image" or "design" of God refers primarily to the physical aspect of man. Therefore, once the soul is taken from the body, the "likeness" of God is also removed. However the body remains as a testimony to the unique care with which God fashioned man and His special love for him:

[Rabbi Akiva] would say, 'Man is beloved because he was created in the image of God. It is an even greater love that this was made known to mankind, as it says, "and in the image of God was man created."⁷

Therefore, the body, the testimony of God's love and handiwork, should be treated with great respect. This idea does not create liability or obligation, but is a value that should guide the decision making process of the family when making arrangements for the deceased.

⁵ See *Midrash Tehillim* to 139:5; Sanhedrin 38a.

⁶ See Bava Basra 58a.

⁷ Avos 3:14 (3:13 in some editions).

Autopsy

Autopsies are generally prohibited under Jewish practice for the reasons we have mentioned above.⁸ Though not prohibited for Noahides, autopsies run contrary to Torah values. Autopsies should be discouraged unless there is a specific reason or need.⁹

Delaying Burial

Jews are prohibited from delaying burial of the dead for any reason. However, delays necessary for the sake of the deceased and his honor are permitted. While these rules do not apply to Noahides, it is not respectful to the deceased to allow it to remain unburied for any unessential period of time.¹⁰

Embalming

God, in his wisdom, designed the human body to return to its source once the soul has departed. Embalming is a corruption of this design and is not considered respectful to the deceased.

Cremation vs. Burial

There is no prohibition of cremation for Noahides. However, cremation is the destruction of God's handiwork and should be discouraged.

Casket Burial in the ground allows the body to decay according to God's design. This process is facilitated by using a casket that is also biodegradable. Many funeral homes offer plain wooden caskets (often marketed as "traditional Jewish caskets") that break down over time or are perforated to allow the body to decay and return to the earth.

⁸ There are other reasons as well. See Bava Basra 115a.

⁹ See Bava Basra *ibid.* Chullin 116; *Nodab BiYehuda* YD 210; and *Shu"t Chasam Sofer* YD 336. For Jews autopsies are only permitted in an extremely narrow range circumstances.

¹⁰ There are some who may hold it is prohibited to even delay Noahide burial. See *Toldos Noab* 13:21 and *Matza Chein* 13:29.

Cemetery Noahides may not be buried in Jewish cemeteries (this is a prohibition from the Jewish side; Jews are not allowed to bury non-Jews in Jewish cemeteries). Burial in any other place is permitted.

Funeral Service

There is no set service for Noahide funerals. This is one of a number of areas in which Noahism requires development. Keeping in line with the ideology of the Torah, the following principles are suggested:

- The service should not in any way allow for denial of the condition or reality of death. This is unhealthy and has long-term consequences.
- The service should allow open mourning and crying for the deceased. Expressions of grief are exceptionally important for both spiritual and psychological reasons. Unexpressed or unresolved grief is a most poisonous emotion, producing unexpected results (and, sometimes, even entire religions...)
- Eulogizing of the deceased by those close to him is important because it opens the hearts of those who are present and honors the deceased.
- The funeral should offer the opportunity for closure, forgiveness, and for those present to “bury the hatchet” with the deceased.
- Open casket funerals should be discouraged for a number of reasons that will be discussed in the live class.

Mourning

In the Jewish world, mourning is a highly developed process, crafted to ensure emotional as well as spiritual health. Its details are obligatory and involve many very formal elements. Noahides have no such obligations or mourning customs. This is another area in which development is needed. We should note, however, that Noahides in earlier times observed a set period of mourning:

For in another seven days, I will make it rain upon the earth for forty days and forty nights, and I will blot out all beings that I have made, off the face of the earth.¹¹

The Talmud, Sanhedrin 108b explains that the flood was delayed for seven days to allow mourning for the righteous Methuselah. As Rashi writes:

For in another seven days...

These are the seven days of mourning for the righteous Methuselah, for whom the Holy One, blessed be He, showed honor by delaying punishment. If you calculate the chronology of Methuselah you will find that he passed in the six-hundredth year of Noah's life.

Noahides certainly have a solid precedent from this verse for observing seven days of mourning for their dead.

In the next lesson we will finish the lifecycle series.

Summary of the Lesson

1. Man is composed of body and soul; physical and spiritual entities.
2. Man's mind, wisdom, intelligence, and creativity are all part of the "likeness of God" and set man apart from animals and other elements of creation.
3. Man's physical aspect, however, was formed by God. What is more, this physical aspect was designed and formed directly by God. It was not merely commanded into being.
4. As such, the physical aspect of man is a testament of God's love of man and of His handiwork. Therefore, dishonoring it is dishonoring one of God's most prized creations. Though not implying any obligations or liabilities, it is a value which informs burial practice.
5. Autopsies and embalming are discouraged.

¹¹ Gen. 7:4.

6. Burial should not be delayed unless it is for the sake of the deceased.
7. Burial in the ground is ideal. In locales that require use of a casket, it is best that the body be buried in a casket that allows for full decay of the body"
8. There is no set Noahide funeral service. This is an area of development for Noahides.