

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH PROJECT

# The Noahide Laws - Lesson Fifty-Two

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## Table of Contents:

1. Introduction
2. The Injunction Against Noahide Idolatry
3. Noahide vs. Jewish Prohibitions of Idolatry
  - a. Capital Idolatry
  - b. Lesser Forms of Idolatry
4. Idolatry in Thought or Intellect: The Prohibition of “Turning to Idolatry”
  - a. Thoughts and Theologies
  - b. Books of Idolatry
  - c. Learning From Deviant Believers
  - d. Deniers of the Torah & Scorners
  - e. Debating Idolaters & Atheists
5. Verbal Idolatry
  - a. Oaths
  - b. Referring to Idols
  - c. When it is Permitted
6. Summary

## *Idolatry II: Fundamentals*

Lesson

52

### **Introduction**

In the last lesson we did a very general overview of the origins and nature of idolatry. This lesson begins our practical overview of the subject.

Idolatry exists in two realms:

- 1) **Idolatry of thought, belief, and words, and**
- 2) **Acts of idolatry.**

Although all forms of idolatry are prohibited, one is only culpable in earthly courts for committing **acts of idolatry**. This lesson will address **idolatry of thought, belief, and words**. We will examine acts of idolatry in the next lesson.

### **The Injunction Against Noahide Idolatry**

Genesis 2:16 states:

*And the Lord, **God**, commanded unto Adam...*

This verse goes out of its way to specify that the Lord, *HaShem*, is God. The Talmud in Sanhedrin 56b notes the implication of this verse is that *HaShem*, and only *HaShem* is God. This idea carries positive and negative *mitzvah* connotations:

- **Negative: Not to “exchange” God** - This is the specific prohibition of idolatry. The Torah defines idolatry as the replacement or “exchange” of God. This concept is much larger than the singular idea of worshipping a graven image. It includes the worship of any natural object or abstract force. Included as well is the worship of any image representing God.

Since God has no form, there can be no item that depicts Him. Therefore, if one worships such an image, he is by default not worshipping *HaShem*. Similarly, to worship any physical item as an embodiment of God (or part of God) creates a similar problem because God has no corporeal or physical manifestation in this world.

- **Positive: One must fear/awe/respect God** – As the creator and master of all things, giver of life, and ultimate power, God demands and deserves our fear, awe, and respect. It is true that we must also strive to love and be grateful to God. However, full acceptance of God's authority and law requires respect and awe of Him.

## Noahide vs. Jewish Prohibitions of Idolatry

For Jews, there are many acts and types of idolatry that incur the death penalty. However, there are other types of idolatry for which a Jew would not receive death, but which are nevertheless prohibited. For example, a Jew is not liable to death for embracing or kissing an idol, even though doing so is prohibited.<sup>1</sup>

Are Noahides executed for all types of idolatry? Or, are they perhaps liable only for those for which Jews would be liable to death?

### **Capital Idolatry: Braisa Sanhedrin 56b**

The Talmud cites the following *braisa* as authoritative:

*Anything [idolatrous] for which a Jewish court would execute [Jews], Noahides are warned against. Anything [idolatrous] for which a Jewish court would not execute [Jews], Noahides are not warned against.<sup>2</sup>*

This *braisa* teaches that any Jewish act of idolatry that incurs capital punishment for Jews also incurs capital punishment for Noahides. Therefore, capital forms of idolatry are the same for both Jews and non-Jews.

### **Lesser, Non- Capital Forms of Idolatry**

What about acts of idolatry that are prohibited for Jews, but for which they are not executed? What is the Noahide liability for these lesser forms of idolatry? Are they even prohibited to Noahides? For example: is a Noahide prohibited from embracing or kissing an idol?

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<sup>1</sup> Sanhedrin 60b.

<sup>2</sup> Sanhedrin 56b.

Though the *braisa* certainly says they are not executed for doing so, is it prohibited nevertheless? The Talmud actually asks this exact question and concludes that Noahide liability is identical to Jewish liability. Therefore, Maimonides writes:

*A gentile is sentenced to death for any type of idolatrous worship for which a Jewish court would impose capital punishment [upon a Jew]. However, a gentile is not executed for a type of idolatrous worship for which a Jewish court would not impose capital punishment. Even though a Noahide will not be executed for these forms of worship, he is nevertheless forbidden from engaging in any of them.*<sup>3</sup>

The definitions of prohibited forms of idolatry, whether they incur capital liability or not, are equally the same for both Jews and Noahides. As we shall see, idolatry's definition, never changes: idolatry is idolatry regardless of who commits it.<sup>4</sup>

## Idolatry of Thought or Intellect: The Prohibition of “Turning to Idolatry”

The Torah states:

*Do not turn toward the idols...*<sup>5</sup>

and

*Beware ... lest you seek to find out how these nations serve their Gods.*<sup>6</sup>

### Idolatrous Thoughts & Theologies

These verses prohibit contemplating, studying, or investigating the thoughts or theologies of idolatrous religions. Therefore, one may not entertain idolatrous thoughts, contemplations, or other such musings. One is also prohibited from planning or contemplating prayer or worship to an idol. Heaven punishes a person for this even if the plan is not actually carried out.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [\*Hilchos Melachim 9:2.\*](#)

<sup>4</sup> The only one exception may be the concept of *shituf* – belief in Hashem plus another entity. While it is considered idolatry for Jews, it is not for non-Jews according to *halakhab*.

<sup>5</sup> Lev. 19:4.

<sup>6</sup> Deut. 12:30.

<sup>7</sup> *Kiddushin* 39b with *Tosafos*.

### Books of Idolatry

As well, books of idolatrous faiths are forbidden and may not be studied or even owned. Such books should be destroyed so that their falsehoods will not persist in the world.<sup>8</sup> The “new testament” is a book of idolatry and must likewise not be owned or read. Even though the central figure was a Jew, the theology and even the apparently wise sayings therein contain many deep, subtle and carefully crafted distortions and misrepresentations of Torah thought. From start to finish, it is a bastardization of Torah thought and belief. Due to its thorough corruption, it is no different from nor does it have any more relevance to Torah than any other pagan or idolatrous book. However, it is more dangerous than other pagan books because of its superficial similarities and seeming parallels to parts of Rabbinic literature as well as its historical connection to Judaism (or to “a Jew,” to be precise).

One may only learn or own such texts if the purpose is to understand how to recognize and better avoid that which is prohibited or to save others from the trap of such material.

### Learning from Deviant Believers

Also included in the prohibition of “turning to idolatry” is learning personally from a *min*, a person whose beliefs or conceptions of God are fundamentally wrong. There are five basic types of *minim* (the plural of *min*), deviant believers, brought in Torah literature:<sup>9</sup>

- One who does not believe in any god or guiding force to the universe,
- A polytheist – one who believes in more than one god,
- One who believes in one god, yet believes that he has now or has ever had a form, body, or other physical manifestation,
- One who denies creation’s fixed beginning *ex nihilo* from God’s command,
- One who believes in, serves, or worships any natural or man-made item as an intermediary between man and God.

These beliefs are idolatrous and prohibited.

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<sup>8</sup> *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 334:21.

<sup>9</sup> [Hilchos Yesodei Teshuvah 3:7 and 8](#) with the commentaries of the *Kesef Mishnah* and the *Raavad*; [Hilchos Mamrim 1:1-2 & 3:3](#).

### Deniers of Torah & Scorners

The following are not called *minim*, deviant believers, but are called “scorners” or “deniers of the Torah,” and one should not learn from them:

- One who does not believe in prophecy or that God communicates with man,
- One who denies God’s omniscience,
- One who believes that the *mitzvos* are manmade or were in any way devised by man,
- One who believes that the Oral Law is manmade or in any way a human invention.
- One who believes that God replaced or altered any part of the Torah or any *mitzvah* after the revelation at Sinai.

This latter group of beliefs is erroneous, yet not idolatrous. Believing in any of them is tantamount to denial of the Torah in its entirety. Therefore, it is not possible for one to be called a believing Jew or Noahide if one believes in any of these things. One may not learn from any of these deviant or erring believers even if such learning is for a constructive purpose like recognizing or countering prohibitions.<sup>10</sup>

### Debating Idolaters and Atheists

The prohibition of “turning to idolatry” also includes debating idolaters and atheists. However, discussion with them for the sake of exposure to Torah and the Noahide laws is permitted.<sup>11</sup>

## Verbal Idolatry

The Torah states:

*...you shall not mention the names of other gods...*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Shabbat 75a with Rash; *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 179 (end) and *Shach*. We should note that there has been serious debate for centuries over Maimonides’s reliance upon Aristotle. There is not sufficient room to discuss the issue here, but only note that Maimonides’s use of Aristotle is no proof that we may learn or study Aristotle’s works.

<sup>11</sup> See [Hilchos Avodah Kokhavim 2:5](#) along with its commentaries.

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 23:13.

The Talmud and Maimonides explain that this verse comes to prohibit praising or giving any credence to the name of idolatry.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, there are a number of restrictions on using the names of idols.

**Oaths** One may not pledge or swear an oath in the name of an idol or adjure others to do so.<sup>14</sup> This is even prohibit if one swears but does not mean it sincerely or have any sincere belief in the idol.<sup>15</sup>

**Referring to Idols** It is prohibited to refer to any idol in a respectful manner. For example, many of the catholic saints are actual idols. When referring to them, one should not use the honorific of “saint.” Casual or neutral references to the names of idolatry are permitted. Nevertheless, it is praiseworthy not accustom oneself to using the name of an idol even in a casual sense.

**When it is Permitted** One may mention the names of idols when teaching the prohibitions of idolatry.

**Verbal Acceptance of an Idol** In all of these cases, one does not incur capital punishment. However, if one verbally accepts an idol upon himself as his god he has committed a capital crime.<sup>16</sup>

## Summary

1. Idolatry is prohibited in thought as well as deed. Idolatrous thoughts, however, are not punishable by a human court.
2. Idolatry is the “exchanging” God or the true conception of God for any other god or idea of God.
3. Whatever is considered idolatrous for Jews (whether idolatry of thought or deed) is also considered idolatry for Noahides. It doesn’t matter whether it is a capital form of idolatry or a lesser form of idolatry.

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<sup>13</sup> *Hilchos Avodas Kokhavim* 5:10.

<sup>14</sup> The laws of making such oaths are found in *Hilchos Avodas Kokhavim* 1:2, 5:10; *Hilchos Shevunos* Ch. 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Radvaḥ* V:256.

<sup>16</sup> *Hilchos Shegagos* 1:2 with commentaries. See further *Nekudos HaKesef* YD 148; *Hilchos Avodas Kokhavim* 9:5.



4. One may not contemplate idolatrous theologies or ideas.
5. One may not own or study the books of idolatrous religions. Such books should be destroyed.
6. One may not learn religion or even Torah from one whose beliefs are corrupted.
7. It is prohibited to debate those who hold such corrupted beliefs.
8. One may not swear in the name of an idol or refer to them in a praiseworthy manner.