

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH PROJECT

The Noahide Laws - Lesson Fifty-Four



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Introduction

Idolatry IV: Idolaters

Lesson

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So far, we have looked at the fundamentals of idolatry and its prohibitions in thought, speech, and deed. In this lesson we will look at the interpersonal aspects of idolatry and the *halachos* pertaining to idolaters. Recall that we have already learned that it is prohibited to learn from or debate idolaters or those who hold corrupt beliefs.

Man as God

Bowing or honoring any man who has made himself into a god is prohibited. However, bowing before such a person is permitted in the case of fear or out of honor for one's position (examples will be discussed in the live class).

A Man with an Idol or Image upon Him

It is forbidden to honor or show respect before a person who has an idol embroidered upon his clothing or is wearing an image of the idol.¹ "Showing respect" includes methods of honor such as:

- Bowing,
- Removing one's hat,
- Kissing another's hand,

¹ *Orach Chaim* 113:8; *Yoreh Deah* 150.

- Standing when the other enters the room,
- Curtsying.

This prohibition is limited only to showing honor because of the idol itself or the idolatry associated with the person's position. If the idol carried upon the person is unrelated to any reason for the individual's honor, then it is permitted to bow or kiss the person's hand.

For example, may one stand or remove his hat for someone who is wearing a crucifix? It depends:

- If the person is a priest or minister, then honoring him is prohibited,
- If the person is a powerful official of a secular government (whose position deserves honor) then it is permitted even though the individual is wearing a crucifix.

Idolatrous Vestments

The clothing and vestments of idolatrous priests are not themselves idolatrous unless they include an image of the idol. They wear these garments for their own honor and position, not for the sake of the idol.

In Business

As a Seller

A Noahide may not sell items known to be idolatrous. Also, he may not sell any item, even a non-idolatrous one, to a Noahide if he knows for certain that it is going to be used for idolatrous purposes.² Therefore, selling Xmas lights to idolaters is permitted because their purpose is not intrinsically prohibited. However, one may not sell idolaters candles or other utensils of actual worship. If the items are readily available at the same or better price elsewhere, and the Noahide's livelihood is affected, then he may sell it to the idolater because he is not contributing directly to the idolater's act.³

As a Buyer

One may not buy goods or donate money or other materials when such resources would go directly to perpetuate idolatrous institutions or activities (i.e. a church bake

² *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 151:2.

³ *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, Rama* 151 and 151:6.

sale).⁴ However, one may donate or purchase goods when the funds are going to be used for other things as well (i.e. a church bake sale to raise money for a homeless shelter).

An Accidental Purchase

If one buys many items from an idolater and unwittingly purchases or receives idolatrous items, he does not need to nullify or destroy the items. Rather he may return them to the idolater (the reasons will be discussed in the live class).⁵

Idolatrous Festivals

The Talmud and *Halacha* prohibits conducting any business with idolaters both on their festivals and in the days immediately preceding them.⁶ This includes repaying loans,⁷ buying, and selling.⁸ The concern is that the business will prompt the idolater to thank his god on the festival.

This prohibition has very limited application in the western world today. The reasons will be discussed in the live class.

Inheriting Idolatry

If ones parents or other relatives leave him an inheritance that includes idolatrous items, he may not give the items to his siblings or other idolaters. Rather, he must take possession of the items and then destroy or nullify them.⁹ Remember, however, that idolatrous items inherited from a Jew cannot be nullified; they must be destroyed.

Attending Idolatrous Festivals

It is prohibited to attend idolatrous festivals at which idols are served by any acts of idolatry or prayer. As long as there is no prayer or actual idolatrous service, one may attend the gathering even if it has religious or seasonal connotations. Therefore, one

⁴ *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 143.

⁵ *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 146:3.

⁶ *Talmud Avodah Zara* 2a; *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 148:1.

⁷ *Hilchos Avodah Zarah* 9:1.

⁸ See the *Rosh* 1:1 to *Avodah Zara* at length for a discussion of the details.

⁹ *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 146:4 with the *nosei Keilim*.

may attend an office Xmas party since the main purpose is not relevant to idolatry or religion

Entering Places of Idolatry¹⁰

Buildings dedicated to or constructed for idolatry are prohibited. One may not use these buildings or benefit from them in any way. While there is no actual prohibition against Noahides entering these structures,¹¹ one should avoid doing so.¹² Entering a church or other place of idolatry is fraught with potential problems and pitfalls.

Today, almost all Noahides have relatives who are involved with idolatrous religions. This fact makes lifecycle events, often held in churches, awkward for believing Noahides. There is a much literature pertaining to Jews entering such places or attending such events. However, there is very little material addressing the Noahide situation. The following is a summary of the *halachos* according to the available responsa literature.

The Type of Event

Lifecycle events that are idolatrous in their very purpose or nature may not be attended under any circumstances. This would include church confirmations, christenings, ordinations, etc. Similarly, if one has a relative who is singing or performing in an idolatrous service, one may not attend to hear her perform since the essence of the gathering is idolatrous. Weddings, however, are not intrinsically idolatrous since the concept of marriage is almost universal.

Held in a Sanctuary

If the event is held in a church, yet the event is not intrinsically idolatrous, he should still not attend unless his absence would create conflict or strife. In that case, one may attend, but should be very cautious to not participate in any way in the service; one may only passively observe the event. One should also avoid any action that may be perceived as idolatrous (examples will be discussed in the live class). It is best to stand or sit at the back of the congregation so that his non-participation will not be conspicuous or cause ill will.

¹⁰ This summary of the *halachos* is based on *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* Ch. 142, 148, and 150.

¹¹ Jews, however, are abjured against entering such places.

¹² There some authorities who have argued that Noahides are actually prohibited from entering churches. However, it appears to this author that this is not on account of any actual injunction against doing so, but only as a practical issue.

In Another Part of the Church

One may attend an event that is not intrinsically idolatrous and not held in a church sanctuary (meaning, that it is held in a social hall or other room). This is even if one's absence would not create strife. However, one may not participate in the service if it includes any religious overtones.

Entirely Secular Events

One may attend an entirely secular event held in a church (concert, town meeting, etc.) provided that he avoids any action that appears to give deference to the idols therein.

Summary of the Halacha

	Sanctuary	Other Room or Building in the Facility	Entirely Secular Facility (i.e. Non-Denominational Wedding Hall)
Idolatrous	May not attend.	May not attend.	May not attend.
Not-Intrinsically Idolatrous	May attend if one's absence would cause strife. Must not participate or appear to honor the idols therein.	May attend even if absence would not create strife. Should still not participate in the service.	May attend even if absence would not create strife. Should still not participate in the service.
Entirely Secular	May attend, but should not appear to honor the idols therein.	May certainly attend.	May certainly attend.

For Practical Purposes

A Noahide may enter a church or other such place for certain business purposes or other practical reasons.

Summary

1. One may not bow or honor any man who is believed to be a God.
2. One may not honor any person with an idol upon his person. However, if there are reasons for honoring the person independent of the idol, then one may show him honor.
3. It is prohibited to sell any idolatrous item. It is also prohibited to sell any regular item if it is known with certainty that it will be used for idolatry.
4. One may return accidentally purchased idolatrous items.
5. If one inherits items from his family, they must be nullified or destroyed.
6. Attending the festivals of idolaters is permitted providing that the festivals are not actually idolatrous.
7. Entering idolatrous places for idolatrous services is always prohibited. There are cases when one may attend a church for family or lifecycle events.