

“KEEP THE SEVEN, GO TO HEAVEN!”

by Chaim Revier

The innocent student of the King James Bible is unlikely to come up with the idea that *Bereishis* 2:16 (“And the Lord G-d commanded the man saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden thou may freely eat’”) lays down the seven so-called Noachide laws, the mitzvot that are binding upon the those descendants of Noach who repopulated the world after the Deluge. Our Sages, however, have an oral tradition telling what these laws are. This tradition found its way into the *Tosefta* (*Avodah Zarah* 9:4) and the *Talmud Bavli* (*Sanhedrin* 56a ff). The *gemara* on *Sanhedrin* 56b asks the question, “*mena hanei milei*, from where do we derive these things,” and answers in the name of Rabbi Yochanan with the above *pasuk*.

In the order given by the Talmud, these are the seven Noachide laws: *Dinim*, setting up courts of law and appointing judges to enforce the other six laws; *Bircas HaSheim*, not to blaspheme; *Avodah Zarah*, not to worship idols; *Giluy Arayos*, not to engage in forbidden relationships; *Shefichus Damim*, not to spill blood; *Gezel*, not to rob or steal; and *Ever Min Hachai*, not to eat the limb of a living animal. Transgression of any of these laws is punishable by decapitation; one who keeps them will be rewarded in Olam HaBa.

Western society, on the face of it, shouldn't have too much trouble abiding by the Noachide laws. Even without threat of decapitation, blasphemy is frowned upon in polite company. For stealing or murdering you could go to jail. Lawyers and law firms are everywhere, so there must be courts, too, and most people live on a conventional diet. Even gourmets

with a taste for French or Chinese cuisine in their more extreme manifestations wouldn't so easily transgress the mitzvah of *Ever Min Hachai*. Eating the brains of a live (and shrieking) monkey isn't a popular pursuit, and even the French habit of eating live oysters doesn't necessarily count as a transgression of this mitzvah.

Doing What Comes Naturally

It could be argued that the seven Noachide laws are rather close to what is called “natural law” in philosophy; the concept, found in the works of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and others, is that in order to survive, prosper, and constitute a society in which it is safe to live, man entered into a “social contract,” creating and subjugating himself to laws. Stealing and murdering endanger the fabric of society, as does engaging in illicit relationships, the family being, after all, the cornerstone of civilization.

Even the Gemara offers a source for this approach (*Yoma* 67b): “Our rabbis taught, ‘My laws alone shall you observe’” (*Vayikra* 18:4). These are the [laws] that, if they hadn't been written, should have been written. And they are [the prohibition of] idol worship, illicit relationships, bloodshed, stealing, and desecration of the Name.”

A Religion for Atheists?

It would seem that even atheists could claim to keep the Noachide laws and not even inadvertently. But, the staunchest atheists of all, those who hold by one form or another of communist ideology (there even used to be a Museum of Atheism, housed in an “abandoned” church in Leningrad), might be said to have stumbled into the area of idol worship during

the last century. Most communist leaders of yesteryear (who, incidentally, upheld none of the Noachide laws), whether giants like Lenin, Stalin, Mao, or relatively small fry, but no less lethal, dictators like Ceausescu of Romania and Enver Hoxha of Albania, created cults around their personality. In the guise of “Infallible Leader,” “Valiant Hero,” “Father of the Nation,” and “Supreme Master” in all sciences and arts, they provided the world with more photographic, painted, and sculpted portraits of themselves, apparently for devotional purposes, than many organized religions managed to turn out of their deities.

The claim that one could be an atheist and still keep the Noachide laws must be rejected in the Rambam's opinion. “Everyone who accepts upon himself the seven commandments and is careful to act upon them, he is one of the righteous among the nations and has a part in the World to Come. That is, if he accepts them and does them because HaKadosh Baruch Hu commanded them in the Torah ... But, if he does them because his reason tells him to ... he is not one of the righteous among the nations and not one of their wise men” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Melachim*, 8:11). Some hold that there must be a scribal error in the last sentence

and that it should read, “... but he is one of their wise men” (*ela* instead of *v'lo*). This interpretation is based on wishful thinking, for there is no manuscript evidence to support it. Besides, true wisdom would lie in the conviction that the seven Noachide laws are, indeed, G-d-given. This is borne out by the fact that the *pasuk* from which the seven Noachide laws are derived is a commandment in itself (in combination with the next *pasuk*), the commandment not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of good and bad. This commandment, says Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in his commentary on the Chumash, is not rational; on the contrary, it goes against human in-

tellect, and man would never have thought of it himself. It is, says Rabbi Hirsch, a “*chok* in optima forma,” a commandment that is kept for no reason except that G-d said so.

Are We Talking About the Same G-d?

So, if you aren't Jewish, and you would like to get to Heaven for your observance of the seven Noachide laws, you would also have to acknowledge that Hashem runs the world.

Suppose you were an adherent of one of the monotheistic religions, such as Islam, for example. Would that count as an acknowledgement of Hashem as Ruler of the world? Apart from the question of whether they *actually* keep all the seven Noachide laws, you can at least say of the Muslims that they are *shtark* in their monotheism. What about the Christians? Can the same be said of them? As their version of *Tanach* has been translated into every known language, every Christian knows that, by all opinions, G-d is One. Yet many Christian denominations hold by the so-called Trinity, the concept that G-d is sort of a three-in-one combination of a father, a son, and a holy spirit. On the other hand, the Christians subscribe to the Ten Commandments as binding upon themselves, so if they're good Christians, there's a good chance that within that framework, they do get around to keeping the seven Noachide laws.

Not all Christians believe in the Trinity. Some sects hold that G-d is simply One, not three-in-one, and that the son in question wasn't a son at all but a regular fellow who happened to have a message that they think is important. There aren't too many anti-Trinitarians, and the largest

Christian denomination, the Roman Catholics, do worship the “son,” and they also venerate, rather emphatically, his mother. Rabbeinu Tam on *Bechoros* 2b, seems to permit Trinitarianism to non-Jews because “their mind is set upon the Creator of heaven and earth, even though G-d is associated with something else.”

There is another problem with Christianity. It is a relatively recent development that many Christians, but certainly not all of them, have started to look at Jews and Judaism with sympathy and genuine interest, sometimes with amazing consequences. A friend of mine, an elderly gentleman, is a long-time convert to Judaism. In his previous life, he was a Roman Catholic. It was the priest of a particular church in Amsterdam who unintentionally kindled his interest in Judaism. “He preached me, so to speak, right into the synagogue,” my friend told me.

Bnei Noachism: A Religion?

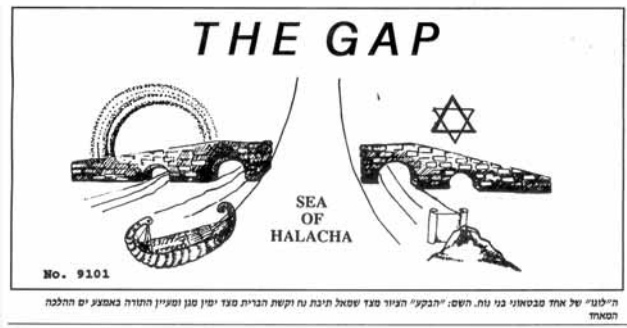
There is another option, which allows a person created as a non-Jew to acknowledge G-d, accept and keep the seven Noachide laws, and endorse G-d’s special relationship with the Jewish people all at the same time. This option is to become a member of the *bnei Noach*.

The *ben Noach* is loosely modeled after the *ger toshav*, the non-Jewish stranger who, upon accepting the seven Noachide laws with all their ramifications (which were left to the discretion of the *beis din*), was allowed to live in Eretz Yisrael in the days of yore, when the Jews were still masters of the land. It was a mitzvah incumbent upon the Jews to help and give sustenance to the *ger toshav*.

In modern fashion, the role of the *bnei Noach*, who choose to live under the jurisdiction of the Torah, has changed. Today, very few of them live in Eretz Yisrael. They can be found all over the Western world but mainly in the US, helping the Jewish people to be a “light unto the nations” by not only accepting the seven Noachide laws but also by voluntarily fulfilling a number of other mitzvos, as well as by their warm interest in things Jewish and their willingness to share what they know with other non-Jews. By taking on this role, they are also playing their part in



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hastening the arrival of Mashiach, may he come speedily in our days. For that reason, the last rebbe of the Lubavitcher chasidim, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, took a keen interest in the *bnei Noach*. So has the Jerusalem-based Root & Branch Association, Ltd., which is perhaps more sensitive to the imminent *geulah* and more eager than the rest of us to be prepared.

The person who consciously proclaims himself to follow the Noachide laws is a relatively recent phenomenon. The *bnei Noach* of today are only the first generation, and their grand old man is Vendyl “Texas” Jones (born 1930), former Baptist preacher and well

known, also among Jews, for his activities as an amateur archaeologist hunting for lost Temple treasures.

About a century ago, there was a follower of the Noachide laws named Aime Palliere (1875–1949), an originally Roman Catholic French writer and philosopher. He felt drawn to Judaism but was advised by the Italian rabbi Elia Ben-amozegh (1822–1900), whom he had approached for conversion, to stick to the seven Noachide laws. Aime Palliere has been called the precursor of today’s *Bnei Noach*, although, at the end of his life, Palliere returned to the faith in which he was born and brought up and which he apparently had never really been able to give up. The *bnei Noach* of today, on the other hand, seem intent on making a clean break with the past.

Who’s Running the Show?

The *bnei Noach* are hard to count, being a rather amorphous category. Philip Levy, a member from Virginia whose father is Jewish, gives a rather pessimistic estimate, guessing that the number of “self-aware, declared *bnei Noach*” runs “in the hundreds.” Michael Dallen of Detroit, author of the book *The Rainbow Covenant*, and a Jew himself, is much more optimistic. Asked about their number, he states: “If you mean *bnei Noach* who have abandoned any other religious affiliation and self-identify as Noachides exclusively, religiously, I would say thousands or, more likely, tens of thousands. If you mean *bnei Noach* in the last classification who also believe that they have a lot to learn from the people of Israel — that is, Noachides who accept the legitimacy of the whole Torah system — I would say thousands.”

The High Council

In January 2006, the High Council of *bnei Noach* was convened by the recently formed, and largely ignored, Sanhedrin in Israel, which gave the organization its official seal of approval.

Regardless of the validity of such a *shtempel*, the ten members of the High Council, including “Texas” Jones, present in his capacity as Honorary Noachide Council Elder, took a pledge in front of the rabbis, stating among oth-

er things: “I pledge my allegiance to Hashem, G-d of Israel, Creator and King of the Universe, to His Torah and its representatives, the developing Sanhedrin. I hereby pledge to uphold the Seven Laws of Noah in all their details, according to Oral Law of Moses under the guidance of the developing Sanhedrin.” Where there is a chief rabbinate, there is a network of community rabbis; but nothing of the sort can be said here. There is a High Council, but there are no lower councils. Not only that, but the High Council itself has a competitor, an “official” body called the United Noachide Council Inc., an initiative of former High Council member Billy Jack Dial.

This council has as its main purpose to sponsor “a five- to ten-year Hebrew-only educational program in Israel” for selected *Bnei Noach*, in order to meet an anticipated future demand for educators and judges. The people thus educated will work within the *bnei Noach* communities and “will have the right and honor of being nominated by their ... communities and presented to the United Noachide General Council and be appointed by such council to sit upon the positions of the United Noachide Supreme Council.” Billy Jack Dial has a vision for the future, that much is clear: “The Structure of the United Noachide Council perhaps could be patterned after the United Nations General Assembly. Theoretically there should be seventy courts, one for each nation. Each *bnei Noach* court has the role of prophet, oracle, or interpreter of Torah for that nation.”

In the meantime, at the grassroots level, things do seem to be happening. People are getting together physically in local groups or, if there is nobody like-minded in the neighborhood, over the Internet, learning about the seven commandments and about Judaism. Some, like Philip Levy, partake in activities at their local Orthodox shul (“the congregants could not be more welcoming and supportive of our presence,” he writes).

The *bnei Noach* aren’t forming a new faith, they emphatically state. And, indeed, the seven Noachide laws have always been extant, at least according to the majority of Rishonim and Acharonim (some hold that the Noachide laws were abrogated because of lack of success, based on *Baba Kama* 38a). This is more or less confirmed by the Druze, who are supposed to be descended from Yisro, whom

they call Shoab; his tomb in Kfar Chittin, near Tiberias, is their holiest site. From a certain angle, Yisro can indeed be seen as a very early follower of the Noachide laws in the narrow definition. Interestingly enough, in January 2004 the spiritual leader of the Israeli Druze community, Sheikh Mowafak Tarif, signed a declaration calling upon all non-Jews in Israel to observe the Noachide Laws.

Where Do They Stop?

Now, as our hypothetical non-Jew, no rites of passage, no *bris milah*, and no

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tevilah, are required in order to become a member of *bnei Noach*. You don’t even have to make any pledge or take any oath in front of any body of rabbis. That doesn’t mean that there are no difficulties, even hardships, entailed by breaking away from one’s old faith and community and maybe from friends and relatives too. But, is it harder to tell your buddies that you don’t believe in Christianity anymore than to tell your Christian friends and family that you want to become Jewish? And don’t forget that, in the latter case, you would have the added problem of getting the Jewish community to accept you.

Perhaps taking on the yoke of seven commandments, part of which are in the Code of Law of any civilized country anyway, cannot be compared with conversion. But many *bnei Noach* like to keep as many mitzvos as they are allowed. They are not allowed, for instance, to lay tefillin or to write a *mezuzah* or a *sefer Torah*, so they refrain from doing those mitzvos. They cannot keep Shabbos either, on pain of death. Some don’t keep Shabbos at all, while others observe the holy day of rest just like Jews, except for making sure to do a token act of *chillul Shabbos*, such as lighting a cigarette or writing a check, to avoid being subject to the death penalty. As for other mitzvos, they are free to keep them if they like. They may eat kosher, circumcise their male children, and honor their parents to their hearts’ content, and they may avoid practices proscribed by the Torah, such as tattooing or shaving one’s beard with a razor. Some build a succah and sit in it and take part in a Seder. I can’t remember seeing anywhere that the *bnei Noach* also take upon themselves to fast on our regular fast days, but I imagine that there are those that do. The question is where do they stop? Do they *toivel* their dishes? Do they sell their *chometz*?

Uncharted Territory

Not being Christian anymore and not being Jewish, the *bnei Noach* find themselves in a no man’s land, in an uncharted



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siddur to tell them what to say. One can find various recommendations, and Chabad has a Noachide siddur in preparation, but these don't go back to Chazal and are not hal- lowed by tradition. Furthermore, in an article in one of the many Noachide newsletters, Rabbi Y. Bindman, author of *The Seven Colors of the Rainbow* (2000), states that a non-Jew can join the silent prayer of Jews in shul, "not necessarily standing as they do but not kneeling," and his prayer will be joined with theirs. "There is no requirement for the content of his prayer, only on condition that he prays to G-d alone for his own needs and those of others, without any intermediary at all." On the other hand, "there is no loss in his not attending, as prayer is accepted at any time."

Finally Seeing the Light

These quotes illustrate the dilemma of one who follows the Noachide laws. I asked a few converts I know what they thought about the concept of following the Noachide laws. They simply couldn't see the point in it.

I also asked a few people in the Noachide world whether it wouldn't make more sense to convert. Philip Levy and Michael Dallen provided answers that show that there can indeed be a point in following the Noachide laws.

Philip Levy writes: "The impact of [non-Jews] encouraging Jews to fulfill their Torah obligations should not be underestimated. Jews have long been affected by their [non-Jewish] neighbors, albeit usually in a negative way. (...) As *bnei Noah*, we play a supporting but vital role in encouraging Jews to fulfill their obligations to keep Torah and do mitzvot by acknowledging the truth and

importance of their purpose. (...) We hope to give Jews a positive reason to run to and embrace Torah: the nations they have been a light unto for so many generations are finally beginning to see that light."

And Michael Dallen writes, "A convert becomes another Jew. The zealous Noachide becomes a center of Torah-learning among the [non-Jews]. (...) When the Noachide becomes another Jew, he's very unlikely to have much influence on his fellow Noahides. (...) They won't envy the restrictions his new life places on him. In fact, this may even put them off the path of Torah and Hashem. (...) [The *Ben Noach*] deserves ... the help of the Jewish people. They are, after all, our brothers in faith. We, Jews, need to bless them, just as they have chosen to bless us." ■



NOACH'S AMERICAN CHILDREN *by Rabbi Moshe Grylak*

Originally published in "Shavua Tov":

Many American Christians are turning their backs on the doctrines they grew up with, rejecting anything having to do with *oso ish* and looking for authentic religious roots. Their search has led them to the seven mitzvos of the *bnei Noah*, to rabbis in Israel, and to the recognition that the Jewish people was chosen by G-d and its job is to teach the nations of the world how to walk on Hashem's path

Rabbi Menachem Burstein is probably best known to our public in his capacity as director of the PUAH Institute, which provides fertility counseling, assistance, and supervision in accordance with halachah. However, he wears another, most interesting hat; he serves as one of the rabbinical advisors of the *bnei Noah*. In 1990, Rabbi Burstein, with the blessing and encouragement of leading *poskim* in Israel, traveled to America to participate in the First International Conference of the Agudat Kerem Bnei Noah, held in Fort Worth, Texas.

Rabbi Burstein shared his impressions of the group's leader, Vendyl Jones. "For years he was a well-known Baptist minister and Christian thinker, with knowledge in many fields, including the history of Christianity. His studies in the origins of Christianity led him to discover that the popular teachings about the life of *oso ish*, upon which Christian belief is based, are garbled and distorted.

"After much soul searching, Jones eventually decided to tear away the mask from Christianity. He boldly declared before his congregation that Christianity is distorted. The force of his amiable personality, excellent leadership skills, and brilliant rhetorical ability drew the whole flock after him, and Vendyl Jones's congregation abandoned the Christian religion to seek out their earliest religious roots.

"He first came to me because he'd heard I was trying to locate the Temple vessels, a passion he shares with me. His interest in the Temple and participation in a number of archaeological digs brought him fame as an amateur archaeologist.

"When we met," says Rabbi Burstein, "Mr. Jones was thinking of converting to Judaism. I told him about the concept of Bnei Noah, explaining that a person can remain a non-Jew and still live by the Torah and that the Rambam states that such a non-Jew is considered to be among the *chassidei umos haolam* and has a portion in the World to Come.

"My words made an impression on him, especially after he heard the same thing from prominent *poskim*. He came to a conscious decision to remain a non-Jew and accept upon himself to keep the seven mitzvos. [Incidentally, two of his children, a son and a daughter, did become converts, and both are living in Israel.]

"I gave him the book, *A Light Unto the Nations* by Rabbi Yoel Schwartz, which is entirely devoted to the laws of Bnei Noah, and I arranged for him to meet with Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu to receive some preliminary guidelines on

the practical fulfillment of these commandments. A bond was formed then, a bond that remains firm to this day."

As mentioned, Rabbi Burstein was invited to speak at the Dallas conference of the *bnei Noah*. This was to be a historic meeting between representatives of Torah Judaism and non-Jewish refugees escaping from the sinking ship of Christianity.

"It was intimidating," he concedes, "because we didn't know to what extent these people were willing to submit to the halachah and how serious they were about cutting off all ties to Christianity."

What were the topics of conversation at the convention?

"We spoke about the fundamental issues. We explained to these amiable people that it was obligatory, first of all, to disassociate themselves completely from all beliefs and rituals connected with *oso ish* because, as long as they were in any way attached to him, they fell into the category of idolaters, despite all their sincere good will. This is a non-negotiable condition for any group or individual wishing to be accepted as *bnei Noah*.

"During these discussions, the question of conversion came up; if they were leaving Christianity, then why shouldn't they all just become Jewish? We explained that, according to the Torah, everyone has his purpose in life. Just as the Jewish nation is divided into Kohanim, Leviim, and Yisraelim, and no one can cross the lines but must fulfill the role assigned to him, so it is with the non-Jews too. True, the option of conversion exists, but there is no need to turn it into a mass movement; one can be pleasing to G-d and serve Him wholeheartedly as a *ben Noah*, too. The participants found these basic principals fully acceptable.

"After these preliminary meetings, difficult practical issues arose. 'We left an organized church,' some of them argued. 'We had prayers, rituals, a day of rest, holidays, and so on. Now we have nothing except true faith in our hearts. But, we need a framework! What prayers should we say? What about a day of rest? We aren't allowed to keep the Jewish Sabbath, and Sunday is the Christian Sabbath. Friday as a day of rest is for Muslims. ... How do we contract a marriage bond? Aren't there any rules for us? Do any laws of modesty apply to us? Even for the mitzvos we already know, we need a code of law like your *Shulchan Aruch*, laying down details on how to fulfill them.'"

