

Noahide Laws Sources

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QUESTION : (a) Where does the Bible say that these Seven Noahide Commandments were given to Noah, and where does it say that they were given to Adam?

ANSWER : The first six commandments were given to Adam. These commandments were repeated, and a 7th commandment was added, when G-d made the Covenant of the Rainbow with Noah. Hence these became known as the Seven Noahide Commandments.

As an introduction before going on to point out the source verses, note that the Covenant of the Rainbow was not dependent on these commandments. Rather it was G-d's promise to all living creatures that He would never again obliterate all land-life from the world, no matter how sinful people would become (Genesis 9:8-17 – "Never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth"). The Covenant of the Rainbow has an inner meaning as well, which is that G-d promised that He would always accept a person's sincere personal repentance if it was directed to Him.

The entire Book of Genesis, and the Book of Exodus up to and including the arrival of the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, were dictated by G-d to Moses when they arrived there. There was then a first covenant made between G-d and the Israelites (who at that point were still Noahides) on that part of the Torah, before the Ten Commandments were spoken openly to all of them by G-d. The part of Torah which G-d decreed that Gentiles must observe is the Seven Noahide Commandments (which in essence

are all prohibitions, including all their details). G-d told Moses at Mt. Sinai that the Gentiles ("all that come into the world") would be expected to at least keep those Seven Commandments from that point on.

Up to that time, the general Gentile population of the world had forsaken any obligations they had been commanded through Adam or Noah. So according to His plan, G-d released everyone from the reward associated with fulfilling those earlier obligations (since the nations had rejected them), which He all along intended to be renewed through his greatest prophet of all time, Moses. Since the whole future existence of the creation was dependent on the acceptance of the Torah of Moses and its 613 Jewish Commandments by the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, G-d's covenant for the reward of eternal life was made on the Torah at that time as a heritage for the Jews, and for Gentiles who wish to accept their part in this Mosaic Covenant. The revealed Torah is G-d's "Tree of Eternal Life," and from that time on, Gentiles can obtain a share in the future World to Come (the culmination of the Messianic Era) if they choose to observe their Seven Commandments as their part in the Written and Oral Torah which G-d gave through Moses.

G-d also made this understandable by simple human logic. Since we only know about the Seven Noahide Commandments and all their details through G-d's Torah, a Noahide's reward for acceptance and fulfillment of them as Divine Commandments must be accompanied by faith in the Torah. But if a person lacks this faith, G-d forbid, that does not change his or her accountability for transgression of any of the Seven Noahide Commandments.

In the Oral Torah (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, chapter 7), it is explained that all of these Seven Noahide Commandments are coded within a single verse in Genesis, chapter 2. But first let's start with six of the Noahide Commandments which are explicitly found in different verses in the Book of Genesis.

1. Do Not Murder.

The edict against murder is stated in Genesis 9:6: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, among man, his blood shall be shed; for in the image of G-d He made man."

2. Do Not Have Forbidden Sexual Relations.

Five of the six types of relations which are forbidden by G-d to Gentiles are covered in Gen. 2:24: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife and they shall become one flesh." This verse explicitly forbids relations with one's mother, one's father's wife, a wife of another man, another male, and an animal. A Gentile is also forbidden to have relations with his maternal sister, which is learned from Gen. 20:13: "Moreover, she is indeed my sister, my father's daughter, though not my mother's daughter; and she became my wife." (Note that Abraham said this to appease Abimelech. It was actually only figuratively true in his case, since Sarah was the daughter of Abraham's brother. So they had the same paternal grandfather, who people often referred to as "father".) It also was universally accepted that father-daughter relations would be included, as evidenced by the disgrace of Lot after he had relations with his two daughters, following G-d's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:29-36, and Rashi's explanation of Gen. 20:1). Relations of a female with a female are likewise an abomination to G-d which is included as one of the subjects of the verse Lev. 18:3, which speaks against the immoral practices of the ancient Egyptians and Canaanites, and which Lev. 18:30 refers to as "abominable traditions." About these the Midrash (Sifra) specifies: "A man would marry a man, a woman would marry a woman, and a woman would be married to two men."

3. Do Not Commit Theft.

The prohibition of theft is contained within the permission which G-d granted to Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:16 to eat from the trees of the garden. This implies that if the permission had not been granted, they would have been forbidden to do so, because the property did not belong to them. This applied specifically to the fruit of the Tree of "Knowledge of Good and Evil" which was forbidden for them to take, under penalty of death (Genesis 2:17).

(Note that Adam and Eve were not given permission to eat animals, so all humans were constrained to be vegetarians until after the Flood. G-d permitted the eating of meat for the first time to Noah and his family after they left the Ark, which is why G-d at that time added the seventh commandment, which prohibits the eating of flesh removed from a living animal.)

4. Establish Laws and Courts of Justice.

This can be learned from the story of Shechem, Dinah, and the sons of Jacob. In Genesis 34:2 it relates, "Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivvite, the prince of the land, saw her; he took her, and he lay with her, and violated her." His "taking" her against her will was a form of kidnapping, which was forbidden as a type of theft. Since the men of Shechem's city did not convene a court of justice and convict him for his crimes, they failed to obey this commandment and also collectively became accomplices to his crime. Jacob's sons therefore formed a court, convicted them, and executed them.

5. Don't Eat Flesh Taken From a Live Animal.

This commandment (the seventh) was given to Noah in Genesis 9:4. ("Nevertheless, you may not eat flesh with

its life, which is its blood.”)

6. Do Not Commit Blasphemy.

Leviticus 24:10-17 relates the incident of a Jew who violated the injunction of Exodus 22:27 and blasphemed in anger, and the Divine edict proclaiming this to be a capital offense. Moreover, it states there “ish ish (any man) who curses his G-d shall bear his sin.” Why the double _expression of ish ish (literally: a man, a man)? To include all mankind, Jews and Gentiles. This demonstrates that blasphemy thus is prohibited to Gentiles as a capital offense even as it is for Jews. (Sanhedrin 56a)

7. Do Not Murder.

The edict against murder is stated in Genesis 9:6: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, among man, his blood shall be shed; for in the image of G-d He made man.”

The source for the remaining law, which prohibits worship of false gods, is explained below.

But first note that the recounting and recording of the Seven Noahide Laws by Moses took place at Mt. Sinai, two days before G-d spoke the Ten Utterances in Ex. 20:1-14. In Exodus 24:3, it says “Moses came [before G-d spoke the Ten Utterances] and told the people all the words of G-d and ALL THE LAWS ...” The words “all the laws” refer to the Seven Noahide Laws and three additional Jewish laws, which the Children of Israel had already been commanded before they arrived at Mt. Sinai. (Moses told this total of 10 laws to the Israelites at Marah, after they crossed through the sea – see Exodus 15:25.) The next verse, Exodus 24:4, states that “Moses wrote all the words of G-d ...” These words were the Book of Genesis, which contains the Noahide Covenant and the Noahide Laws, and the

Book of Exodus up to that point. G-d thus commanded the Jewish People at that time to remember the Noahide Laws, to teach them to all the nations of the world for all generations, and to provide for the establishment of Noahide courts in the Land of Israel for those Gentiles who choose to live there.

In the Oral Torah passed down through the Jewish prophets and sages and recorded in the Talmud (Sanhedrin p. 56b), it is explained that all these seven laws given are coded within the verse Gen. 2:16 (“And L-rd G-d commanded to the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may surely eat.”) In Hebrew, the verse reads, “Va-y’tzav Havaye Elokim al ha’adam laymor mikol aits hagan achol tochayl.” One of the 13 specific rules of authentic Torah exegesis is by a tradition of an analogy between two laws established on the basis of identical Hebrew expressions. The seven laws are coded into Gen. 2:16 as follows, as explained by the Talmudic sage Rabbi Yochanan:

1. The word Elokim is one of the holy divine Names which mean “G-d.” But the same word is used in the non-holy plural sense to refer to physical or conceptual idolatries (other “gods”), as in the verse “You shall have no other gods ...” (Ex. 20.3). Thus the above statement to Adam implies that only G-d should be worshipped, but not an idol. According to this, a Gentile is liable for making an idol, even without worshipping it.

[Note: the Talmudic sage Rabbi Yitzchak offered an alternative derivation. He suggested that the word tzav (“command”) in the verse points to a prohibition of worship of false gods. The verse would then teach that only G-d, the One True G-d, is the source of all true commandments, and therefore only G-d is to be served. The connection to idolatry is evident from Hosea 5:11: “Ephraim is plundered, shattered by his judgement; for he has willingly followed after their command/tzav” – i.e., the command of idolatrous priests.]

2. The unspoken four-letter Divine name in this verse, transposed to spoken form as Havaye, points to a prohibition against cursing G-d, as evident from Leviticus 24:16. ("And one who pronounces blasphemously the Name of the L-rd/Havaye shall be put to death, the entire assembly shall surely stone him; convert and native alike, when he blasphemes the Name, he shall be put to death." Note: in the painless mode of execution translated from Hebrew as "stoning", the convicted criminal was drugged and thrown to his death from a high tower onto a stone pavement. See Tractate Sanhedrin.)
3. The words al ha'adom ("to the man") point to the prohibition against murder, which is stated in Gen. 9:6 (see above).
4. The prohibition of the six forbidden sexual relations (see above) is pointed to by the word laymor ("saying"), as evident from Jeremiah 3:11 ("Saying/laymor: if a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him and marries another man, can he return to her again? Would that not bring profound guilt upon the land? Yet you have committed adultery with many lovers and would now return to Me – the word of the L-rd.")
5. The prohibition of theft is contained within the general sense of the verse, as explained above.
6. The word va-y'tzav ("He commanded") in the verse points to the requirement for courts of justice, as seen from the similar wording in the verse Gen. 18:19: "For I know him, that he will command ("y'tzaveh") his children and his household after him that they may keep the way of the L-rd, to do righteousness and justice."

[Note: the Talmudic sage Rabbi Yitzchak offered an alternative derivation. He suggested that the commandment to establish laws and courts of justice is pointed to by the word Elokim/G-d, which also means "judges." This is evident from Exodus 22:27, which uses this word to simultaneously prohibit cursing G-d and cursing judges – as explained for example by Maimonides

in his Book of the Commandments.]

7. The verse concludes, “you may surely eat” – of the trees of the garden, but not meat removed from a live animal.

So there you have it!

QUESTION : (b) Where does it say that the Seven Noahide Commandments are for all nations?

ANSWER : The simple answer to this question is that when G-d renewed these universal laws with Noah (see beginning of Genesis chapter 9), they were meant not just for Noah and his immediate family, but for all of Noah’s descendents (i.e. all nations, for all time) as G-d’s basis for civilized human society.

The complete answer to the question is that when G-d told Moses to record the Noahide Commandments and the story of Noah in the first book of the Torah (Genesis), He commanded through Moses that these seven commandments should be learned and practiced by all the nations for all time according to their details which would be revealed in the Torah (G-d’s “Tree of Eternal Life”), and that that this would be the opportunity through which Gentiles can merit to receive a place in the eternal future World to Come.

From various narratives in Genesis, we also learn that a wide variety of peoples knew about and either practiced or were held responsible for the Noahide Laws: the Chaldeans (as demonstrated by Abraham, who personally knew Noah), the Philistines (as demonstrated by Abimelech), the Hivvites (as demonstrated by the story of Shechem), and the Canaanites (as demonstrated by the story of Sodom and Gomorrah).

[A further note. It seems to me, although I have not seen a source for this, that there is also a way that the universal

nature of the Seven Commandments can be seen from the verses at the beginning of Genesis Chapter 9. After the Flood, in Gen. 9:1-7, G-d gives Noah and his family several directives. These begin with the blessing/directive to be fruitful and multiply (Gen.9:1). Then in verse 9:4, G-d prohibits the eating of flesh removed from a living animal. Then in verses 9:5 and 9:6, G-d prohibits murder and explicitly states in both 9:5 and 9:6 that this prohibition applies to all mankind. (Note that G-d says that murder is prohibited because He made mankind "in His image," which refers to the intellectual human soul that He invests within the human body.) Then in verse 9:7, G-d repeats the blessing/directive to be fruitful and multiply. Now the words of the Torah are very concise, and a verse is not repeated unless the repetition comes to teach us something new. In this case, it seems to me the repetition in verses 9:1 and 9:7 shows that G-d has a common intention for all the directives in this group of 7 verses. Since one of the directives is explicitly applied to all mankind, it is clear from the context that this intention applies to all the directives that are explicit or implicit in this group of verses – i.e., all of the Seven Commandments which G-d established with Noah and his family when they left the ark.]