

[The Noahide Laws: Thoughts on Parashat Noah,](#) [October 9, 2010](#)

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Rabbinic tradition teaches that Noah and his descendants were given seven basic categories of law, and that "Noahides" fulfill their religious obligations through these Noahide laws. The Talmud (Yevamot 47a) states: "Our sages have said that seven commandments have been prescribed for the Sons of Noah: the first requires them to have judges; the other six forbid sacrilege, idolatry, incest, homicide, theft, and the consumption of a limb taken from a living animal."

The great 19th century thinker, Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh, pointed out that the Noahide laws represent an important part of Jewish teaching. While Jews are obligated to observe all the commandments of the Torah due to their covenant with God, all non-Jewish human beings are bound by a divine covenant through the specific commandments given to them as Noahides. Thus, Judaism is a religion that maintains both a specific message to Jews, and a universal message for all humankind.

Because non-Jews have access to God through the Noahide covenant, they are under no obligation to convert to Judaism in order to be "saved". "The authentic spirit of Judaism appears unambiguously when we find it affirming that there exist just men among the Gentiles, men loved by God, whose merits are responsible for the prosperity of the nations." (E. Benamozegh, "Israel and Humanity", translated and edited by Maxwell Luria, Paulist Press, 1994, p. 349.) Those non-Jews who wish to convert to Judaism are welcome--but Jews have generally avoided active proselytization, since non-Jews do not have to become Jewish in order to serve God properly. They need only adhere to the seven Noahide laws (and their derivatives), thereby living morally upright lives.

Judaism presents a religious message for humanity. It does not demand or expect that everyone convert to Judaism. It does not force Judaism on anyone. It respects non-Jews' spiritual integrity, and offers a religious worldview which is remarkably universal and humane. It only asks that all human beings--Jewish and non-Jewish--conduct their lives on a high moral level, based on recognition of One God who loves all humanity.

Maimonides (Hilkhot Shemitah veYovel 13:13) underscored the universal vision of Judaism: Not only the tribe of Levi but every single individual from among the world's inhabitants could rise to the highest spiritual levels and could become "totally consecrated, and God will be his portion and inheritance forever and ever."

Rabbi Benamozegh noted the irony: Christianity and Islam are considered "universal" religions; and yet they have historically been quite intolerant of those not adhering to their particular religion. They engaged in forced conversion of "infidels", crusades, and religious wars in order to force others to accept their creeds. They have taught that only their religious adherents fulfill God's will and can share in the blessings of the world-to-come. Judaism, which is often (unfairly) portrayed as being parochial and particularistic, actually is the most universal religion--it teaches that God blesses all righteous people, that the world-to-come is available to all good people whether Jewish or non-Jewish.

God's covenant with humanity--the Noahide laws--create the foundation for a world governed by justice and morality. Humanity still has a very long way to go to fulfill this covenant properly. In humankind's quest for a righteous world, the religious message of Judaism is a beacon of strength and hope.

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