

# Universal Morality: Analyzing the Seven Noahide Laws

*Dedicated in memory of Mr. Irving Montak z"l*

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## סנהדרין נ"ו א [1]

תנו רבנן שבע מצות נצטוו בני נח דינין וברכת השם ע"ז גילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים  
וגזל ואבר מן החי

### Sanhedrin 56a

§ Since the *halakhot* of the descendants of Noah have been mentioned, a full discussion of the Noahide mitzvot is presented. **The Sages taught** in a *baraita*: **The descendants of Noah**, i.e., all of humanity, **were commanded** to observe **seven mitzvot**: The mitzva of establishing courts of **judgment; and** the prohibition against **blessing**, i.e., cursing, **the name** of God; and the prohibition of **idol worship**; and the prohibition against **forbidden sexual relations; and** the prohibition of **bloodshed; and** the prohibition of **robbery; and** the prohibition against eating **a limb from a living** animal.

## רד"ק על ירמ" ט"ז:י"ח:א' [2]

...כי אפילו לא צויתם ולא הזהרתם על התועבות כמו שלא צויתי ולא הזהרתי  
הגוים שהיו בה מקדם אף על פי כן הארץ לא סבלה אותם התועבות והקיאא אותם  
כי אף על פי שהגוים לא נצטוו הרי נתן בהם הקל שכל ובינה ומדרך השכל יש  
להשמר מכל התועבות ומלעבוד אלקים אחרים עץ ואבן כל שכן ישראל שנצטוו  
שהוא מן הדין שתקיאם הארץ...

### Radak on Jeremiah 16:18:1

...For, even had I not commanded them and not warned them regarding the abominations, as I did not command and I did not warn the nations that were there [in Israel] prior, even so, the land did not bear those abominations, and it expelled them. For, even though the nations were not commanded, God gave them intellect and intuition, and logically, they should guard themselves from all abominations and from serving other gods--of tree and stone. All the more so Israel, who were commanded [about this], it is logical that the land will expel them.

כד. והוסיפו עליהן דינין <sup>אשר התקיימו</sup> דינין הם מו' מצות עכ"ו  
מיחשבה הוספה כיון שהיה בהן שינוי יסודי שמקודם נצטוו על דין  
שכלי של אדם ובמרה נצטוו על פרטי דינים משפטי תורת ה'.

24. **And he added laws:** While "laws" are amongst the seven (Noahide) laws, they are still considered an addition since they had a fundamental change. For, originally, they were commanded to use logical judgement, whereas, at Marah they were commanded about the detailed laws and rules of Hashem's Torah.

#### [4] משנה תורה, הלכות מלכים ומלחמות ה' י"א

(יא) פל המקבל שבע מצות ונזהר לעשותן הרי זה מחסידי אמות העולם. ויש לו חלק לעולם הבא. והוא שיקבל אותן ויעשה אותן מפני שצוה בהן הקדוש ברוך הוא בתורה והודיענו על ידי משה רבנו שבני נח מקדם נצטוו בהן. אבל אם עשאן מפני הכרע הדעת אין זה גר תושב ואינו מחסידי אמות העולם ולא מחכמיהם:

#### Mishneh Torah, Kings and Wars 8:11

(11) Anyone who accepts upon himself and carefully observes the Seven Commandments is of the Righteous of the Nations of the World and has a portion in the World to Come. This is as long as he accepts and performs them because (he truly believes that) it was the Holy One, Blessed Be He, Who commanded them in the Torah, and that is was through Moses our Teacher we were informed that the Sons of Noah had already been commanded to observe them. But if he observes them because he convinced himself logically, then he is not considered a Resident Convert and is not of the Righteous of the Nations of the World, but merely one of their wise.

#### [5] בראשית כ"ו:ה'

(ה) לְעָבַב אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַע אַבְרָהָם בְּקִלְי וַיִּשְׁמַר מִשְׁמֵרָתִי מִצְוֹתַי חֻקֹּתַי וְתוֹרָתַי:

#### Genesis 26:5

(5) inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings."

## [6] רש"י על בראשית כ"ו:ה'ג'-ד'

(ג) מצותי. דברים שאלו לא נכתבו ראויין הם להצטוויות, כגון גזל ושפיכות דמים: (ד) חקותי. דברים שייצרו הרע ואמות העולם משיבין עליהם, כגון אכילת חזיר ולבישת שעטנז, שאין טעם בדבר, אלא גזרת המלך וחקותיו על עבדיו:

### Rashi on Genesis 26:5:3-4

(3) MY COMMANDMENTS — those matters which, had they not been written in the Torah, we would nevertheless hold that they are fitting matters to be the subject of a commandment, such as robbery and murder (cf. Yoma 67b). (4) MY ORDINANCES — matters which our evil inclination and the heathen nations argue against the necessity of prohibiting, such as the eating of swine's flesh and the wearing of garments made of a mixture of wool and linen — things for which there are no apparent reasons but which are the King's decrees and enactments imposed on His subjects (Yoma 67b).

## [7] כלי יקר במדבר יט:ב

תשובה לדבר: כי יש חוקים שיכול השכל האנושי להשיג טעמים זולת שטעמים נסתר מכלל ההמון ונגלה הוא ליחידי שרידי הדור, ופרה זו טעמה נסתר מכל אדם שהרי שלמה ע"ה השיג הכל חוץ מן הפרה שאמר עליה והיא רחוקה ממני (קהלת ז כג) לפיכך האומות ששומעים חק הפרה לבד ודאי מונין עליה, ולהלן נאמר את כל החקים האלה כי השומעים כל החקים בכלל ויש בהם חקים שיש בהם טעם נגלה אזי המה יעידון יגידון גם על חק הנעלם כי יש בו סוד ויתלו החסרון בקוצר דעת המשיג.

### Kli Yakar, Numbers 19:2

The answer is: For there are laws that the human intellect is able to understand, but their reasons are hidden from the majority and only revealed to specific individuals. This [red] heifer, though, is understood by no one. For Solomon, may he rest in peace, grasped everything other than the [red] heifer, saying about it, "It is far from me" (Ecclesiastes 7:23). Therefore, the nations who hear about the law of the heifer alone will definitely jeer at it. But later on (in Deuteronomy), it says "all these laws," because those who hear all of the laws together, including laws that have revealed reasons, will testify and tell about even a hidden law that it has a secret reason, and they will blame the lack [of explanation] on the inadequate knowledge of the person trying to grasp it.

[8] רמב"ם על משנה חולין ז'ו'א'

...ושים לבך על העיקר הגדול הנכלל במשנה הזאת והוא מה שאמר מסיני נאסר לפי שאתה הראית לדעת שכל מה שאנו מרחיקים או עושים היום אין אנו עושין אלא במצות הקב"ה ע"י משה רבינו ע"ה...

**Rambam on Mishnah Chullin 7:6:1**

...Pay attention to the important fundamental principle that arises from this Mishnah. It is: That which it says that it was prohibited at Sinai is because everything that we distance ourselves from or do today is only because God commanded it to Moshe Rabbeinu, may he rest in peace...

[9] במדבר ט"ז:א'-ג'

(א) וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח בְּוֹיְצֵהוּ בְּוִקְהַת בְּוֹלְגֵי וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיאָב וְאוֹן בְּוֹפְלֵת בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן: (ב) וַיִּקְמוּ לְפָנָי מִנְּשֵׂה וְאֲנָשִׁים מִבְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמֹשִׁים וּמְאַתָּים נְשִׂאֵי עֵדָה קְרָאִי מוֹעֵד אֲנָשֵׁי־שָׁם: (ג) וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מִנְּשֵׂה וְעַל־אֶהְרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לְכֶם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה כָּלָם קֹדְשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם ה' וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קֹהֵל ה':

**Numbers 16:1-3**

(1) Now Korah, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben— (2) to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute. (3) They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the LORD is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the LORD’s congregation?”

**Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik, The Common Sense Rebellion, p.2**

The rallying cry which Korach chose was "common sense." He proclaimed that all reasonable people have the right to interpret Jewish law according to their best understanding: "For all the community are holy" (Num. 16: 3). In down-to-earth logic, the lowliest woodcutter is the equal of Moses. This appeal to populism evokes considerable support because it promises freedom from centralized authority; it flatters the people's common intelligence and it approves the right of each Jew or group of Jews to follow their own individual judgment.

However, we do not regard the qualitative and subjective experience as primary. Rather, the objective act of performing the mitzvah is our starting point. The mitzvah does not depend on the emotion; rather, it induces the emotion. One's religious inspiration and fervor are generated and guided by the mitzvah, not the reverse. The goal is proper kavvanah and genuine devekut, but these can be religiously authentic only if they follow the properly performed mitzvah. The emotion generated by the mitzvah is circumscribed and disciplined by the Halakhah and its character is not left open to possible distortion by human desires and fantasies. The halakhically defined mitzvah has quantitative dimensions and precise perimeters, and these establish the authenticity of the genuinely Jewish religious experience.

