

The Laws of Noah

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We should all be suspicious when somebody tells us that Judaism is objectively superior to other religion. We are understandably inclined to believe such claims. After all, we profess and practice Judaism or we are part of a Jewish family. We have embraced a religious tradition into which we were born and raised, we have chosen Judaism for ourselves, or both. Still, we should be wary. All religions are true—and, by definition, superior—for those who adhere to them.

One thing I remember learning as a child was specifically about something that makes Judaism better, or at least friendlier, than Christianity. A Jewish person, I was taught, could not be considered a good person in Christianity, since anybody who does not believe in Jesus is consigned to eternal damnation. By contrast, Judaism teaches that people who are not Jewish “merely” have to abide by seven laws in order to be considered righteous—that is, according to Judaism, non-Jews have an **easier** route to righteousness than to Jews, since we have to observe six hundred thirteen commandments; others, only seven.

For tonight, I want to leave aside the accuracy of the characterization of Christianity, except to say that many of my Christian friends, including Christian clergy, would object. As Rev. Robert Lowry preached from this pulpit a month ago, many Christians clearly proclaim that the Jewish people’s covenant with God is eternal, so we are not required to be Christians in order to be counted as righteous.

I do want to delve into what Judaism means about those seven laws that non-Jews must observe to be counted as praiseworthy. The origin is in this week’s Torah portion, as Noah and his family emerge from the Ark. God says: “Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these. You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood still in it. But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning: I will require it of every beast; of humankind, too, will I require a reckoning for human life, of everyone for each other. Whoever sheds human blood, by human [hands] shall that one’s blood be shed; for in the image of God was humankind made. Be fertile, then, and increase, abound on the earth and increase on it.”ⁱ

Three commandments are clearly delineated in this passage: Murder is forbidden. Also, Noah and his descendants—that is, all humanity—are told that we must kill an animal before eating it. And we are commanded to propagate our species.

However, when our sages interpreted these verses to codify the seven laws that all humans must follow, they did not include the “be fruitful and multiply” part. They did specify the prohibition of murder and of eating flesh from a living animal. In addition, they somehow found that these verses forbid all humans from cursing God, practicing idolatry or sexual immorality, and robbery. They also insisted that all of Noah’s descendants were now required to establish laws and courts in which to adjudicate them.ⁱⁱ

So far, if we are willing to grant that the sages legitimately derived these so-called Noachide Laws from the verses in our portion, we may not be troubled. Asking that others respect and not insult our God, and that all human beings refrain from murder, idolatry, incest, robbery, and animal cruelty, and even that they establish a legal system, is reasonable, and is indeed much less than we ask of ourselves as Jews.

The problem, though, is in the details.

For example: What constitutes idolatry? Until the late Middle Ages, Christianity was widely considered to be polytheistic idolatry, as Jews could not wrap their heads around the Christian trinity as a form of monotheism—and worse, regarded veneration of statues and paintings of Jesus to be idol worship. To this day, many Orthodox Jews will not enter Christian churches with iconography for this reason.

Moreover, the list of sexual immorality specifically includes male homosexuality, much more explicitly than any biblical verse prohibits it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Equally disturbing to many Jews will be a Talmudic passage that forbids abortion to all descendants of Noah. That prohibition is based on an interpretation of a phrase from one of the verses spoken to Noah and his sons: “Whoever sheds human blood, by human shall that one’s blood be shed.” Another way to read the Hebrew, and the one chosen by these particular sages, is, “Whoever sheds human blood within a person, their blood shall be said.” The sages ask, “What is a person that is in a person? You must say: This is a fetus that is in its mother’s womb. Accordingly, a descendant of Noah is liable for killing a fetus.”^{iv}

This last part flies in the face of what most of us have been taught about Jews law regarding abortion. We know that, in the Torah itself, killing a fetus is not treated the same as killing a person.^v We know that, in the Mishnah, the original code of Jewish law, a pregnancy may be terminated, and the fetus killed, either by surgical or medical means, even during labor, if the pregnancy threatens the mother’s life.^{vi} We know that multiple Jewish authorities, beginning with the Talmud, grant to the fetus the status of one of its mother’s limbs—most often, her

thigh.^{vii} All of these rulings and more lead to the overriding Jewish conclusion that a pregnancy may be terminated for the same kinds of reasons that a person may have any other part of their body removed—that is, if doing so is necessary for the person’s wellbeing. Of course, different individuals will have different thresholds for what constitutes a necessity for one’s wellbeing. Therefore, we should not be surprised that some Jewish authorities permit abortion only if a mother’s health is seriously threatened by pregnancy; while others, including official positions of Reform Judaism, permit abortion for any reason that the pregnant person and their health care provider agree warrants it.

Perhaps we should not be surprised, then, that one Orthodox anti-abortion legal text admits, “[I]n the matter of abortion, the Torah was more stringent for non-Jews than for Jews. This may be because many gentile nations tend to devalue life, to the extent that some are suspected of bloodshed.”^{viii}

We, of course, do not regard our neighbors of various faiths or no faith to be “suspected of bloodshed.” We would do well not to imagine Jews or Judaism to be better than other people or other faiths more broadly. Instead, we would do well to practice humility. To let other religions speak for themselves, not to define any as prohibited idolatry. To celebrate each person who lives in a way that is true to their authentic selves, **their** sexual orientation, **their** gender identity. And, we must add, particularly this year, to fight for the right of every pregnant person to determine their own fate, in consultation with their chosen health care provider and their God, as they see fit.

Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 9:3-5.

ⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 56a.

ⁱⁱⁱ Maimonides, Laws of Kings and Wars 9.5.

^{iv} Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 57b.

^v Exodus 21:22-23.

^{vi} Mishnah Ohalot 7.6.

^{vii} See, for example, Babylonian Talmud, Hullin 58a.

^{viii} “The Prohibition of Abortion for Jews and Non-Jews,” *Peninei Halakha*, [02. The Prohibition of Abortion for Jews and Non-Jews – Peninei Halakha \(yhb.org.il\)](#). The part about gentile nations being suspected of bloodshed is based on M. Avodah Zarah 2.1.