

The 7 Noahide Laws: What Every Gentile Should Know

By JAMES D. TABOR
(First of Two Parts)

Does Judaism have a vital evangelistic message for the non-Jewish world? Can Gentiles respond to such a message without converting to Judaism? According to a growing number of Jewish authorities, just such an outreach to the world is not only desirable, but is on the way to full and formal implementation.

I recently attended the first International Conference of the "Children of Noah" (B'nai No'ach) held in Ft. Worth, Texas. As a specialist in Judaism and Christianity in antiquity, I went as an academic observer and adviser. But, as a Gentile, I also brought along a high degree of personal fascination and interest. The results of this conference were truly amazing and historic. I witnessed the beginnings of what might be called a "new religion," although technically the rabbis involved insist that the B'nai No'ach concept is neither "new," nor formally, "another religion," though it has full *halachic* foundation. First let me offer a bit of legal and historical background.

According to Jewish rabbinic tradition, all non-Jews are "children of Noah," and as such are subject to a special universal Noahide Covenant. This covenant, made with Noah following the Flood, is prior to, and separate from, the Torah Covenant made at Sinai with the "children of Israel." All humankind is accordingly obligated to follow the "seven laws of Noah," traditionally enumerated as: the prohibitions of idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual sins, theft, and eating flesh (or blood) from a living animal; and the obligation to establish legal systems to administer justice.

Indeed, according to rabbinic interpretation, Jews, functioning as the chosen priestly people, and a "light to all nations," are obligated to teach the Gentile world those portions of Torah applicable to non-Jews (Exodus 19:5; Isaiah 42:1-6).

Such Gentiles who turn to G-d, and turn away from these sinful practices, are said to "have a share in the world to come." They have become *yirei shamayim* ("fearers of Heaven," i.e.,

G-d), and in the Land of Israel are called *ger toshav* (i.e., "the stranger that dwells among you"). These Noahides are not proselytes, nor full converts to Judaism. They remain Gentiles, but with special attachment to G-d, Torah, and Israel.

Many scholars of ancient Judaism and Christianity believe that something akin to this rabbinic concept of the "Noahide" existed in the Greco-Roman period. The oft-expressed generalization that non-Jews in the Roman empire tended to be anti-Jewish is unfounded. It is well established that large numbers of Gentiles were attracted to Judaism and became proselytes or full converts. But there is also solid evidence that many Gentiles were attracted to Judaism, attended the synagogues that dotted the Roman empire, but pulled back short of full conversion. Such "semi-Jews," or "Jewish sympathizers," worshipped the G-d of Israel and observed various Jewish customs and laws.

(In the New Testament, the book of Acts refers to such Gentiles as "G-d-fear-

ers," using the Greek terms *phoboumenos* or *sebomenos*.) According to Acts, large numbers of these "G-d-fearers" responded to the evangelistic message of the apostle Paul and formed the core of his Gentile congregations in the Diaspora. Acts 16, and Paul's own account in Galatians, reports a sharp dispute between groups of these Jewish messianic believers as to whether Gentiles, who had joined the movement, should be required to convert to Judaism, taking up full observance of the Torah. According to Acts 15 such conversion was not required, but they were directed to abstain from sexual immorality, blood, pollutions of idols, and "things strangled." Such a list of prohibitions, though not precisely parallel to the rabbinic enumeration, offers evidence that Jewish groups in this period were expressing something akin to the "Noahide" concept.) In the subsequent centuries Jewish sources have further expounded and elaborated the concept of the Noahide. Generally speaking, both Moslems and Christians have been

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considered "Noahides" as long as the latter avoided the tritheism sometimes associated with popular Trinitarianism (i.e., making Jesus a "second" Deity, separate from G-d). Indeed, Hermann Cohen argued that the Noahide concept was the common rational, ethical ground, and thus the penultimate goal, of both Israel and all humankind, i.e., a kind of universal "natural law."

On the other hand, Orthodox rabbinic opinion has tended to argue, with Maimonides, that Noahides must accept the "seven laws," not only on their own merit ("natural law"), but as divinely revealed precepts of Torah, mediated by the teaching mission of Israel. The best

known Gentile exponent of "the Noahide religion" in our time was Aime Palliere (1887-1949). Though born and baptized a Catholic, and raised for the priesthood, Palliere spent all of his adult years in the study and teaching of traditional Jewish texts.

In recent years, various publications have appeared, setting forth the *halachic* issues involved in the Noahide concept, and calling for their concrete implementation. Still, to my knowledge, there have been no sociologically significant movements to actually organize and promote such a version of Torah faith among Gentiles, as something distinct from standard forms of Christianity or Islam.

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(Conclusion)

That brings us back to the recent events in Ft. Worth, Texas. In the week prior to the Ft. Worth conference, rabbis and Torah scholars from Israel and the United States, representing a variety of Orthodox Jewish groups, together with Gentile representatives, hammered out a program to officially and formally implement the creation of B'nai No'ach study groups and congregations. I attended several days of these private meetings, full of intense discussion and debate, in which matters of polity and halachah were worked out. These discussions resulted in a formal proposal, which was immediately wired to Mordechai Eliahu, Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel (Sephardic), to form Agudat Kerem B'nai No'ach (Union of the Vineyard of the Children of Noah). Rabbi Eliahu sent his approval and formal blessing of the efforts.

What followed I found amazing. Over 300 non-Jewish delegates, from across the country, gathered at the Ft. Worth Convention Center to officially register themselves as participants in this newly formed "B'nai No'ach" movement. They accepted the proposal from the rabbis, acknowledged the blessing of Rabbi Eliahu, and pledged themselves to faithfully observe and study the Torah as applicable to Gentiles.

Obviously such a group did not spring up overnight. The conference was organized by Vendy Jones, former Baptist minister, archaeologist, and director of the Institute of Judaic-Christian Research based in Arlington, Texas. For over a decade Jones has been promoting Torah study for Gentiles, according to the B'nai No'ach concept. He has helped to organize dozens of groups around the country who regularly and formally

study with Orthodox rabbis and Torah scholars.

These groups typically study and discuss the weekly *Parshah* and *Haf-torah* portions, based on standard Jewish sources. The "Seven Laws of Noah" are seen as topical headings, under which an elaborate set of theological and ethical concepts are organized. For example, under the prohibition against "idolatry," one would delve into a whole cluster of Jewish ideas and observances as applicable to Gentiles: the nature of G-d, prohibitions against the occult, definitions of idolatry, and so forth. Likewise, under the heading of "sexual immorality," would come the whole Jewish understanding of human sexuality as expounded in Torah and rabbinic tradition. Accordingly, like their Jewish counterparts, such B'nai No'ach have embarked on a lifelong effort of *talmud Torah*.

In 1989 Jones sent out an

official appeal to the rabbinic community to set up an international B'nai No'ach organization. With the blessing of leading Orthodox authorities, including Chief Rabbi Eliahu, the Ft. Worth conference was born.

I had a chance to interview many of the non-Jewish participants. Most of them were from Christian backgrounds. They expressed a diversity of opinions regarding Jesus, the New Testament, and Christianity. Some appeared to be committed to B'nai No'ach as a distinct religious expression of faith, while others viewed their Torah study as a way to deepen the "Hebraic" aspects of their Christian identifications. The rabbinic proposal developed no creedal lines in this regard. The sole requirement for participation was a sincere desire to study and observe the Torah as applicable to Gentiles. The idea is that people of all religious back-

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grounds, whether Christian, Moslem, Buddhist, or any other would come together in Torah study. I met two leaders, both former Baptist ministers, David Davis of Athens, Tennessee and Jack Saunders of Cohutta, Georgia, who head up actual congregations of B'nai No'ach. They had come under the influence of Vendyl Jones, and began studying, along with their entire Baptist congregations, with a local Orthodox rabbi, Michael Katz. Over a period of years they have dropped their Baptist affiliation and many of their standard Baptist doctrines.

Apparently there are numerous halachic matters still to be ironed out. An international committee, headed by Rabbi Yoel Schwartz in Jerusalem, will be responsible for working out such details. Rabbi Schwartz is a renowned authority on the Noahide Laws. He is to consult with leading rabbis from all the various groups of Jewish Orthodoxy. The future plans for B'nai No'ach are ambitious and international. Chief Rabbi Eliahu has taken the Ft. Worth proposal to his Ashkenazic counterpart, Rav Abraham Shapiro. As various practical matters are clarified, the B'nai No'ach concept might eventually be presented in a more offi-

cial manner to the Union of Orthodox Rabbis in North America and other such organizations worldwide, for their input and approval.

I have also learned that other such groups, unconnected to the efforts of Vendyl Jones and others here in the United States, exist in England, Belgium, and Nigeria. For the future Jones sees B'nai No'ach "yeshivas," where Gentiles will come for intensive Torah study, as well as B'nai No'ach teachers be fully observant Jewish rabbis and Torah scholars. What, if anything, these efforts will eventually mean to Reform, Conservative, or other "branches" of Judaism remains to be seen. What is surprising is the range of Orthodox groups of different persuasions who are willing to cooperate in this effort.

As an historian of ancient Judaism and early Christianity I find this movement particularly fascinating and significant. The earliest Gentile Christians were more rooted in, and wedded to, a form of "Torah faith," than their brethren of later centuries. Something close to the Noahide concept is reflected in our New Testament sources. I find it intriguing that such options for Jewish-Christian connections are being replayed in our own time.

My personal impression is that this movement has a solid beginning and will grow rapidly. Many will find appealing the combination of a universal ethical monotheism, with a firm, conservative base in Scripture and tradition. Others will welcome the opportunity to study and learn the Torah in a traditional Jewish manner from rabbis and scholars. Such an option has seldom been openly available to non-Jews.

Still others, who have difficulty with Christian dogma, will find this "half-way house" attractive. It offers a way to worship and follow the G-d of Israel short of conversion to Judaism, but free of many restraints of creed and cult.

The emphasis is firmly on code, at a time when so many seem to have lost a sense of any certain "way." Whether we will ever see a B'nai No'ach version of Billy Graham, forcefully proclaiming this way of repentance to the masses remains to be seen. I might recast the question I posed at the beginning. If Judaism does have an evangelistic message for the non-Jewish world, what might be the practical outcome? By all measures it appears that this fledgling B'nai No'ach movement proposes a most concrete answer.

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