



YITRO

GOOD WITHOUT G-D? NOT FOR LONG

Morality without an Anchor Drifts

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Yitro

Moses's father-in-law, Jethro, hears of the great miracles that G d performed for the people of Israel and comes from Midian to the Israelite camp, bringing with him Moses's wife and two sons. Jethro advises Moses to appoint a hierarchy of magistrates and judges to assist him in the task of governing and administering justice to the people.

The Children of Israel camp opposite Mount Sinai, where they are told that G d has chosen them to be His

"kingdom of priests" and "holy nation." The people respond by proclaiming, "All that G d has spoken, we shall do."

On the sixth day of the third month (Sivan), seven weeks after the Exodus, the entire nation of Israel assembles at the foot of Mount Sinai. G d descends on the mountain amid thunder, lightning, billows of smoke, and the blast of the shofar and summons Moses to ascend.

G d proclaims the Ten Commandments,

commanding the people of Israel to believe in G d, not to worship idols or take G d's name in vain, to keep the Shabbat, to honor their parents, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, and not to bear false witness or covet another's property. The people cry out to Moses that the Revelation is too intense for them to bear, begging him to receive the Torah from G d and convey it to them.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Is it possible to be a good, moral person without believing in G-d?





When G-d gave us the Torah, He appointed us the chosen nation.

TEXT 1A

Exodus 19:5-6

ה. וְעַתָּה אִם שָׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת
בְּרִיתִי, וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סֻגְלָה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים כִּי לִי כָּל הָאָרֶץ.
ו. וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ.

5. And now, if you will listen to My voice and keep My covenant, you will be a treasure to Me from among all the nations, for the entire earth is Mine.

6. And you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

TEXT 1B

*Rabbi Ovadiah
Seforno, ad loc.*

"וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מִמְּלֻכַת כֹּהֲנִים":

וּבְזֶה תִּהְיוּ סְגוּלָה מִכָּל־עַם, כִּי תִהְיוּ מִמְּלֻכַת כֹּהֲנִים לְהַבְיִן
וּלְהוֹרֹת לְכָל הַמִּין הָאָנוּשִׁי, לְקַרֹּא כָל־עַם בְּשֵׁם ה' וּלְעַבְדוֹ
שְׁכֵם אֶחָד.

"And you will be for Me a kingdom of priests."

By this, you will be chosen from among all the nations, for you will be a kingdom of priests: to teach and guide the entire human race to invoke G-d's name and to serve Him shoulder to shoulder.

We were chosen to help
the nations recognize
and serve G-d and to be
a light to them.



TEXT 2

*Maimonides,
Mishneh Torah, Laws
of Kings 9:1*

עַל שְׁשֵׁה דְבָרִים נִצְטַנּוּה אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן: עַל עֲבוּדָה זָרָה, וְעַל
בְּרִכַת הַשֵּׁם, וְעַל שְׂפִיכוֹת דָּמִים, וְעַל גִּילּוּי עֲרִיּוֹת, וְעַל הַגָּזֵל,
וְעַל הַדִּינִים . . .

הוֹסִיף לָנֶח אֶבֶר מִן הַחַי.

G-d gave Adam [and his descendants] six commandments: the prohibitions against idolatry, blasphemy, murder, inappropriate sexual relations, and theft, as well as the imperative to establish a judicial system. . . .

G-d gave Noah one more commandment: the prohibition against eating a limb of an animal while it is still alive.



Jews have an obligation to teach the seven Noahide Commandments to non-Jews.

TEXT 3

*Maimonides,
Mishneh Torah, Laws
of Kings 9:1*

צָוָה מֹשֶׁה רַבֵּנוּ מִפִּי הַגְּבוּרָה לְכַף אֶת כָּל
בָּאֵי הָעוֹלָם לְקַבֵּל מִצְוֹת שְׁנַצְטִוּוּ בְּנֵי נֹחַ.

Moses instructed us in G-d's name to compel all the people of the world to accept the commandments that were given to the descendants of Noah.

QUESTIONS

1. Why is it our responsibility to promote or enforce the moral code of non-Jews?
2. What gives us the ability to inspire them more than they can inspire themselves, and what unique insights or teachings do we offer that they lack?
3. The Rambam says we must compel them to follow their code—how are we meant to do that?

We had to accept G-d as
our King before we could
receive His laws.



TEXT 4

Midrash, Mechilta,
Exodus 20:2

מִשָּׁל לְמֶלֶךְ בְּשָׂר וְדָם שְׂנוֹכְנִים
לְמַדִּינָה.

אָמְרוּ לוֹ עֲבָדָיו: גִּזּוֹר עָלֵיהֶם גִּזְרוֹת.

אָמַר לָהֶם: כִּשְׂיִקְבְּלוּ אֶת מַלְכוּתִי
אֶגְזֹר עָלֵיהֶם. שְׂאֵם מַלְכוּתִי לֹא
יִקְבְּלוּ, גִּזְרוֹתִי לֹא יִקְבְּלוּ.

כִּךְ אָמַר הַמָּקוֹם לְיִשְׂרָאֵל: "אֲנֹכִי ה'
אֱלֹהֶיךָ", "לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ". אֲנִי הוּא
שְׂקִבְלָתָם מַלְכוּתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם?
אָמְרוּ לוֹ: כֵּן.

וּכְשֶׁם שְׂקִבְלָתָם מַלְכוּתִי, קִבְּלוּ
גִּזְרוֹתִי.

By way of analogy, a human king enters a country to assume the throne.

His advisors urge, "Issue decrees to the people."

He replies, "I will issue decrees after they accept my sovereignty. If they don't accept my sovereignty, they won't accept my decrees."

Similarly, G-d first said to the Jewish people, "I am G-d your G-d" and "Have no other G-d but Me" (Exodus 20:2–3). [By this, He was asking] "Am I the G-d that you accepted upon yourselves in Egypt?"

They replied, "Yes."

G-d responded, "Now that you have accepted My sovereignty, accept My decrees."



By establishing His moral authority, G-d ensured that His moral code would be accepted as binding and eternal.

TEXT 5

*Rabbi YY Jacobson,
“How Do We Protect
Our Schools?”,
www.theYeshiva.net*

[W]hen American schools emphasized character development, and when nearly all Americans believed that there is a G-d who forbids and punishes murder . . . [o]ur schools were safe. . . .

Why did the moral standards of our youth deteriorate astonishingly, from one extreme to the other . . . ?

We stopped focusing on the most important goal of education: values, character development, and cultivating a moral conscience in each of our youngsters. We stopped teaching children that the most important aspect of life is knowing right from wrong. . . .

Teaching children that murder is wrong because it is against the law, or it is not “nice,” does not penetrate the . . . hearts of many youth[s]. It is a shallow argument. By teaching our children that the Creator and Ruler of the world has deemed certain behaviors wrong and evil, and this Creator cares about the behavior of every person and expects them to behave with goodness and kindness toward others, and will hold them responsible for their actions, we can hope to ingrain these values in them far more effectively. The child must . . . understand that the world is not a jungle, for there is a Creator and Master who sees and evaluates all his actions, there is . . . an “eye that sees and the ear that hears” (Mishnah, Avot 2:1).

When morality is based on my . . . moods and inclinations, or the norms of the school or the society, I can end up justifying the most heinous crimes. . . . When children are inculcated from the youngest age with . . . a recognition that G-d has deemed certain behaviors evil, and He is watching them, there is a far greater chance for them to behave morally, despite internal turmoil and all types of challenges life may confer upon them.

Without moral authority,
moral values become
flexible and dependent
on circumstance.



TEXT 6

Will Herberg, Judaism and Modern Man (New York: Atheneum, 1979), pp. 91-92

The moral principles of Western civilization are, in fact, all derived from the tradition rooted in Scripture and have vital meaning only in the context of that tradition. The attempt made in recent decades by secularist thinkers to disengage these values from their religious context, in the assurance that they could live a life of their own as “humanistic” ethic, has resulted in what one writer has called our “cut flower culture.” Cut flowers retain their original beauty and fragrance, but only so long as they retain the vitality that they have drawn from their now-severed roots; after that is exhausted, they wither and die.

So [it is] with freedom, brotherhood, justice, and personal dignity—the values that form the moral foundation of our civilization. Without the life-giving power of the faith out of which they have sprung, they possess neither meaning nor vitality. Morality ungrounded in G-d is indeed a house built upon sand, unable to stand up against the vagaries of impulse, and the brutal pressures of power and self-interest.



The pagan gods created a moral gap because they lacked absolute authority—being many, flawed, and changeable, they offered no stable foundation for enduring values.

ANSWERS

1. It is our responsibility to promote the moral code of non-Jews because we are called to be a light unto the nations and guide them toward G-d.
2. We can inspire them because we possess faith in G-d's absolute moral authority.
3. We compel them not by force, but through the power of our teachings, persuading them to accept G-d's authority and follow His commandments.

TEXT 7

*Rabbi Yom Tov
Lippman Heller,
Tosafot Yom Tov,
Mishnah, Avot 3:14*

בְּכַפֵּיית דְּבָרִים, לְהַמְשִׁיךְ לָבָם אֶל רְצוֹן קוֹנָם וְחַפְץ צוּרָם.
יִזְכִּירָם לְטוֹבָה, וְנִשְׁהֶם חֲבִיבִים שֶׁנִּבְרָאוּ בְּצַלְמֵם. לְהוֹרוֹת נָתַן בְּלָבָם, כִּי
זֹאת תּוֹרַת הָאָדָם לַעֲשׂוֹת חוּקֵי אֱלֹקִים וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו מִצַּד אֲשֶׁר הוּא צָנָה,
כְּדַבְּרֵי הַרְמֵב"ם, דְּהוּאֵיל שְׁחַבְּבוּ לְבָרָאוּ בְּצַלְמוֹ, לְכֵן מוּטָל עָלָיו
לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן קוֹנוֹ.

We compel them with words that draw their hearts to the will of their Master and the desire of their Maker.

We must speak highly of the people and tell them they are beloved to G-d in Whose image they were created. Thus, they must observe His rules purely because He decreed them. If G-d loves them so much as to make them in His image, they have a reciprocal duty to fulfill His desires.

QUESTION

If we are commanded to share the Noahide Code with the nations, why is it not clearly mentioned in our literature?

Since the fall of the Jewish Commonwealth in the first century, it has been dangerous for Jews to engage in proselytizing.



TEXT 8

*Talmud, Avodah
Zarah 11a*

אוּנְקֵלוֹס בֶּר קֵלוֹנִימוּס אֵיגִייר, שְׂדֵר
קֵיסָר גּוֹנָדָא דְרוּמָאֵי אַבְתָּרִיָהּ. מִשְׁכִּינְהוּ
בְקָרְאֵי, אֵיגִיור.

הֵדֵר שְׂדֵר גּוֹנָדָא דְרוּמָאֵי [אַחֲרִינָא]
אַבְתָּרִיָהּ, אָמַר לְהוּ: לָא תִימְרוּ לִיָּה וְלָא
מִיָּדִי.

כִּי הוּוּ שְׁקֵלִי וְאַזְלִי, אָמַר לְהוּ: אֵימָא לְכוּ
מִלְתָּא בְּעֵלְמָא. נִיפְיוּרָא נְקֻט נּוּרָא קִמִּי
אַפִּיפְיוּרָא, אַפִּיפְיוּרָא לְדוּכְפָסָא, דּוּכְפָסָא
לְהַגְמוּנָא, הַגְמוּנָא לְקוּמָא, קוּמָא מִי נְקֻט
נוּרָא מְקִמִי אֵינְשֵׁי?

אַמְרֵי לִיָּה: לָא.

אָמַר לְהוּ: הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא נְקֻט נּוּרָא
קִמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל, דְכָתִיב: "וְהָ הַלֵּךְ לַפְּנֵיָהֶם
יוֹמָם וְגו'".

Unkelos, the son of Kelonymus, was a convert to Judaism. The emperor sent a troop of Romans to seize him. He drew them in with biblical passages, and they, too, converted.

The emperor sent another troop and instructed them not to say a word to Unkelos.

They seized him, but as they were walking, he said, "I will make a mere statement. A minor official carries the torch for the high official. The high official carries the torch for the duke. The duke carries the torch for the governor. The governor carries the torch for the ruler. For whom does the ruler carry the torch? Perhaps for the people?"

"No," they replied.

Unkelos said, "Yet G-d carries the torch for the Jewish people, as it is written, 'And G-d went before them by day and by night with a torch of fire' (Exodus 13:21)."



TEXT 8

*Talmud, Avodah
Zarah 11a*

איגיוור פוֹלְהוּ.

הָדָר שֶׁדָּר גּוֹנְדָא אַחֲרֵינָא אַבְתְּרִיה, אָמַר
לְהוּ: לָא תִשְׁמַעוּ מִיַּדִּי בְהֵדִיה. פִּי נִקְטִי
לִיה וְאַזְלִי, חֲזָא מְזוּזָתָא דְמִנְחָא אַפְתָּחָא,
אוּתִיב יְדִיה עָלֶיהָ, וְאָמַר לְהוּ: מָאִי הָאִי?

אָמְרוּ לִיה: אֵימָא לֵן אַתָּ.

אָמַר לְהוּ: מְנַהֲגוּ שָׁל עוֹלָם, מְלָךְ בְּשָׂר
וְדָם יוֹשֵׁב מִבְּפָנָיִם, וְעַבְדָּיו מְשֻׁמְרִים אוּתוּ
מִבְּחוּץ, וְאֵילוּ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, עַבְדָּיו
מִבְּפָנָיִם וְהוּא מְשֻׁמְרָן מִבְּחוּץ, שְׁנַאֲמַר,
”ה’ יִשְׁמַר צְאֻתָךְ וּבּוֹאֶךָ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד
עוֹלָם.”

איגיוור. תוּ לָא שֶׁדָּר בְּתַרִּיה.

They all converted.

The emperor sent a third troop and said, “This time, do not talk to him at all.” They grabbed him, but as they left, he paused to place his hand upon the mezuzah on the doorpost. He asked, “What is this?”

They said, “You tell us.”

He replied, “It is the way of the world that human kings sit indoors while their servants stand guard outside. G-d is different. While Jews sit in their homes, G-d guards them from the outside, as it is written, ‘G-d will guard your goings and comings from now and forever’” (Psalms 121:8).

They all converted, and the emperor sent no more troops.

ANSWER

Although Jews are commanded to share the Noahide Code, persecution made doing so dangerous, so these efforts were rare and secret. This is why they are not clearly recorded in our literature.

TEXT 9

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 26, p. 142*

איז מױבן אז בְּדַרְךְ כָּלֵל הָאָבֶן זײַךְ אײַדן גְּעִמױזֵט אָפֶהאַלְטֵן דְּעֶרפּוֹן צוֹלִיב פִּיקוּחַ נֶפֶשׁ, און אין אויסנאם פאלן ווען מען האט דאס געטאן, איז דאס געווען בזהירות מתאימה, ובלי פּרסום.

איז דערײַבער מױבן ןױאס מ'האט אויך נײט מִפְּרָסָם געווען קײן שְׂאֵלוֹת וּתְשׁוּבוֹת בְּזָה. וַיֵּשׁ לױמֵר אז מִצַּד דָּעִם זְעֵלְבָן טעם איז דער דין ("לְכוּף") אויך נײט דְּעֶרמָאָנֵט אין שְׁלֶחַן עָרוּךְ און נושאי פֶּלְיוֹ - אין יַעֲנֶע זְמַנִּים איז עָס געווען פִּיקוּחַ נֶפֶשׁ.

וּמױבן, אַז אין פֶּאָל ןױאוי דער חֲשׁוֹשׁ איז לְגַמְרֵי נִיטָא, ווי בְּמִדִּינױת אֱלוֹ, איז דא דער צײַווי לְכוּף.

It is understood that Jews had to refrain from fulfilling this obligation out of danger to their lives. In exceptional cases where this was done, it was done carefully and clandestinely.

This explains why responsa on these matters were never published or publicized. This is possibly also why this obligation is absent from the Shulchan Aruch [a main codification of Jewish law] and its associated texts, which were written in times of danger for Jews.

It follows that when these concerns are not relevant, such as in the countries where we reside, this obligation is in full force.



Jews promoted adherence to the Noahide Code quietly whenever possible.

TEXT 10

*Rabbi Chaim Yosef
David Azulai, Maagal
Tov (Benei Berak,
Israel: 2022), p. 447*

וְאָנִי אָמַרְתִּי לְגוֹי הַנִּזְכָּר וְשִׂיאָמַר לִי בְמָה מְאֲמִין. וְאָמַר לִי: בֵּה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.
וְחִקְרְתִּי בְּזֶה וְנִרְאָה בְּעֵינַי שֶׁכֶּךָ הוּא.

וְאָמַרְתִּי לוֹ: אִם כֵּן, בְּבִקְרָה וּבְעֶרְבֵי תֵאמַר פָּסוּק שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, וּתְקַיֵּים ז' מִצְוֹת,
וּתְזַהַר מִשִּׁיתוּף בְּכָל אוֹפָן, כִּי אִם יַחֲוֶה גְמוּר לֵה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

וְקִבַּל וְאָמַר וְשָׁלָא יִתְפַּלֵּל כִּי אִם לֵה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

I asked the aforementioned non-Jew to describe his beliefs. He told me he believes in the Jewish G-d of Israel. I examined him and found that it was so.

I said to him, "If so, recite the Shema [Jewish proclamation of faith] every morning and evening, observe the Seven Laws of the Noahide Code, and beware of introducing other gods into your belief system. Believe in only one G-d."

He accepted this and pledged to pray only to the Jewish G-d of Israel.

In the modern era,
promoting the Noahide
Code is safe, benefits
society, and enhances
respect for Jews, making
it our obligation to
pursue openly.





People can be ethical without belief in G-d, but only an ultimate moral authority keeps rules firm.

We are obligated to promote the Noahide Laws to help create a just and moral society.

KEY POINTS

1. G-d gave Adam six laws by which to live and then gave Noah a seventh law, collectively known as the Noahide Laws.
2. When G-d gave the Torah to the Jews at Mount Sinai, He charged them with the mandate to recruit new adherents to the Noahide Code.
3. The key distinction is that Jews would teach people to embrace G-d as the ultimate moral authority. With categorical moral authority, moral laws remain sacrosanct and unchanging under all circumstances and never become obsolete.
4. This obligation was not pursued rigorously or publicly throughout the years because it was dangerous for Jews to teach the Noahide Laws.
5. Today, this danger has passed, so we must engage in it with full force. Such advocacy is beneficial to the Jewish community.

