

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 10: The Written and Oral Torah II

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We have previously discussed that the Torah is God's Divine wisdom, crystallised into a finite form for mankind to study and keep. In turn, studying Torah and keeping mitzvot connects each one of us to

our Creator, ensuring that our actions resonate with His Divine moral vision for all humanity.

God's wisdom is not exclusively relevant to the Jewish people, but contains significance and applicability to all humanity – Jews and non-Jews alike. Indeed, the Torah contains a universal educational and legal system known as the *sheva mitzvot bnei Noach*, the seven Noachide laws. These laws, which are incumbent on all of humanity, require the establishment of legal and judicial systems. Blasphemy, idolatry, murder, theft, and sexual immorality are prohibited, as well as eating a limb torn off a living animal.

Yet it was not until ten generations after Noach that the message of universal morality took hold. When Avraham departed from his homeland and left towards the Land of Canaan, the Torah describes how he travelled with “the souls that they [Avraham and Sarah] had made in Charan”. Rashi (d. 1105) cites a Midrash, which explains that Avraham and Sarah had spread the concept of monotheism and its theology of universal Divine morality and “brought [these individuals] under the wings of the Divine Presence”.

The historical importance of the Noachide laws must not be underestimated. The great Renaissance jurists, such as Hugo Grotius (d. 1645) and John Selden (d. 1654) refer to them as the ‘law of all nations’ and ‘Natural Law’.

Today, according to a 2012 report by the Pew Research Center, entitled *The Global Religious Landscape*, the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam make up a

total of 57.3% of the world population. However, the non-Abrahamic faiths, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, who make up a further 22.1%, appear to be excluded from this universal message.

Nonetheless, Rabbi Menashe ben Israel (d. 1657), who corresponded directly with Hugo Grotius regarding the nature of the Noachide laws, asserts that Abrahamic monotheistic ethics have become truly global. After Sarah passed away, Avraham married Ketura and had more sons (see Bereishit 25:1) who were sent away to “the east” with gifts (ibid. 25:6). Rabbi Ben Israel explains that the gifts were the gifts of knowledge and “the east” refers to India, where Avraham's sons disseminated his teachings. These teachings ultimately filtered into the Eastern religions which exist today. He notes astonishingly that the term ‘Brahman’ which in Hinduism denotes the Ultimate Reality in the universe, is related to the word ‘Abrahamim’ meaning the sons of Avraham.

Rabbi Menashe ben Israel's point is that Avraham and Sarah succeeded in globally disseminating monotheistic ethics. Although a contentious point, many argue that even Western secular law is historically rooted in Torah values. The Jewish vision of an ethical utopia is not one of conformity to Jewish law, but one where humanity recognises God and adheres to His vision of universal ethics, for the greater good of all mankind.

