

BOOK REVIEWS

The Seven Laws of Noah, by RABBI DR. AARON LICHTENSTEIN, (New York: The Rabbi Jacob Joseph School Press, 1981), 115 pp.

Reviewed by
Pesach Lichtenberg

What a mightily imbalanced world our tradition seems to present to us. A few million Jews are blessed with the fruit of divine revelation, a concrete way of expressing their relationship with God through the 613 commandments, while over four billion non-Jews, forced to languish in second-class status vis-a-vis God, must be satisfied with a scanty seven prohibitions, almost as a pitiable consolation for missing the real revelation.

Not so, according to the forceful and scholarly demonstration by Rabbi Dr. Aaron Lichtenstein in *The Seven Laws of Noah*, a work based upon his doctoral dissertation at New York University. The Seven Laws of Noah are no mean sketch of vague principles or impoverished list of specific commandments, but rather the basis of a comprehensive legal system.

Though the Laws of Noah have long been in a sorry state of disuse, ("What did He see? He saw that the seven commandments, which the children of Noah had accepted, they no longer observed." B. T. *Baba Kama* 38a), matters were not always thus. In an introductory section, the author discusses evidence that the Hammurabi, Hittite, and Assyrian legal codes may have been based upon a waning Noahide system. In our own century, Aime Palieri, a Frenchman disenchanted with his strong Roman Catholic background, became an articulate proponent of Noahism after being dissuaded by Rabbi

Elijah Benamozegh from converting to Judaism.

The author's basic contention is that each of the seven categories within which many specific commandments are included. For example, the prohibition of theft contains within it stealing (*lo tignovu*), robbing (*lo tignol*), cheating (*lo taashok*), overcharging (*lo tonu*), and many others. Sometimes, as with theft, the derivations are straightforward. Other times, the extension to other commandments is less obvious. For example, blasphemy is convincingly shown to apply generally to man's relationship with God. Therefore, acknowledging God's existence, fearing God, and praying to Him are some of the specific commandments that go under the general title of blasphemy.

By subjecting the other Noahide commandments (justice, idolatry, illicit intercourse, homicide, and limb of a living creature) to a similar analysis, and using as a point of reference Maimonides' compilation of 613 commandments in *Sefer Hamitsvot* (Book of Divine Commandments), Lichtenstein tallies a total of 66 commandments that are applicable to non-Jews. That is not to say that their 66 correspond exactly with their counterparts among our commandments; rather, within the seven broad categories, we may discern imperatives or prohibitions that contain at least certain elements in common with 66 of ours, even though they are not

necessarily derived from or based upon them. Considering that the *Hafets Haim*, in *Sefer Hamitsvot Hakatsar*, counted only 271 of the 613 as applicable these days, the ratio of Mosaic to Noahide commandments is far less lopsided than generally thought.

Lichtenstein chooses not to deal with some important questions impinging upon the topic, though he mentions many of them in passing. For example, why are the negative commandments stressed in the Noahide code? Only 14 of the 66 commandments applicable to non-Jews are positive commandments. Even the names of the seven commandments—or categories, as Lichtenstein argues—are prohibitions, so that, for example, as basic an imperative as acknowledging God's existence must be placed under the rubric of blasphemy. Though justice (*dinim*) appears to be an exception, here too the Talmud attempts to recast the commandment as a prohibition ("Do justice, but do not do iniquity," B. T. *Sanhedrin* 59a, Rashi). Why is the non-Jew granted few positive commands? And why is he not required to partake of any ritual observances? Can this shed light upon the exclusion of the Jewish female from many positive commandments?

Another issue that arises in dealing with the Seven Laws of Noah is the death penalty. For violations of Noahide law, the transgressor is punished by decapitation. How does this reflect upon Noahide Law? Somehow, the code appears less of a beneficent formula for law in society in light of this harsh punishment. Rabbi Benamozegh claimed that the death penalty is not a mandatory sentence but merely an option to which the courts may resort in time of need. However, this assertion derives more from an apologetic bent than from a serious reading of the sources.

Lichtenstein also deals with the reasons behind the commandments

(*taamei hamitsvot*) in his exposition of the Seven Laws of Noah. Various imperatives or prohibitions are at least partially attributed to attempts at instilling moral values (as in limb of a living creature), labelling certain acts as immoral, emphasizing particularly insidious acts (e.g. false weights and measures), or eradicating activities common in certain historical periods (e.g. Molech). Perhaps a further investigation of *taamei hamitsvot* in the more limited example of the Noahide code may yield clues about the rationale, if any, behind our 613; or perhaps the lack of ritual in the Noahide code points to a fundamental discrepancy disqualifying any comparison.

The author is aware of these and other problems. He has chosen, however, to direct his efforts towards unravelling the Noahide code in order to reveal the comprehensive legal structure contained within it. Lichtenstein has succeeded handsomely in his task, and demonstrates his thesis with refreshing clarity, persuasive arguments, and concise explanations. His content and methodology is that of the traditional yeshivah, as he admits and defends in his introduction. Sources from across the centuries are marshalled side by side as if they were snatches of a never-ending halakhic conversation. Any original opinions that the author propounds are shown to have some basis in the sources, often emanating from difficulties in the texts.

As the author suggests early in his work, the Noahide code may constitute an Orthodox Jewish approach to ecumenism. Rabbi Benamozegh envisioned the Seven Laws of Noah as the "true catholicism," a "universal religion," with Jews, "the priests of humanity," serving as its protector. In considering such claims, more questions arise. Is the Noahide code a standard by which to measure existing codes, or a system demanding its own adherents? Pertinent

here is Maimonides' declaration (*Code*, "Laws on Kings" 8:11) that the "righteous heathen," who has a share in the world to come, is he who observes the Seven Laws as commandments of God, and not merely as imperatives of reason.

What, then, is the status of Christianity and Islam? Whatever the upshot of these deliberations, Rabbi Dr. Lichtenstein has supplied us with invaluable material in developing an ecumenism grounded in traditional sources.

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

Pesach Lichtenberg is a medical student at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, New York.