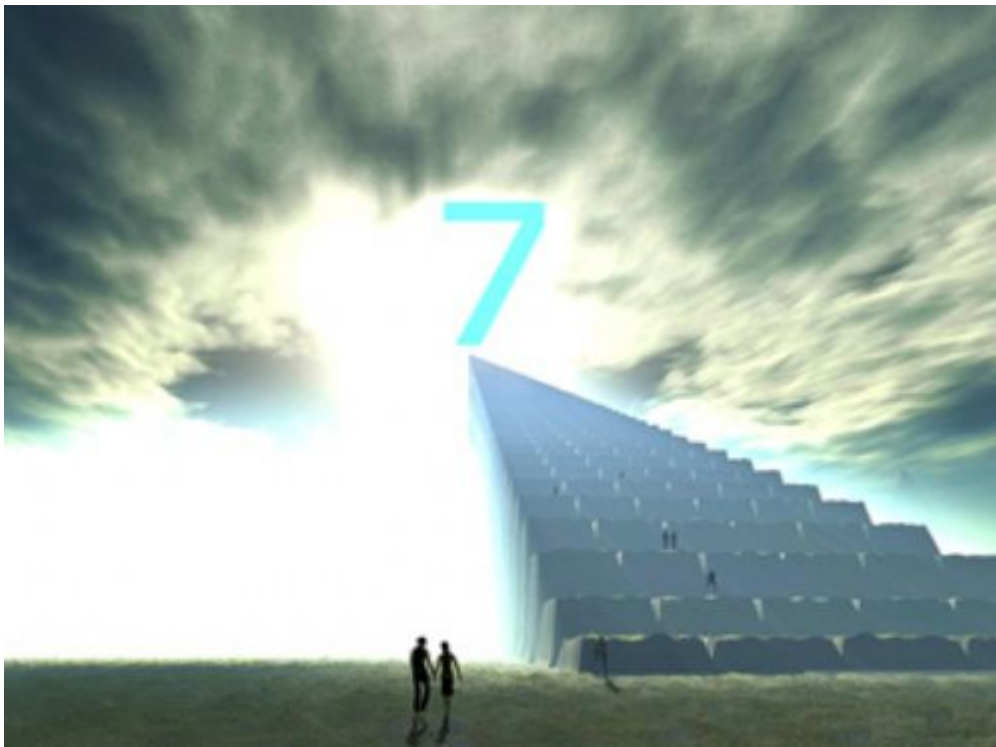


Heaven for Seven

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By Michael Kress

Sitting at a table at Mendy's Kosher Delicatessen in New York, Jim Long pauses to say a blessing in Hebrew before biting into a massive hamburger topped with fried pastrami. "This pastrami is better than bacon," he declares in his warm voice tinged with an Arkansan accent. The 58-year-old filmmaker—who no longer permits himself bacon—is in the city with his wife Carol, who sits primly beside him. They are here to speak at several Orthodox synagogues about their documentary, *Riddles of the Exodus*, which examines the biblical account through the lens of Egyptian archaeological finds.

The Longs are an observant couple. Hebrew phrases pepper their conversation—a b'ezrat Hashem (with God's help) here, a baruch Hashem (praise God) there. Back in Arkansas, they keep a traditional Jewish home. "We've got blessings in ivrit [Hebrew] hanging on the walls, and menorahs on display," Long explains. Each year, they build a sukkah and attend a Passover seder. "Our oldest grandson just turned six and already knows his aleph-bet," Long boasts.

But despite the baruch Hashems, the menorahs, the sukkah, the avoidance of pork and the intimate familiarity with advanced rabbinic texts, Jim and Carol Long are not Jewish, nor do they have any plans to convert. They are Noahides: non-Jews who accept the authority of Jewish law and focus their lives around the Jewish concept of Sheva Mitzvot B'nei Noach or the Seven Commandments for the Children of Noah. This set of laws is intended for non-Jews and, according to tradition, predate the Ten Commandments given at Mount Sinai. "I believe exactly what a Jew believes," Long tells me. "My belief system is exactly parallel to that of an Orthodox Jew. That doesn't mean I am one."

Unbeknownst to most Jews, there are hundreds, maybe even thousands, of Noahides, and most, like the Longs, are former Christians who've turned their backs on the faith. This is not the first time the world has seen a community of "Righteous Gentiles" who center their beliefs around Judaism but it is the first time in history that such a group has begun to organize as a worldwide movement. And that movement is being actively encouraged by some Orthodox Jewish groups—in particular, the Brooklyn-based Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidim.

About forty blocks north of Mendy's deli, Rabbi Yakov Cohen scurries around a second-floor office at the Schneerson Center for Jewish Life, the home of Chabad on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

The 30-something Brooklynite with a close-cropped reddish

beard, rarely sits still: he devotes his copious energies to helping out with the Chabad center's core mission—classes, prayer services and other programs for Jewish residents of this tony Manhattan neighborhood.

His true passion, however, lies in reaching out to non-Jews through what are usually referred to as the “Seven Laws,” which he describes as pillars of universal morality that serve as a “balm for a world of conflict and immorality.” Jewish teachings say that God first gave these laws to Adam, then reaffirmed them as part of the covenant he made with Noah after the Flood. Just as the Jews have the Ten Commandments (plus an additional 603 mitzvot), non-Jews—all of whom are technically the children of Noah—have the Seven Laws, which command them to establish a legal system and refrain from murder, blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, theft and eating the flesh of a living animal.

“The non-Jews have the full length and breadth of Torah—they just have a different role in it,” says Cohen, his rapid-fire delivery complete with a yeshiva-ish lilt. “The role of every person is to be a good person, to bring divine light, to draw down godliness, Hashem, into the world. To do it as a Jew, as a non-Jew, it doesn't matter. It's the same light,” he says. “It's the same Godly energy.”

Like virtually all Chabad Hasidim, Cohen seeks counsel in the words of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the late Lubavitch rebbe, who died at age 92 in 1994 and is still affectionately referred to simply as the “the rebbe.” “Influencing non-Jews to keep their mitzvos, the Seven Noahide Laws... will assist our task of making the world into a dwelling place for God, and help bring about the arrival of Messiah,” Schneerson said in a 1987 speech during a Purim celebration. In response to teachings like this, thousands of his followers fanned out around the globe to battle what they saw as society's moral degeneracy, bringing yiddishkeit to non-observant Jews and seeking out and supporting interested non-Jews.

About six years ago, Cohen founded Noahide.org, a website that serves as a sort of Noahide think tank, through which he runs conferences, publishes papers and counsels non-Jews from as far away as Scandinavia. Other Chabad-associated websites such as AskNoah.org and 7for70.com (meaning, seven laws for the proverbial 70 nations of the world) likewise seek to spread Noahide values to non-Jews in English, French, Spanish and other languages. Rabbis from Shimon Cowen in Australia to Immanuel Schochet in Canada offer halachic advice to Noahides and lecture about what Jewish tradition expects of non-Jews. In Israel, Chabad emissaries visit Arab and Druze villages to pass out literature about the Seven Laws and converse with the sometimes bewildered—but often receptive—locals. In addition to preparing the world for the Messiah, they see themselves as presenting moral values that will end the centuries-old animosities between Muslims and Jews.

“We, the Jewish people, especially from people, have to be a light upon the nations and we have to tell them what Torah says,” says Cohen. “We have the responsibility to shed light on the world.”

Jack Saunders has a snowy white beard of biblical proportions.

Back in the 1980s he was a Baptist minister at Frazier’s Chapel Independent Baptist Church in Cohutta, Georgia, near the Tennessee border. But that was before the now 58-year-old Tennessean began to question the fundamentals of his faith and came to the conclusion that the gospel stories of Jesus and the entire New Testament are false.

“It was kind of disturbing,” he says of the experience. “But if you’re looking for truth and truth smacks you in the face, then you have to do something. You have to be able to confront it and say, ‘This is the truth’ and let go of your emotions.”

Saunders recalls how hard it was to express his doubts to his

parishioners and admit that he had “been wrong for all those years.” The process was slow. For about a year and a half he preached only from the Jewish Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament. Then one Sunday morning, Saunders recalls, he stood on the pulpit and read from Isaiah 7:14, in which a young woman, interpreted by Christians to be a virgin, gives birth to Jesus. For the first time he let his parishioners know that he saw no hint of Christian prophecy in that passage. “That’s when everything, you may say, hit the fan.”

Some church-goers abandoned Saunders, but nearly half of the congregation’s 70 members were moved by the pastor’s change of heart and stayed as Frazier’s Chapel Independent Baptist Church removed its steeple and crosses. “At the time,” Saunders says, “the only thing we knew was what we were not.” After reading about the Seven Laws and studying with a rabbi, Saunders and his remaining flock became Noahides and redubbed their place of worship Frazier’s Chapel B’nai Noach Study Center. “I wanted to be able to read the Hebraic sources by myself,” says Saunders, who has since learned Hebrew. “I didn’t want to be lied to because I’d been lied to by all those Christians.”

It was Texas archaeologist Vendyl Jones who introduced Jim Long to the Seven Laws. The two met in 1993 when Jones appeared on the Dallas radio show that Long produced. A former Baptist preacher, Jones had grown dismayed with what he considered the anti-Jewish sentiments of the Gospels and sought council from rabbis, studied in Israel and became a Noahide. He is believed to have been the inspiration for the character Indiana Jones in the film Raiders of the Lost Ark and is the founder of the Vendyl Jones Research Institute—a nonprofit based in Grandview, Texas, devoted to Biblical archeology. Considered one of the pioneers of the modern Noahide movement, Jones fondly remembers meeting Schneerson in his Brooklyn home and the rabbi’s encouraging words: “‘Vendyl Jones, you are doing the most important work in the world.’”

Long found himself intrigued by Jones's spiritual journey. Having drifted from denomination to denomination until he abandoned Christianity altogether, Long "was looking for something to fill the void." Shortly after the radio interview, he began attending Torah classes and joined Jones on archeological digs in the Middle East.

For Pam Rogers, the break with Christianity was more wrenching. Rogers and her husband, Larry, who live in Tulsa, Oklahoma, were members of the Worldwide Church of God, a small Christian movement that observes the Sabbath on Saturdays, before becoming leaders of a Messianic Jewish congregation. In the early 1990s, a Jewish man befriended them and challenged them to prove the validity of the Christian Bible. As the couple tried to defend their views, they came to believe that the New Testament distorted the teachings of the Hebrew Bible.

The decision to become a Noahide threatened to break the Rogers family apart. Pam's father, a Pentecostal preacher, refused to speak to her for four years. Larry lost his job because he refused to work on Saturdays. The couple almost divorced because Pam made the decision to build her life around the Seven Laws before Larry did. "We lose our children, our spouses, our identities," Rogers says of the sacrifices that she and other Noahides are often forced to make for their faith.

Despite what might seem an obvious trajectory, following the Seven Laws is not a path to becoming a Jew, says Yakov Cohen of the Schneerson Center. "We're not interested in membership," he says.

Rather, the Chabad sees Judaism as a "universal religion" that offers salvation to everyone without conversion.

Jews are not known for proselytizing, and most Jews believe that Judaism prohibits it. David Novak—a Conservative rabbi and leading authority on the Seven Laws and what Judaism

requires of non-Jews—debunks that idea. “Find me one halachic prohibition against proselytizing,” he says. The popularly accepted notion that Judaism opposes proselytizing, Novak argues, rests less on theology than on the fact that most of Jewish history has been a perpetual struggle for survival. “For most of the time, Jews couldn’t do it.”

Novak, who teaches at the University of Toronto, points to sporadic attempts to convert people to Judaism throughout history. The best-known effort took place during the time of the Second Temple, which stood from 515 to 70 B.C.E. Living under the Romans, Jews actively proselytized, with great success. Some non-Jews converted, others simply took on aspects of observant Jewish life and became part of Jewish communities. Called the “God Fearers” (Yirei Adonai), they are immortalized in the Book of Psalms.

While Jewish law does not prohibit proselytization, it does not call for a world of Jewish converts, either. The traditional messianic vision, as articulated most famously in the Book of Isaiah, is of a world at peace in which everyone acknowledges one God, even if all do not adopt Judaism:

And many peoples shall go and say: ‘Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares...

Even in a text as familiar as the Aleinu prayer, Jews regularly reference a vision of Jews and non-Jews under a monotheistic ruler—to many, a clear allusion to Noahides:

All the world’s inhabitants will recognize and know that to you, every knee should bend, every tongue should swear. Before You, Lord, our God, they will bend every knee and cast

themselves down and to the glory of your name they will render homage, and they will all accept upon themselves the yoke of your kingship, that you may reign over them soon and eternally.

Since the earliest days of Christianity, Jewish sages have argued over whether the Noahide commandment not to worship "false gods" is compatible with other religions.

Islam, the rabbis hold, is acceptable because of its adamantly monotheistic stance. Christianity, on the other hand, remains a subject of contention, with many arguing that belief in the Trinity is polytheistic, and therefore out of bounds under Noahide law.

Another critical debate centers around whether the Seven Laws are a set of universal moral imperatives that people intuit on their own or are precepts that Jews must actively bring to the world. The dominant halachic attitude has been that Jews are not required to spread Noahide teachings to non-Jews. Moses Maimonides, the medieval Jewish philosopher and legal authority, disagreed. In his monumental 12th-century work the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides envisioned a society in which non-Jews would be governed by Jewish law, noting that they could choose to convert. "If they do not want to, we do not compel them to accept the Torah and the commandments. Moses did, however, command in the name of God to compel all people to accept the Noahide laws," Maimonides continued. "Compel" may seem a particularly strong word, but Maimonides's stance is clear: Jews must do what they can to teach non-Jews about the Noahide laws.

The 19th century Italian rabbi and famed Kabbalist, Elijah Benamozegh, also believed that Jews have a responsibility to

guide non-Jews towards the path of righteousness. Shortly before his death in 1900, Benamozegh received a letter from Frenchman Aimé Pallière seeking advice on converting to Judaism. Benamozegh told the young man there was another way. "The religion of humanity is no other than Noahism," the rabbi wrote to Pallière. "Here is the religion preserved by Israel to be transmitted to the Gentiles. It is the path which lies open before your efforts, before mine as well, to spread the knowledge thereof, as is my duty to do so." Called the "first and last high priest of the Noahide religion," Pallière is believed to have been the first modern Noahide. A talented writer, he learned Hebrew, lectured at the Orthodox Rabbinical School of France and urged Jews to follow Orthodox traditions.

Benamozegh believed "that mankind cannot rise to the essential principles on which society must rest unless it meet[s] with Israel. And Israel cannot fathom the depths of its own national and religious tradition, unless it meet[s] with mankind." A half-century later, Benamozegh's dream of a Jewish-supported Noahide worldwide movement would be seized upon by Schneerson. "Every Jew has the obligation to ensure that all the peoples of the world observe the Seven Noahide Laws" and that non-Jews, as well as Jews, "acknowledge God as Creator and ruler of the world," Schneerson declared.

It's a position that remains controversial. "If Jews are telling Gentiles what to do, it's a form of imperialism," Novak says. To him, the Seven Laws are valuable in constructing a moral foundation that enables Jews to speak out on social issues, but not as part of a religion around which non-Jews should structure their daily lives. "Why would any Gentile want to be told by Lubavitch—or any other rabbi—what to do?" Novak asks. "I am suspicious of anyone who wants to live this way."

Novak isn't alone in his suspicions. "With a lot of rabbis, there's still this skepticism and fear that someone's trying to infiltrate your shul and will end up being some sort of

missionary trying to bring people to Christianity,” Jack Saunders says of the reception Noahides often receive when seeking guidance. Counseling Noahides is not the sort of subject covered in a typical rabbinical school education and rabbis tend to confront the issue only if approached personally by a non-Jew.

Barry Freundel, the author of *Contemporary Orthodox Judaism's Response to Modernity* and rabbi of Washington, DC's Keshet Israel, a modern Orthodox synagogue, is among the many rabbis who have never been approached by a Noahide. Freundel doesn't share Schneerson's belief that Jews are required to spread the Noahide laws to non-Jews—but he also doesn't believe that Jews can ignore interested Noahides. “Once they are doing it, you are required to help them,” he says.

Carol Long wishes there were many more rabbis who were willing to work with Noahides. “They have to know there are actually people out there looking to them for leadership and spiritual guidance and who respect what they bring to the world.”

Today's Noahide movement has no prescribed ritual and liturgical life.

Even the laws themselves—six out of the seven—are prohibitions such as “don't kill” and “don't steal.”

“We need to give more than ‘don't, don't, don't,’” Larry Rogers says. If more people are going to become Noahide, “they have to have a life. They have to know there are life celebrations,” he says. “We're trying to find our place with Hashem.”

To add greater meaning to their lives, some Noahides have created a lifestyle parallel to that of Orthodox Judaism: They study Jewish texts, pray and follow some of what are known as the “positive commandments”—rituals and other mitzvot. They've adopted portions of Jewish liturgy and prayers, removing all

mentions of chosenness, to make clear that this concept only applies to Jews.

But “there are so many opinions about Noahide halacha,” says Pam Rogers. “It’s very confusing for us Gentiles.” The Noahide approach to Shabbat illustrates the difficulty of deciding which Jewish traditions to follow. Rogers and her husband try to avoid work and set aside time for a festive meal and prayer, but don’t refrain from using electrical devices. Others may shun the use of electricity but go out of their way to perform at least one activity over the course of Shabbat that distinguishes them from Jews. Jack Saunders, for example, writes a check. “I always do something that makes it known I’m not Israel,” he says.

From his base in New York, Yakov Cohen is working to bring structure to this mosaic of Noahide spiritual life. He and others are creating a Noahide siddur (prayerbook) to standardize prayers, and a liturgy of lifecycle rituals, such as funerals and baby-naming ceremonies. This year, one of the first Noahide weddings was held in Buffalo, New York, under a chuppa. The officiating rabbi spoke of the Seven Laws as the marriage’s foundation and sealed it with a contract modeled after the traditional ketuba. Rabbis are also working on the first-ever Noahide Shulhan Arukh—a comprehensive book of law pertaining to non-Jews, which will spell out the specifics of Noahide life, making clear which mitzvot are acceptable for them and which aren’t. “We know what they can’t do,” says Cohen. “Let’s see what they can do.”

Noahides are few, dispersed, often misunderstood and they crave community.

Lucky ones, like Saunders, find likeminded souls near home with whom to gather together to study Jewish texts, pray, discuss the challenges of the Noahide life and socialize. Local groups, such as the Chavurath B’nei Noach (the

Fellowship of the Children of Noah) of Ft. Worth, Texas, serve as an important source of communal life for their members. Organizations such as The Root & Branch Association, Noahide Nations, Rainbow Covenant and B'nai Noach Torah Institute provide advice and support to Noahides wherever they live, often through the Internet.

No single organization, however, is widely recognized as representative of the worldwide movement. That's partly because of the diffuse and ad hoc nature of Noahide organizations, but it is also reflective of the nature of the movement, which is composed of independent-minded people who have rejected their traditional faith and are willing to follow a largely uncharted spiritual path. "We're very iconoclastic—we're all about taking down the idols," Jim Long says. Saunders puts it more pessimistically: "It seems like every time we try to organize, it doesn't go well."

The most recent effort to bring Noahides together comes in the form of High Council of B'nei Noah, an umbrella organization that seeks to fill the leadership vacuum. The High Council's mission is to provide support for Noahides, educate the general public, serve as a liaison with the Jewish community and standardize Noahide beliefs and practices. Last January, members of the Council—which included Saunders and Long—were inaugurated in Jerusalem, where they recited the following oath:

"I pledge my allegiance to Hashem, God of Israel, Creator and King of the Universe, to His Torah and its representatives, the developing Sanhedrin. I hereby pledge to uphold the Seven Laws of Noah in all their details, according to Oral Law of Moses under the guidance of the developing Sanhedrin."

The Noahide Council is supported by the respected Orthodox Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, best known for the edition of the Talmud that bears his name, but who's also the leader of the

“developing Sanhedrin” cited in the oath. Steinsaltz’s Sanhedrin is the most recent attempt to revive the Great Sanhedrin of 71 sages who met in Jerusalem until 425 C.E. to discuss matters of concern to the Jewish people and adjudicate disputes. Steinsaltz argues that both Jews and Noahides follow different parts of the same belief system and can even be considered members of the same religion. “Even from simply a utilitarian point of view, we Jews have hardly any friends in the world. B’nei Noah are by definition our closest friends,” he says. “So we should reach out to them.”

Already, the Council has been troubled by internal disagreements and criticism from outsiders. Some Noahides are unhappy that its members were appointed by the Sanhedrin rather than voted on, while others complain that all its members are American. Jack Saunders is among those who have left the Council, tiring of the strife though still supportive of its mission. “For me, it’s a wonderful thing,” he says, but cautions that “working out all the problems is going to be tough.”

Steinsaltz believes the Council—and the broader Noahide community—will overcome these rifts. Long also remains optimistic. A major conference for Noahides in Jerusalem for October 2007, during Sukkot, is in the works and Long hopes it will serve as an inspiration for Noahides worldwide. “We think that we could act as a gesher, a bridge, between Jews and Noahides,” he says.

As a child of a Jewish father, Philip Levy, a 28-year-old Noahide from the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC, could walk into any Reform synagogue as a full-fledged member.

But after drifting from Catholicism, his mother’s religion, to evangelical Christianity, he found meaning in Orthodox Judaism. Through the Internet and guided by the local Chabad

community, Levy came to self-identify as a Noahide. He takes classes and attends services as a non-Jew at a Chabad synagogue and even created a website, novanoahides.org (nova as in Northern Virginia)—in the hope of meeting other Noahides who live nearby. So far, he has only found one.

Why doesn't Levy take that last step and convert, so he can be considered Jewish according to Orthodox standards and become a full member of the community? Nearly all Noahides grapple with the conversion question, sometimes for years and without definitive conclusion. After all, they adhere to traditional Jewish commandments more strictly than most Jews and many can quote from rabbinic texts as well as yeshiva students.

Some have become Jewish, but they are a minority. For the rest, the reasons for not converting are complicated. "I was raised on bacon and eggs," Levy jokes, "and if I had to give them up I don't know what I'd do." More seriously, he talks about an "attachment" to his "Gentileness" and his respect for his mother.

But for most Noahides the decision not to convert boils down to the fact that they find spiritual fulfillment in what they view as their role in the divine plan for the world: To follow the lead of the Jewish people—not become them. "Israel was chosen to be a nation of kings and priests and a light unto the nations," Pam Rogers explains. "We decided if everybody converted, who would Israel have to be priests to?"

They believe that they can have a greater impact as non-Jews following the Torah than as Jewish converts, both by encouraging other non-Jews to live according to Noah's laws and by calling upon Jews to observe their own traditions. "If I just converted and went out to the non-Jewish world talking about the Torah and the prophets and how great it was, then I'd just be another Jew running my mouth," says Jack Saunders.

To those who take the long view of Jewish history, like

University of Toronto professor Novak, the Noahide movement is destined to peter out, as did the Second Temple-era God Fearers. Eventually, Novak reasons, Noahides will return to their original faiths or convert to Judaism. "If you want rabbis to tell you what to do, why not convert to Judaism?" he asks. "It's an untenable situation."

A couple of months after meeting the Longs at Mendy's Kosher Delicatessen, I called them at their home in Arkansas to ask how they envisioned the Noahide future, in 15, 20, or even 50 years. "There will be places in every state and nation where people can go to study and worship," answered Carol. No other group of Righteous Gentiles has had the tools of modern technology with which to communicate, organize effectively and dispense information. This, Jim said, not only insures the long-term sustainability, but the growth of the Noahide movement. Then he asked me a question: "Do you know what kind of world we would live in if all nations honored the Seven Laws?" He took a quick breath and answered his own query: "It would be transformational. If we were to stop killing, stop stealing, establish real courts of justice everywhere in the world, do you see what would happen? We'd have world peace."

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