



# One Law for All

Should the language of “one law” in the Torah be understood in terms of equal obligation to every commandment regardless of the different people and gender groups that are clearly identified in the Torah?

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**T**orah has different instructions for different people within the commonwealth of Israel. To say that God’s Torah is still in force today has vastly different implications, depending upon who you are. This realization will affect the way we read the Bible, in particular the Apostolic Writings, and help put those writings back in their proper context, especially when it comes to the distinction between Jews and Gentiles.

## Distinctions in the Torah

When we speak about how much of the Torah various individuals, be they Jew, Gentile, priest, or Levite, are obligated to observe, it is important to point out that no one person is obligated to observe the entire six-hundred-and-thirteen commandments of the Torah. Some individuals are obligated to observe more commandments than others, but no one is obligated or even permitted to observe them all.

When the Torah introduces a commandment, it usually establishes carefully to whom the commandments are addressed. For example, we find the oft-repeated phrase, “Command to Aaron and his sons, saying,” referring specifically to instructions for priests. Even within the priesthood, some men are excluded from various commandments, based

upon physical defects.<sup>1</sup> Some commandments apply only to the Levites, and some apply only to certain families within the House of Levi, such as the various duties associated with transporting the Tabernacle.<sup>2</sup> There are also instructions that obviously only apply to men and those that only apply to women. A good example of this would be the bodily-purity regulations of Leviticus 12 and 15. All of these distinctions and various levels of obligations are not based upon personal merit or right standing within the community but strictly upon lineage and gender.

Because of these inherent distinctions, rabbinic literature is able to speak of the study and observance of Torah with the assumption that certain commandments are incumbent on some groups but not upon others. The commandments must be viewed within the context of whom they are addressing. This is most clearly exposed amidst discussions regarding the relationship between non-Jews and the Torah.

*Rabbi Meir used to say, “Whence do we know that even a heathen who studies the Torah is as a High Priest? From the verse, [‘You shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments:] which, if man do, he shall*

*live in them' [Leviticus 18:5]. Priests, Levites, and Israelites are not mentioned, but men: hence thou mayest learn that even a heathen who studies the Torah is as a High Priest!"*  
— *That refers to their own seven laws.*  
(b.Sanhedrin 59a)

Notice the clarifying last sentence. According to the Gemara, when Rabbi Meir speaks of a Gentile studying and observing Torah, he is not speaking of a Gentile keeping the Torah in the same way as an Israelite. Rather the Gentile observes the commandments which (in his mind) apply to a Gentile. Therefore, in Talmudic thought, to say that a Gentile keeps Torah is different from saying that a Jew keeps Torah. But does the Torah itself really make such a distinction between Jews and Gentiles as it does with Priests, Levites, men, and women?

### The Stranger Among You

The rabbis find commandments applicable to all nations in the Noah narratives in Genesis. Noah, of course, appears on the scene before Abraham, the father of the Hebrew nation, and therefore is seen as a prototype of the righteous non-Jew. Once Noah steps off the ark, God gives him specific instructions:

*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth ... Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. (Genesis 9:1–6)*

These instructions were then codified by the sages of Israel into seven laws: the prohibitions against idolatry, murder, theft, sexual

immorality, blasphemy, and eating a limb from a live animal as well as the injunction to set up courts.<sup>3</sup> The commandments given to Noah are an important place to begin when discussing a non-Jew's obligation to the Torah, but a better place to gain a more detailed perspective on Jew/Gentile distinction is the Torah concept of the *ger* (גר).

*Ger* is usually translated as “stranger” or “sojourner.” When used in contrast to the children of Israel, it refers to the non-Israelites who are dwelling and sojourning among the people. The *ger* might be a casual passerby or a Gentile family who makes their permanent home within the land of Israel. The *ger* did not become an official “son of Israel,” but rather chose, for various reasons, to cast his lot with the people of Israel. Non-Jews first appear among Israel during the Exodus where they voluntarily choose to leave Egypt as companions of the Jewish people.<sup>4</sup>

In many other economies of the ancient Near East, strangers did not have the same civil rights and protections as the native population. The strangers in Israel, however, enjoyed the Torah's protection, which included being provided with various forms of charity and rest from servitude on the Sabbath.<sup>5</sup> Just because they could not defend themselves, did not mean that they could be abused. Commandments regarding proper behavior toward the stranger are some of the most ubiquitous in the Torah.

*You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners [ger] who are in your land within your towns. You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the LORD, and you be guilty of sin. (Deuteronomy 24:14–15)*

By the time of the late Second-Temple period it was almost universally accepted that the term *ger* referred to a proselyte; in others

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words, one who had made a formal conversion to Judaism and was no longer considered a Gentile.<sup>6</sup> Proselytes fell under full obligation to keep the Torah in the same manner as any Jew, and this is most likely how the apostles would have interpreted many of the laws about the *ger* as well.<sup>7</sup> But for now we will examine the concept of the *ger* from a literal, contextual, *sola-Scriptura* view, as is understood by most Protestant Bible scholars today, i.e., that of the non-Jewish sojourner.

## The Stranger and Passover<sup>8</sup>

The first example we find of a *ger*'s unique relationship to the Torah is in regard to the instructions about the Passover sacrifice. A close reading of this passage reveals that the Torah does distinguish between the obligations of an Israelite and those of the stranger.

*And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "This is the statute of the Passover: no foreigner shall eat of it, but every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him. No foreigner or hired servant may eat of it. It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones. All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger [ger] shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as*

*a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it." (Exodus 12:43–48)*

Biblical commentator Nahum Sarna explains that the non-Israelite "was not required to celebrate the Passover; but if he desired to do so [by sacrificing a Passover lamb], and thus identify himself and his family with the national experience of Israel, he had to first submit to circumcision."<sup>9</sup> The *ger* is permitted to participate in the Passover sacrifice, but, unlike the native-born Israelite, he is in no way obligated to do so.

However, elsewhere we read that unlike with the sacrifice, a Gentile sojourning among Israel was not permitted to have any leaven in his dwellings.

*For seven days no leaven is to be found in your houses. If anyone eats what is leavened, that person will be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a sojourner [ger] or a native of the land. (Exodus 12:19)<sup>10</sup>*

No leaven was to be found in Israel during the entire week of Unleavened Bread, either in the dwellings of the native born or the *ger*. Nevertheless a distinction remains in regard to the obligation of the actual Passover sacrifice.

The Passover sacrifice section in Exodus 12 continues with a curious verse:

*There shall be one law [torah achat, תורה אחת] for the native and for the stranger [ger] who sojourns among you." (Exodus 12: 49)*

What about the phrase, "there shall be one law"? Does this contradict the idea that the non-Israelite has a choice? When this last verse is read alone, it may give the impression that all of the Torah's commands apply equally for both the *ger* and for the native. It is tempting to remove that verse from its context and read "one law" as if it refers to the entire scope of the Torah. However, in the context of the Passover

sacrifice we can see that it is not meant in this way. Exodus 12 was not speaking about all of the laws of the Torah. In fact, at the time that this commandment was given, Israel had not even left Egypt, nor had God given the laws at Mount Sinai, nor had Moses descended the mountain with the tablets.

This verse simply explains that if the *ger* desired to participate in making a Passover-lamb sacrifice, he must follow the same procedure as the native-born Israelite. In the Hebrew Bible, the word *torah* has multiple meanings. In certain cases, the word is used to refer collectively to all of the laws in the Pentateuch. In other cases, it can denote only a subsection of laws or a single law. For example:

*Command Aaron and his sons, saying, This is the law [torah] of the burnt offering. The burnt offering shall be on the hearth on the altar all night until the morning, and the fire of the altar shall be kept burning on it.*  
(Leviticus 6:9)

Exodus 12 uses the term *torah* in a similar sense. A parallel passage regarding the “second Passover” confirms this. A special Passover sacrifice may be offered in the second month in the event that it could not have been offered at its proper time:

*And if a stranger sojourns among you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, according to the statute of the Passover and according to its rule, so shall he do. You shall have one statute [chukkah achat, חֻקָּה אַחַת], both for the sojourner [ger] and for the native.*  
(Numbers 9:14)

In this case, the same idea communicated by *torah* (law) in Exodus 12 is now described as a *chukkah* (statute), which does not ordinarily apply to the whole body of commandments. Thus, we can see that in Exodus, “one law” is Passover-specific. Jacob Milgrom underscores

the idea of Passover being voluntary for the non-Israelite:

*The ger is under no obligation to observe the festivals. The paschal sacrifice is explicitly declared voluntary for the ger: whereas an Israelite abstains from the sacrifice on pain of karet, the ger may observe it provided he is circumcised.*<sup>11</sup>

As a side note, we find the same type of distinction when it comes to the commandment of building and dwelling in a *sukkah*. Leviticus 23:42 explicitly states that “all native Israelites” are required to dwell in the *sukkah*, thus implying that it is optional for the *ger*.<sup>12</sup>

As we can see, “one law” does not imply equal obligation. The *ger* can participate in a Passover sacrifice if he wants to, but the Israelite absolutely must do so. The *ger* could opt out of the Passover but would still be considered part of the broader community. The one *torah* that applies to both of them is the single law requiring both to be circumcised in order to eat the Passover sacrifice.

Does the phrase “one law” contradict the idea that the non-Israelite has a choice?

### More on One Law

The language of “one law” appears again in several other contexts throughout the Torah dealing with the *ger*. Because its proper understanding is vital to how we view the non-Israelite obligation to the Torah, we will examine each occurrence.

*The guilt offering is just like the sin offering; there is one law [torah achat] for them.*

*The priest who makes atonement with it shall have it. (Leviticus 7:7)*

Here, the usage of the phrase “one law” precludes any possibility that the phrase means the Torah as a whole. Instead, we are to understand that the specific sacrificial procedures are the same in both cases.

Numbers 15 uses similar terminology. Once more, the context is the sacrificial service:

## If the *ger* wishes to offer a sacrifice, he must do it in the Torah-prescribed manner.

*And if a stranger is sojourning with you, or anyone is living permanently among you, and he wishes to offer a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the LORD, he shall do as you do. For the assembly, there shall be one statute [chukkah achat] for you and for the stranger [ger] who sojourns with you, a statute forever throughout your generations. You and the sojourner [ger] shall be alike before the LORD. One law [torah achat] and one rule [mishpat echad, משפט אחד] shall be for you and for the stranger [ger] who sojourns with you. (Numbers 15:14–16)*

*And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who makes a mistake, when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven. You shall have one law [torah achat] for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the people of Israel and for the stranger [ger] who sojourns among them. (Numbers 15:28–29)*

Here, the application is similar to previous cases. In the first passage, if the *ger* wishes to

offer a sacrifice, he must do it in the Torah-prescribed manner just as the Israelite would. In the second passage, the same ritual procedure regarding a sin offering applies to both the *ger* and the native born. The phrases “one statute” (*chukkah achat*) and “one rule” (*mishpat echad*) further substantiate that “one law” is meant in a specific way rather than referring to the body of Torah law as a whole.

When we read and apply the passages that speak of “one law” in their original context, it becomes apparent that they do not mean that the entire Torah should apply identically to both the Israelite and the *ger*. Milgrom takes this approach, noting that one must not make sweeping generalizations based on these verses:

*The injunction that “there shall be one law for you and the resident stranger” (Num. 15:15; cf. Exodus 12:48–49; Lev. 7:7; 24:22; Num. 9:14; 15:29–30) should not be misconstrued. It applies only to the case given in the context; it is not to be taken as a generalization.<sup>13</sup>*

### The Obligations of the Ger

Here is one remaining example of “one-law” language, found in Leviticus 24:

*Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, and whoever kills a person shall be put to death. You shall have the same rule [mishpat echad] for the sojourner [ger] and for the native, for I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 24:21–22)*

Unlike all of the other “one-law” passages cited above, this verse is not in a sacrificial context. This passage does actually not speak of “one *torah*”; instead, it indicates that there must be “one judgment,” referring to the judicial procedure and sentence to be meted out by the court for a crime. This stands in contrast to other judicial systems in the ancient Near East, where outsiders would not be given the

same sentence, judicial process, rights, or legal protection as natives if they are victims or perpetrators of civil crimes.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, not only does this passage imply equal rights for both the stranger and the native born in the courts, but also equal responsibility for such acts as negligence and murder. This idea is reinforced in another passage, where the non-Israelite is given equal access to the six cities of refuge.

*These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger [ger] and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills any person without intent may flee there. (Numbers 35:15)*

If a *ger* had committed involuntary manslaughter he could flee to one of these cities for safety, but if he had committed the act with intent he must face the death penalty. Additionally, according to Leviticus 17:7–9, there was to be the same prohibition and punishment for idolatry in regards to the non-Israelite as there was for the Israelite.

Even in some cases of ritual purity we find similar injunctions:

*And every person who eats what dies of itself or what is torn by beasts, whether he is a native or a sojourner [ger], shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening; then he shall be clean. But if he does not wash them or bathe his flesh, he shall bear his iniquity. (Leviticus 17:15–16)*

Yet, we do find more distinctions. For example we read in the Ten Commandments that while the Israelite is specifically forbidden to work on Shabbat, the non-Israelite is not enjoined to rest on the Sabbath; it only says that he may not be forced to do work.

*Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and*

*your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien [ger], may be refreshed. (Exodus 23:12)*

The Sabbath commandment is given to the Israelite; the mention of the *ger* is secondary. The non-Israelite participates in Shabbat but not on the same level as the Israelite; the obligations are different. In Deuteronomy we find a specific distinction in relation to a dietary command.

The phrases “one statute” and “one rule” further substantiate that “one law” is meant in a specific way . . .

*You shall not eat anything that has died naturally. You may give it to the sojourner [ger] who is within your towns, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk. (Deuteronomy 14:21)*

A *ger* may eat what an Israelite is explicitly forbidden to eat.<sup>15</sup>

Making specific conclusions as to the implications and ins-and-outs of exactly what this meant for the Torah-observant *ger* is difficult, nevertheless scholars have drawn some big-picture conclusions. Once again Jacob Milgrom weighs in:

Though the *ger* enjoyed equal protection with the Israelite under the law, he was not of the same legal status; he neither enjoyed the same privileges nor was bound by the same obligations. Whereas the civil law held the citi-

zen and the *ger* of equal status (e.g., Lev 24:22; Num 35:15), the religious law made distinctions according to the following underlining principle: The *ger* is bound by the prohibitive commandments but not by performative ones.<sup>16</sup>

While Milgrom himself admits that his conclusions are a generalization, nevertheless some important general principles can be established.

### Opportunity versus Obligation

One more key point must be mentioned in regard to the distinction between the *ger* and the Israelite. In the case of the priest and Levite and man and woman, etc. the distinctive commandments for each group are unique and should really not be performed by other groups. For example, a non-Israelite is certainly not encouraged to voluntarily take on the prohibitions and injunctions of the priest. In fact, to do so would at times cause him to actually transgress the Torah rather than fulfilling additional commandment, and the same is the case with men and woman.

Yet, this is not necessarily true of the non-Israelite observing Israelite-specific instructions. In the case of Passover, as we saw, although not obligated to do so, a *ger* may choose to participate in the Passover sacrifice, provided that he does it in the prescribed manner, which included circumcision. Biblical scholar Patrick Miller comments:

*The resident alien, for the most part, was not excluded from participation in the ritual practices of Israel's cultic life, specifically the festivals and cults of Israel ... The resident alien was not required but was permitted to participate in those actions that involved the active worship of [the Lord].*<sup>17</sup>

The *ger* was not obligated to do so, but he had the opportunity to join in with native-born in their festivals and various other Torah rituals as worship unto the God of Israel. Therefore,

unlike the distinction between Israelite and priest and man and woman, the non-Jew had opportunity to take on more than what was required of him.

### Conclusion

Time and space does not allow us to explore more of the implications of the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles in the Torah's injunctions. It would be wrong to take the model of the *ger* and try to apply it directly to all Gentile believers in Messiah today. There are many more factors to figure in, such as how the apostles would have themselves interpreted the word *ger*, the rulings they made such as in Acts 15, and the fact that most Gentile believers today are not living in the land of Israel or in the midst of a Jewish community. Instead, the purpose of the present article is merely to demonstrate that there are indeed Biblical distinctions within the Torah as to the commandment-obligations of Jews and Gentiles.

With this understanding we can approach Apostolic passages such as, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments" (1 John 5:3), and "Neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God" (1 Corinthians 7:19). These passages were written to communities that contained both Jews and Gentiles. Each person hearing these words would have understood "commandments" as referring to the specific parts of Torah that applied to them as a Jew or Gentile and man or woman.

In the 1 Corinthians passage, Paul states that the uncircumcised Gentile believer should keep the commandments that apply to him and that the circumcised Jewish believer should keep the commandments that apply to him:

*Paul can only mean that gentiles should obey commandments also, although evidently not the same ones as Jews. He views Gentiles as included in the perspective of the Creator which involves commandments*

for all ... The saying would then imply that whether or not one is a Jew does not matter before God, but whether one performs the commandments incumbent upon one does.<sup>18</sup>

In Messiah everyone is in equal standing before God as regards salvation, but we all have our individual responsibilities. There is only one Torah for all of God's people, but within that one Torah are many different distinctions. Once we understand that the Torah itself makes these distinctions, it becomes easier for us to grasp the words of the apostles, because, after all, it is the Torah from which they themselves are drawing. 🕯

### Endnotes

- 1 Leviticus 21:17–24.
- 2 Numbers 4.
- 3 E.g., b.*Sanhedrin* 56a. Cf. *Jubilees* 7 for an earlier formulation: “That they might do justice and cover the shame of their flesh and bless the one who created them and honor father and mother, and each one love his neighbor and preserve themselves from fornication and pollution and from all injustice ... covering [the blood] which will be poured out upon the surface of the earth. And you shall not be like the one who eats with blood, but beware lest they should eat blood before you. Cover the blood ... And you shall not eat living flesh.”
- 4 Exodus 12:38. Ibn Ezra also connects the “rabble” mentioned in Numbers 11:4 to the “mixed multitude” of the Exodus.
- 5 E.g., Exodus 23:12; Leviticus 19:10, 23:22, 25:6, 47–49.
- 6 There was the additional category of the *ger toshav* (“resident alien,” גֵּר תוֹשֵׁב), a Gentile who lived among ancient Israel and under legal protections from Israel which included receiving charity if necessary. According to the *Talmud*, they were required to make a formal proclamation renouncing idolatry before a Jewish court of law (*beit din*, בֵּית דִּין) and then, according to one opinion, to keep all of the 613 commandments of the Torah with the exception of the prohibition to eat a *nevelah* (נֶבֱלָה), i.e. an animal that has died of itself (b.*Avodah Zarah* 64b). The Talmud allows the *ger toshav* to eat *nevelah* because Deuteronomy 14:21 forbids an Israelite to eat the carcass of an animal that dies of itself, but it permits the Israelite to give it to a *ger* (“stranger,” גֵּר). There also appears to be a less formal type of *ger toshav* who does not make

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a formal declaration before a *beit din* and therefore is not legally eligible for protection and support (b.*Avodah Zarah* 65a).

- 7 See Aaron Eby, Toby Janicki, Daniel Lancaster, and Boaz Michael, “Divine Invitation: An Apostolic Call to Torah,” 51–54 [Cited 05 August 2010]. Online: [http://ffoz.org/\\_php/download.php?file=Divine\\_Invitation.pdf](http://ffoz.org/_php/download.php?file=Divine_Invitation.pdf).
- 8 Much of the material from this section and the next were drawn directly from “Divine Invitation: An Apostolic Call to Torah,” 47–49.
- 9 Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 64.
- 10 Cf. Exodus 13:7.
- 11 Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 401.
- 12 This verse and the distinction it implied was quite troubling to the sages who interpreted *ger* as “proselyte.” For a discussion of rabbinic interpretations of this passage, see Martin Lockshin, *Rashbam's Commentary on Leviticus and Numbers* (Providence, RI: Brown University, 2001), 124 n. 35.
- 13 Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 401.
- 14 Baruch Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 168.
- 15 Ancient Judaism viewed the “foreigner” in this passage as not referring to a convert but rather to the *ger toshav* (b.*Yevamot* 48b). Cf. Genesis 9:3.
- 16 Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 401.
- 17 Patrick M. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 201.
- 18 Peter Tomson, *Paul and Jewish Law* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 271–272, cited in Mark Kinzer, *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 74.