

not. Upon seeing a non-Jewish king, we recite the blessing to God, "Who has given of His glory to mortal man," and upon seeing an outstanding non-Jewish scholar we bless God "Who has given of His wisdom to mortal man" (*Berachos* 58a). We are also required to assist and respect the elderly among the gentiles (*Kiddushin* 33a), and to support their poor, visit their sick and bury their dead (*Gittin* 61a; *Rambam, Hil. Melachim* 10:12; *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 151:12, 335:9, 367:1).

Moreover, the Gemara teaches that the righteous among the gentile nations have a share in the World to Come (below, 10b, 18a).^[4] People in this category are placed on an equal footing with Jews with respect to our charitable obligations toward the less fortunate (see *Rambam* *ibid.* 8:10-11 and 10:12; *Tiferes Yisrael [Boaz]* to *Avos* 3:14).

In this vein, the Midrash states: *I call upon Heaven and Earth to testify that whether Jew or gentile, man or woman, manservant or maidservant, only according to a person's deeds does the spirit of holiness rest upon him.*^[5] Indeed, the Gemara (below 3a, *Sanhedrin* 59a) teaches that even a non-Jew who occupies himself in study of the sections of Torah that are pertinent to him is worthy of respect like the Kohen Gadol! In short, God's eternal blessing is promised to every person who faithfully carries out the duties laid down for him by God.^[6]

The above notwithstanding, living among the pagans of old presented the Jew with considerable difficulties in his religious, personal and social spheres. Historically, idolatry was more than a misguided theological belief and forbidden choice of worship. It embodied a way of life whose depravity is virtually unfathomable to the modern mind. Some forms of paganism encouraged the sacrifice of humans – most frequently children – who were either slaughtered or burned before the pagan idols (see *II Kings* 17:31 and *Sanhedrin* 63b). Even in the less barbaric cultures, pagan belief developed into a license to pursue hedonistic excesses and violate the norms of human society. It is notable that in describing what motivated renegade Jews to take up idolatry during the First Temple Era, the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 63b) states: *The Jews knew that there is no substance to idolatry, and they engaged in idolatry only in order to permit themselves overt immorality.* Thus, embracing the pagan form of worship allowed entry into a hedonistic lifestyle where public licentiousness was acceptable. The self-indulgent attitude characteristic of the idolatrous sects engendered disdain for others and brought on a devaluation of human life in general, leading to wanton murder and other violent acts. Those who rejected the pagan gods found themselves particularly at risk.

The Sages witnessed this behavior of the pagans firsthand (see Gemara 22b). Having seen the carnality of those who worshiped the pagan gods and the havoc they wrought upon society, the Sages found it necessary to institute safeguards that would insulate Jews from their pernicious influence and protect them from physical harm. Hence, we find laws designed to discourage Jews from living in quarters where they would be in constant contact with idol worshipers and might be influenced by them (see Gemara 64b).^[7] We also find laws designed to ensure that no Jew place himself in a position where he would be vulnerable to assault by a pagan (see Mishnah 22a, 26a, 27a). These rules reflect the real dangers that Jews faced on a daily basis in earlier times.

It is noteworthy that in forbidding certain forms of interaction with idol worshipers, the Gemara explicitly *includes Jews* who worship idols and *excludes gentiles* who do not worship them (see 64b-65a). Clearly, these Rabbinic decrees were enacted for the sake of protecting Jews from the corrosive influence and danger of *idolaters*, not of gentiles per se. In this regard, numerous Rishonim draw a distinction between laws that the Rabbis enacted to prevent Jews from being harmed by idolaters and those that they instituted to safeguard against intermarriage or Sabbath desecration. The former were directed specifically at the pagans of earlier generations whose society was a moral abyss that did not extend the rule of law and order to all. They are not applicable in civilized cultures where a high moral standard is in place, and where all humanity is respected and justice reigns. The latter,

NOTES

4. *Rambam (Hil. Melachim* 8:11) describes as "righteous" one who observes the seven precepts of the Noahide Code because God, in His Torah, commanded that all men abide by them. [These precepts incorporate the fundamental rules of humanity. They are the prohibitions against idol worship, immoral relations, murder, robbery, blasphemy and eating a limb torn from a living creature, and the positive commandment to institute laws that promote justice, law and order (*Rambam* *ibid.* 9:1).] *Yad Ramah (Sanhedrin* 105a) writes that any gentile, provided he is not evil, has a share in the World to Come. See below, 10b, and *Seder Yaakov* there.

It is of note that the Gemara does not hesitate to single out non-Jews as exemplars of appropriate behavior (see, for example, 10b-11a, 18a, 23b-24a).

5. *Tanna DeVei Eliyahu Rabbah*, Ch. 9 in Lublin ed.; Ch. 10 in Ish Shalom ed. See also *Yalkut Shimoni* to *Genesis* 15:3.

6. *R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, The Collected Writings* (Feldheim Publishers/The Rabbi Dr. Joseph Breuer Foundation/The Samson Raphael Hirsch Publications Society), Vol. VII p. 226.

7. Interestingly, the Torah itself expresses the concern that when the Jews would enter Eretz Yisrael and come in contact with its pagan inhabitants, they might be negatively influenced and adopt some of the heathen practices. This is one of the themes of Moses' exhortations to the Jews in the first chapters of the Book of *Deuteronomy*. In a sense, then, these Rabbinic restrictions go hand in hand with the Biblical warnings against coming under the influence of idolaters.