



## *Noahide Laws & Lifecycle Course*

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### *Selecting a Rabbi*



**Noahide Nations Nagid Clergy  
Certification Program**

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## **Outline of This Lesson:**

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Classic *Semikhah***
- 3. Modern *Semikhah***
- 4. Problems With Modern *Semikhah***
- 5. Choosing a Rabbi**
- 6. Kabbalah – Specialized Licenses**
- 7. Honor Due to Torah Scholars**
- 8. Honor Due to Torah Books**

# Selecting a Rabbi

## Introduction

In previous lessons we examined the laws governing what Torah may be learned by non-Jews and what Torah may be taught to non-Jews by Jews. In this final lesson on Torah study, we are going to look at Rabbis, different types of Rabbis, and the requirement to show proper honor to Torah scholars and Torah books.

## Rabbinic Ordination: Classical *Semikhah*

*And Moses spoke to the Lord, saying: 'Let the Lord, the God of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them, and who may come in before them, and who may lead them out, and who may bring them in; that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd.' And the Lord said unto Moses: 'Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is spirit, and lay your hand upon him; and set him before Eleazer the priest, and before all the congregation; and give him a charge in their sight. And you shall put of your honor upon him that all the congregation of the children of Israel may hear. And he shall stand before Eleazer the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord; at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he, and all the children of Israel with him, even all the congregation.' And Moses did as the Lord commanded him; and he took Joshua, and set him before Eleazer the priest, and before the entire congregation. And he laid his hands upon him, and gave him a charge, as the Lord spoke by the hand of Moses.<sup>1</sup>*

*And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him; and the children of Israel bearkened unto him, and did as the Lord commanded Moses.<sup>2</sup>*

*And the God said to Moses: 'Gather unto Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; and bring them to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you. And I will come down and speak with you there; and I will take of the spirit which is upon you, and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you should not have to bear it alone.'<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 27:15-23.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 34:9.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 11:16-17.

The “laying on of hands” and “placing the spirit” described in the above verses are the first examples of Rabbinic ordination and the beginning of classical *Semikhab* (*Semikhab* is Hebrew for ordination). Joshua went on to ordain others, who in turn taught and ordained their students down through the generations. This ordination was not a license to teach Torah or to lead a congregation – it was the transferring of divinely sanctioned authority from one scholar to another. This ordination imbued the holder with a spirit of wisdom, imparting holiness to his words and thoughts. *Semikhab* was required for certain roles; it was especially needed in order to serve in the Sanhedrin and other institutions of Torah law. Upon entry of the Jewish people into Israel, certain rules took effect governing how this ordination was given<sup>4</sup>:

- *Semikhab* could only be conveyed by a quorum of three judges, one of whom must himself have *Semikhab*.<sup>5</sup> *Semikhab* could be conferred verbally or in writing. The “laying on of hands” was only practiced in the earlier generations. It was not practiced beyond the generation of Moses and Joshua.
- Both the grantor and recipient must be in Israel at the time *Semikhab* is given.
- In order to receive *Semikhab*, one must be an expert in all areas of Torah law. He must also be of proper character and zealously observant of the mitzvos and words of the sages.

An important detail of rabbinic ordination is that it was tiered: ordination was given in specific areas of Torah knowledge. To receive any one of these ordinations, however, a scholar must be capable and fluent in all areas of Torah knowledge. The ordinations were, in ascending degrees:<sup>6</sup>

- *Yoreh Yoreh* (He shall instruct, he shall instruct) – This ordination was for matters of religious and ritual law.
- *Yadin Yadin* (He shall judge, he shall judge) – This ordination qualified the scholar to matters of civil, criminal, and monetary law.
- *Yatir Yatir* or *Yatir Bechoros Yatir* (He shall permit, he shall permit) –

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<sup>4</sup> Most of this material is taken from Maimonides, *Hil. Sanhedrin* 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Sanhedrin* 13b-14a. *Hilchos Sanhedrin* 4:5.

<sup>6</sup> *Sanhedrin* 5a.

This ordination qualified its holder to rule on matters of animal sacrifices and ritual purity.

This chain of ordination passed unbroken for centuries until shortly after the Bar Kokhba rebellion (132 – 135 CE). In the wake of Bar Kokhba's failed attempt to re-establish Jewish autonomy, the Romans viewed *Semikhab* as a dangerous expression of the Jewish desire for self-rule. They also realized that, by ending *Semikhab*, they would destroy the Sanhedrin. What ensued was a brutal program of persecution and suppression. By imperial decree, giving *Semikhab* was made a capital offense with terrible consequences. Not only were the parties to the *Semikhab* executed, but absolute destruction was decreed for the city in which *Semikhab* was granted. To emphasize his point, the emperor also ordered the complete destruction of all villages and settlements located within 2000 *Amos* of that city's boundaries.<sup>7</sup>

By the fourth and fifth centuries the Romans had driven most of the rabbinic community across the border into what is now Iraq. With few sages remaining in Israel, the chain of *Semikhab* eventually broke.<sup>8</sup> For the next several centuries, the title "rabbi" would not be used.<sup>9</sup> Instead, a scholar would either be referred to as "*kbokham*" (wise one) or, if he held a position of authority, as a *Gaon* (eminence).

## Rabbinic Ordination: Modern *Semikhah*

In modern times, *Semikhab* refers to a degree or diploma certifying one as having completed a course of study in halakhah, Jewish law. The impetus for this new *Semikhab* was the rise of the medieval university, which began to issue diplomas and degrees. Jewish communities, in constant flux, saw the value of credentialing its religious scholars. They called this academic degree *Semikhab* in commemoration of the classical *Semikhab*. While this *Semikhab* caught on in the European Jewish world, Sephardic communities did not adopt it until very late.

Today, *Semikhab* is given at three levels:

- *Rav U-Manbig* – The equivalent of a Bachelor's degree, this *Semikhab* originated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century at Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore,

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<sup>7</sup> *Sanhedrin* 14a.

<sup>8</sup> There are some Gaonic traditions indicating that ordination may have continued beyond the fourth century. See the *Kovetz Shaarei Tzedek*, p. 29-30 and *Sefer HaShtarot*, p. 132. However, even these concur that there is no modern *semikhab*.

<sup>9</sup> The term "Rabbi" is not all that common in the Talmud either. There are many honorifics used in the Talmud for Torah scholars. However, most of them are referred to simply by their names or soubriquets.

MD. It certifies the holder as a teacher and as knowing the basic laws of the synagogue ritual service and observance of the holidays. Not all yeshivas issue this *Semikhab* or accept it as valid. Where accepted, the holder may use the title Rabbi.

- *Yoreh Yoreh* – Equivalent of a Master's degree. Based on the *classical Yoreh Yoreh*, this is usually awarded following a course of study in kashrus (dietary laws), Shabbat, *Niddah* (laws pertaining to married women), and *Aveilus* (mourning). Traditionally, the final exam is given in *Issur ve-beter* (a very detailed sub-section of the dietary laws). This is the most common *Semikhab* today. A Rabbi with this *Semikhab*, who holds a position of communal authority, may be called Rav.
- *Yadin Yadin* – Also based on the classical *Semikhab*, this ordination is the equivalent of a Ph.D. It requires extensive study of the laws of monetary and civil damages, as well as the laws of marriage and divorce. One who holds this ordination may be called *Dayan*. In the US, however, they are usually called Rabbi or Rav.

There is a fourth level that is very uncommon in our times called *beter horaah* (although this term is confusingly applied to other ordinations as well) or *Semikhab*s *Moreh Horaah*. This is an all-encompassing *Semikhab* awarded to rare scholars who have mastered the entire body of Torah literature. Very few people receive this today.

## The Problems with Modern *Semikhab*

Students of Judaism and Noahism should be aware that there are many details (and problems) with modern *semikhab*:

- *Semikhab* is first and foremost a certification in Torah Law. Biblical interpretation, philosophy, and theology, are rarely, if ever, part of the curriculum. *semikhab* is only relevant to the study of Torah law – it is not awarded for knowledge of other areas.
- *Semikhab* is an academic degree attained after a course of study and examination. It is not awarded based on righteousness or character. There are people with *semikhab* who are not particularly pleasant.
- One who has *semikhab* at one level may not teach or answer questions about law from a higher level. Someone with *Yoreh Yoreh* should not answer questions about *Yadin Yadin* material.

- In the past 15 or 20 years, many yeshivas have begun awarding *semikhab*s in very specific areas of study. For example, someone may take a course in the laws of *Shabbos* and receive *semikhab* in *Shabbos* (this may even be done online). However, he may not know any other area of Torah law. Such a person must be very cautious about holding himself out as a Rabbi because he is not qualified to discuss anything other than the laws of Shabbat. There are many “area specific” Rabbis in the world today. Unfortunately, many hold themselves out as “Torah authorities” when, in actuality, they are woefully unqualified outside their narrow area of study. Of Rabbis who teach or rule on matters in which they are not thoroughly versed, Maimonides describes them as “evil, arrogant people.”<sup>10</sup>
- Because it is possible to get *semikhab* in only one narrow area, it means that one does not have to be a Torah scholar anymore to be a Rabbi. Likewise, one doesn’t need to be a rabbi to be a Torah scholar.
- One does not have to study at a yeshiva to attain *semikhab*. Either a person can study at a yeshiva and receive *semikhab* from the Yeshiva, or one can study privately and be examined by a renowned Torah scholar.

Ultimately, the world of Torah scholarship is a meritocracy – the greater scholars receive the greatest recognition and are accorded authority on the merits of their achievements. For this reason, many of the greatest Torah scholars and authorities of the past 150 years never bothered with *semikhab*.

## Choosing a Rabbi

The only qualified Rabbis are those who are observant and received their training from orthodox institutions. If someone was ordained as a reform Rabbi, and subsequently became orthodox, their ordination remains invalid.

Know from where a Rabbi received *semikhab*. Did he get it online, from a recognized Torah scholar, or from a Yeshiva? All three could be valid, depending on the source.

Also, what did the Rabbi have to study to receive his *semikhab*? Was it one area (i.e. *Issur v’Heter*) or did he have to complete a long course of study? Most importantly – is the rabbi affiliated with a particular institution, or is he a “lone wolf?”

Rabbis who “do their own thing” should generally be avoided because they have no accountability to anyone other than themselves.

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<sup>10</sup> *Hilchos Talmud Torah* 5:30.

You must endeavor to find a Rabbi in whose scholarship you have confidence and who you believe will take your interests seriously. If you always agree with everything your Rabbi tells you, then your relationship with the rabbi is not healthy for you. You want to find a Rabbi who challenges you. Most important of all, you must find a Rabbi who is consistent in his teachings. A rabbi who changes his opinions to suit the audience at hand, or when he is challenged, should be avoided.

## ***Kabbalah* – License**

Besides ordination, there is another rabbinic credentialing called *kabbalah* – although this is similar to the Hebrew word for mysticism, it has an entirely different meaning here. A *kabbalah* is a license to practice as a *mohel* (perform circumcision), *sofer* (scribe) or *shochet* (kosher slaughterer).

- *Mohel* – An unlicensed *mohel* should not be used. Additionally, unlicensed *mohalim* are exposed to tremendous liability. Besides the religious requirement for licensure, many countries have laws that enforce certification.
- *Sofer* – There is a tremendous number of unlicensed *soferim* (scribes) today. Many of these are producing non-kosher *mezuzos* and *tefillin*. Without licensure, their work would still remain unacceptable because the work of an unlicensed *sofer* (scribe) considered non-kosher even if the unlicensed Sofer is a Torah scholar and if their work is executed properly. Purchase of *safrus* from an unlicensed person is likewise prohibited.
- *Shochet* (a ritual slaughterer of animals) – The requirement of licensure for *shochtim* is very stringent. The meat of an unlicensed *shochet* is treated as non-kosher even if he slaughtered the animal correctly. As a result the meat is either discarded or sold to non-Kosher meat companies.

## **Honor Due to Torah Scholars**

*Rise before an elderly person and stand before a wise man.*<sup>11</sup>

This teaches that we are obligated to show honor to a Torah scholar by standing in his presence. We must stand when a scholar enters or leaves a room if he is within six feet of us. For an exceptional scholar, we stand when he enters the room even from more than 6 feet away.

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<sup>11</sup> Leviticus 19:32.



## The Honor Due to Torah Books

There are a number of rules that ensure the respectful treatment of holy books. The *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (Concise Code of Jewish Law), 28:4 to 10, summarizes these:

*28:4 One should treat sacred books, even those other than a Torah scroll, with great respect. If placed on a bench, it is forbidden to sit on this bench unless the texts are placed on some object whose height is at least a handbreadth. It is surely forbidden to place such texts on the ground. A person should not put a sacred text on his lap and rest his arms upon it. When necessary, one may sit on a chest that contains other sacred books. However, this is forbidden if it contains a Torah scroll. Chumashim {The writing of the five books of Moses} may be placed on books of the Prophets and Sacred Writings. Books of the Sacred Writings may be placed on books of the Prophets and books of the Prophets may be placed on books of the Sacred Writings. However, we may not place books of the Prophets or of the Sacred Writings on Chumashim.*

*28:5 A Torah scroll that has become worn should be placed in genizah. The same applies to other sacred texts, writings, and ritual articles. It is forbidden to burn them.*

*28:6 One should not toss sacred texts or even works of Law or Aggadah. Similarly, it is forbidden to turn them upside down. If one finds one upside down, he should turn it the right way up.*

*28:7 One should not urinate in the presence of holy texts. In an emergency, one should at the very least, see that they are placed ten handbreadths up.*

*28:8 One should not make covers or mantles for a sacred article, from an article that was used for ordinary purposes. However, ex post facto, it is permitted. However, if it was made from an article that was used for idol worship, even after the fact, it is forbidden.*

*28:9 It is forbidden to use a holy text for one's own benefit - e.g., to stand it up for shade in the sun, or as a screen so that his colleague does not see what he is doing. However, if the sun is shining too brightly on the text that one is studying, one may use another text for shade, because one is not using it for one's own benefit. Similarly, to place a sacred text under another text from which one is studying to raise it, to make studying easier, is allowed. However, one should not place one text inside another, so that one will not need to search afterwards for the place one was learning. One should not rule a notebook on top of a sacred text since a notebook is not sacred until one has written in it. Similarly, one should not place paper and the like within a sacred text to be preserved.*

*28:10 One who destroys sacred texts transgresses a negative commandment, “Do not do so to the Lord, your God.” We need to rebuke the binders of books, who (often) glue, in the covers of books, pages from sacred texts. Also great care should be taken when giving old holy texts to a gentile binder to rebind. One should remove the old covers and hide them, so the binder does not use them for secular books.*