**Gentile *Torah* Study**

**Introduction**

“O how I love your *Torah*, I speak of it all day long”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As Jews who pride themselves as being on fire with *yiddishkeit* whilst being involved in the world, questions often arise regarding the prohibition against teaching Torah to gentiles. Whether quoting Torah ideas in one’s dissertation or being peppered with questions from curious co-workers, knowing what one can communicate of our precious heritage is essential to ensure that we represent our religion in the best possible light, whilst maintaining the standards mandated by Halacha.

This article will outline the sources for the prohibitions against gentiles studying Torah and against Jews teaching them. It will focus on the interplay between these prohibitions and the approaches taken by a number of classical *rishonim* in grappling with nature of these prohibitions. Second, it will define the scope of the transgression, regarding which gentiles, material and formats it includes. Finally, it will address the seeming omission of this ruling from the halachic codes.

This article’s aim is to introduce the reader to the main issues of gentile Torah study, not to reach a definitive ruling; something which is beyond the scope of both this article and its author. The approaches of contemporary *poskim* are mentioned regarding specific issues, but the general approaches they carve out, based on the sources below, are not included. Hopefully this article will provide sufficient background in the relevant sources from *Shas* and *poskim* for one to understand the assumptions and conclusions the contemporary *poskim* are making when they arrive at their diverse rulings.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**1. Source of the Prohibition**

**a. Two Prohibitions**

*A gentile who delves into Torah study is liable to receive the death penalty, as it is stated[[3]](#footnote-3) “Moshe commanded us Torah, an inheritance (morasha)”, our inheritance and not theirs (Rabbi Yochanan[[4]](#footnote-4))*

*Words of Torah may not be transmitted to gentiles, as it states[[5]](#footnote-5) “He has not dealt so with any other nation, and as for his commandments they have not known them” (Rabbi Ami[[6]](#footnote-6))*

The *gemara* records two prohibitions regarding gentiles and their Torahstudy. One vis-à-vis their own study – Rabbi Yochanan’s ruling, and the other regarding Jews teaching them – Rabbi Ami’s ruling. The *rishonim[[7]](#footnote-7)* frame the first as a Torah level prohibition, whilst the second is assumed[[8]](#footnote-8) to be rabbinic, primarily due to its source text being psalms.

Indeed, it seems hard to argue that Rabbi Yochanan’s ruling could be rabbinic. The assumed[[9]](#footnote-9) source for the requirement to adhere to rabbinic decrees, “don’t veer from their words”[[10]](#footnote-10), was commanded to the Jewish people alone. Thus, a legislative framework for rabbinic rulings to be enacted against gentiles is lacking. Furthermore, the *gemara*[[11]](#footnote-11) equates Rabbi Yochanan’s prohibition to the other Noachide laws, which are not rabbinic. The *gemara* says “If gentile Torah study is forbidden, it should be counted among the seven Noachide laws?! According to the one who understands *morasha* in the verse to describe the Torah as an inheritance, then this prohibition is included in the prohibition of theft[[12]](#footnote-12). According to the one who says *morasha* means that the Torah is betrothed to the Jewish nation[[13]](#footnote-13), the punishment of a gentile who learns Torah is like that of one who engages in relations with a betrothed woman”.

Despite these prohibitions, there is a section of Torah which gentiles are not only permitted[[14]](#footnote-14), but encouraged to study - the Noachide laws. Rabbi Meir[[15]](#footnote-15) likens a gentile who studies the Noachide laws to a *Kohen Gadol*.

**b. The Requirement for Multiple Prohibitions**

Tosfos[[16]](#footnote-16) question the necessity of Rabbi Ami’s ruling, forbidding Jews to teach gentiles Torah. Since Rabbi Yochanan forbade gentiles from *Torah* study, it would be *lifnei iver* for a Jew to teach them.[[17]](#footnote-17) Approaches to dealing with the issue fall into two general categories. The first distinguishes a gentile’s Torah study from a Jew teaching them Torah. The second establishes Rabbi Yochanan’s prohibition as pertaining to certain sections of Torah, and Rabbi Ami’s as pertaining to others.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**i. Distinction 1: studying versus teaching**

TheTurei Even[[19]](#footnote-19) understands the *gemara*’s equation of the prohibition to either theft or forbidden relations literally. He argues that Rabbi Ami sided with the opinion that Rabbi Yochanan’s prohibition was based on theft. Hence the case of a Jew who willingly teaches a gentile Torah does not amount to theft,[[20]](#footnote-20) as the Jew is happily giving up his Torah. Therefore, such a situation would not be covered by Rabbi Yochanan’s ruling and this is what Rabbi Ami forbade, albeit rabbinically.

Tosfos, on the other hand, explains that teaching Torah to a gentile ceases to be *lifnei iver* when the gentile could achieve their goal independently, such as when there is another gentile[[21]](#footnote-21) willing to teach them. This case is what Rabbi Ami’s ruling came to prohibit.

Such an answer proves difficult. The existence of a willing gentile teacher may well circumvent the issue of *lifnei iver*. However, it does not affect the rabbinic transgression of *m’sayei’ah l’ovrei aveira*[[22]](#footnote-22). This is a rabbinic enactment forbidding a Jew to be instrumental in the committing of a sin, even if the sin could have occurred independently of their input[[23]](#footnote-23). Further, if it were not included in *m’sayei’ah l’ovrei aveira*, what was Rabbi Ami’s logic to prohibit it?

One could suggest that Tosfos, like the Shach[[24]](#footnote-24)*,* but against the Rama, understand that *m’sayei’ah* was only enacted to stop Torah observant Jews from sinning and therefore is not relevant to gentiles. Alternatively, according to the Turei Even[[25]](#footnote-25), the nature of *m’sayei’ah* is an outgrowth of the commandment to rebuke sinners. Thus, if one realises that they won’t succeed in preventing the transgressor from sinning, *m’sayei’ah* would not apply.

If such a situation does not fall within the technical bounds of either *lifnei iver* or *m’sayei’ah,* why did Rabbi Ami prohibit it? Perhaps Rabbi Ami’s prohibition wasn’t based on preventing sinners from sinning, but to uphold *K’vod HaTorah*. Despite not being required (on either a Torah or rabbinic level) to stop gentiles studying Torah, Rabbi Ami feared the consequences of people not fully grounded in Torah, studying sections of our intricate heritage. Without a solid background and conceptual basis, the Torah could easily be misunderstood and such misunderstandings, as history has shown us, can create a risk to Jewish life. Precedent for such an idea can be seen in the Rambam’s approach to this prohibition[[26]](#footnote-26) and perhaps by comparing this prohibition to the other groups of people for whom Torah study is prohibited[[27]](#footnote-27).

**ii. Distinction 2: different categories of Torah**

The S’fas Emes[[28]](#footnote-28) distinguishes between ‘Torah’, which Rabbi Yochanan forbade and ‘specific rulings’[[29]](#footnote-29) which were permitted without the ruling of Rabbi Ami.

He suggests further, that Rabbi Yochanan’s verse “Moshe commanded us Torah” may refer specifically to *Torah shebichsav* which was directly taught by Moshe to all of ‘*Klal Yisrael*, to the exclusion of *Torah sheb’al peh*[[30]](#footnote-30). Again, this was until Rabbi Ami’s enactment which forbade teaching *Torah sheb’al peh*.

Finally, the Maharsha[[31]](#footnote-31) infers from Rabbi Ami’s choice of language, “don’t transmit”, rather than “don’t teach”, that Rabbi Ami came to prohibit “teaching the reasons and depths of commandments, even regarding the Noachide laws”. At first glance[[32]](#footnote-32) the Maharsha is distinguishing between the studies of the Noachide laws at a basic and at an in-depth level; Rabbi Yochanan didn’t prohibit study of the Noachide laws at any level and Rabbi Ami prohibited studying their reasons and depths. However, the Maharitz Chayos[[33]](#footnote-33) infers from the Maharsha’s specification of “the depths of all commandments” that he permits studying all commandments at their basic level.

**iii. Summary**

Both distinctions lead to the conclusion that almost all categories of Torah are forbidden to be taught to gentiles. However, their conclusions regarding the areas of Torah that gentiles can study themselves differ. The first distinction made no reference to different categories of Torah, understanding that Rabbi Yochanan forbade all categories of Torah. However, the second type of distinction included suggestions to permit self-study of simple rulings, *Torah* *shebichsav* or basic details of either the Noachide laws or all commandments. If we assume that those who hold the second opinion accept the logic offered by Tosfos, i.e. that Rabbi Yochanan’s ruling won’t be bound by *lifnei iver* if there is another gentile available to teach, then, were there alternative avenues for the gentile to obtain Torah knowledge, a Jew would also be sanctioned to teach them the sections that they are permitted themselves to study.

**c. Approaches**

**i. Kabbalistic approach – not even a single letter**

*“Giving even a single letter of Torah to one who’s not circumcised is comparable to destroying the world and lying in the name of Hashem… For it says[[34]](#footnote-34) “this is the Torah which Moshe put before B’nei Yisrael”, before B’nei Yisrael, but not before any other nation… Hillel and Shamai told Onkelos that they wouldn’t teach him any Torah until he was circumcised” (Zohar[[35]](#footnote-35))*

The Zohar’s maximalist approach to the prohibition is adopted by other Kabbalistic leaning works such as the Sh’lah[[36]](#footnote-36) and Tola’as Yaakov[[37]](#footnote-37)*.* The Tola’asYa’akovuses a *Kal VaChomer* to prove that an uncircumcised person is absolutely forbidden to study any shred of Torah. “If regarding *Korban Pesach*, which merely hints to matters of *k’dusha*, we are told[[38]](#footnote-38) “those uncircumcised cannot eat”, clearly the Torah, which is of much greater holiness, is off limits to those uncircumcised”.

These approaches seem in direct contrast to the *gemara*, which quotes Rabbi Meir encouraging Noachide law study. The Sefer Chareidim[[39]](#footnote-39) writes that this Zohar and, by extension, those works built off it are arguing with the *gemara*. Despite noting this argument, the Sefer Chareidim seems to side with the Zohar.

The simple understanding of “a single letter of Torah” is that teaching anything associated with Torah is forbidden. However, one could understand “a single letter of the Torah” to mean the Hebrew alphabet in which the Torah is written. Indeed, the Sefer Chassidim writes[[40]](#footnote-40) “don’t teach a gentile priest the letters (*aleph beis*), and don’t play for him pleasant tunes, lest he use the tunes for his idol worship”. Perhaps this is based on his understanding of the Zohar. However, from his specification of a priest and his further references to idol worship, one suspects that his intentions aren’t connected to our prohibition and rather a more general idea of separating our worship from that of idolaters.

The Zohar is not understood by all to be more stringent. Preceding the above quoted passage, the Zohar writes, “It is written ‘for a good teaching, [*Torah*], I have given to you[[41]](#footnote-41)’, to you and not the nations that worship idols”. Rabbi Chaim Pilagi[[42]](#footnote-42) utilises this text to justify why the prohibition to teach gentile Torah is not codified[[43]](#footnote-43) by the ShulchanAruch. He explains that the ShulchanAruch rules in accordance with the *d’rasha* of the Zohar and that the Shulchan Aruch maintains that the nations of his time are not considered idol worshipers.

There are four issues with this approach:

1. It assumes that the Shulchan Aruch would rule in accordance with the Zohar against two explicit *gemara*s as well as another statement of the Zohar.

2. It assumes that the Rav Yosef Kairo did not consider the nations of his time idol worshipers, whilst it would seem sensible to assume that there were still idol worshipers.

3. Further, it assumes that his assumption that idol worshipers do not exist in his time would lead him to ignore them in the codification of the law.

4. Elsewhere in Rabbi Pilagi’s works[[44]](#footnote-44) he quotes the previously stated ruling of the Zohar that anyone uncircumcised must not study a shred of Torah.

**ii. Rationalist approach – not to lead Jews astray**

*A gentile who delves into Torah is liable with his life… Similarly, one who keeps Shabbos, even on a weekday, is liable with the death penalty…. The principle here is that we do not permit them to make a new religion and create new commandments for themselves based on their own reasoning. He must either become a righteous convert (ger tzedek) and accept upon himself all of the commandments or he must only observe the Noachide Laws without adding or detracting from them. (Rambam[[45]](#footnote-45))*

Rambam understands the prohibitions for both gentile Torah study and Sabbath observance in a similar vein; gentiles are forbidden to pick certain parts of our religion to create their own ‘hybrid-Judaism’. Whilst in the *Yad*, Rambam doesn’t explain the logic for this rule, is his responsa[[46]](#footnote-46) he outlines his concerns: “for they [gentiles] will incorrectly explain the Torah… and will cause converts and simple Jews to err, it will be a stumbling block before Israel!”

Meiri’s[[47]](#footnote-47) explanation of the two prohibitions echoes Rambam’s[[48]](#footnote-48). He goes as far as to suggest that a gentile who wants “to fulfil the commandment of Torah study” would be permitted to study Torah. However, one who studies “to know and understand our Torah and *gemara* is fitting to be punished since people will learn from him, think he is one of us, and make mistakes by following his practices”.

**2. Scope of the Prohibition**

**a. Material**

**i. Noachide laws**

*“If a man [keeps my laws] he shall live by them. This verse does not specify Kohanim, Levi’im nor Yisraelim, rather mankind. We see from this, that even a gentile who engages in Torah study is analogous to the Kohen Gadol. [The gemara qualifies] these words are regarding his study of the Noachide laws*” *(Rabbi Meir[[49]](#footnote-49))*

Despite Rabbi Meir’s statement encouraging gentile study of Noachide law going unopposed in the *gemara*, there are those who disagree. Some[[50]](#footnote-50) argue that Rabbi Meir’s ruling only refers to pre-Sinaitic gentiles. Others[[51]](#footnote-51) rule in accordance with the Zohar which was more stringent, whilst others maintain that Rabbi Meir’s statement only applies to those that believe in the divinity of the text they study[[52]](#footnote-52). However, bar these fringe sources, the mainstream halachic opinion[[53]](#footnote-53) is to encourage gentile study of the Noachide laws.

The TiferesYisrael[[54]](#footnote-54) understands gentile study of Noachide laws in a similar vein to that of women’s Torah study; they are permitted to study the laws pertaining to their observance[[55]](#footnote-55). Although the scope of the Noachide laws requires an article unto itself, it is interesting to note that Meiri[[56]](#footnote-56), when commenting on Rabbi Meir’s ruling, writes that “any gentile who studies the Noachide laws; both the general topics and their specific laws, coupled with their practical ramifications, even though this includes the majority of the Torah, should be honoured like the *Kohen Gadol*”. It may well be that the Noachide laws are more inclusive that one would have originally thought.

**ii. Simple rulings**

*Proklos son of Plosfos asked Rabban Gamliel in Akko, while he was bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite: "It is written in your Torah 'And let none of the condemned cling to your hand'[[57]](#footnote-57). If so, why are you bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite? Rabban Gamliel responded that one may not respond [to halakhic questions] in the bathhouse. When Rabban Gamliel left, he said to Proklos: "I did not come into her territory. She came into mine. They did not say [when they built this bathhouse]: 'Let us make a beautiful bathhouse for Aphrodite.' Rather, they said: 'Let us make Aphrodite for the beauty of the bathhouse'. Alternatively: [even] if you were given a lot of money, you would not enter before your idolatry naked, defiled and urinate in front of it. Yet she stands on the sewer pipe and the entire nation urinates in front of her. The verse only applies a prohibition to that which they treat like a god and not to that which they don’t." (Mishna[[58]](#footnote-58))*

The *mishna* describes Proklos asking Rabban Gamliel about his usage of a bathhouse considering its connection to the idol Aphrodite. Rabban Gamliel freely answered Proklos with Torah sources. One could argue that Rabban Gamliel only answered Proklos for *sh’lom malchus*, i.e. to maintain safe, positive relations with his gentile neighbours[[59]](#footnote-59). Alternatively, he wanted to ensure Proklos didn’t view Jews as hypocrites, going against their own religion[[60]](#footnote-60). Nevertheless, the extent to which Rabban Gamliel answered Proklos and his provision of two answers, suggests that a Jew is permitted to teach simple rulings to a gentile, in all circumstances. This approach is held by the TiferesYisrael[[61]](#footnote-61)*,* MachaneChaim[[62]](#footnote-62)andMizrachi[[63]](#footnote-63), who brings a proof for his opinion from the Rashbam[[64]](#footnote-64). Interestingly, the Turei Even[[65]](#footnote-65) utilises this text as a proof for his approach; that if Rabbi Yochanan’s prohibition is based on stealing, a Jew is permitted to willingly give over Torah ideas, as it is his Torah to give and no stealing is involved[[66]](#footnote-66).

Rashi[[67]](#footnote-67), in explaining the oath of the Jewishnation[[68]](#footnote-68) not to reveal ‘the secret’, writes that the Jews swore not to reveal the reasons behind the *Torah*. This suggests that simple rulings are permitted. However, although Rashi understood that the prohibition against teaching simple rulings was not included in the *sh’vuah*, we have no proof that this was how Rashi understood the prohibitions of Rabbis Ami and Yochanan.

**iii. *Chumash***

*“How did the Jewish people write the Torah [for their gentile neighbours to read as they entered the Land of Israel]? They wrote it on stones, as it says “you shall write on the stones all of the words of the law” and afterwards they plastered them over [so that the words could not be read]… Then, Hashem granted the gentiles an extra degree of understanding and sent their scribes who peeled off the plaster and copied down the Torah.” (Rabbi Yehuda[[69]](#footnote-69))*

Based on this gemara, the N’tziv[[70]](#footnote-70) permits gentile study of *Chumash*. However, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef[[71]](#footnote-71) argues that permission to study Torah was extended to that generation of gentiles alone with the sole purpose of ensuring that they could not claim that they were not given an option to study Torah.

**iv. *Nach***

*“A gentile who delves into Torah study is liable to receive the death penalty, as it is stated[[72]](#footnote-72) “Moshe commanded us Torah, an inheritance”… all this was only said regarding the Torah of Moshe and the commandments[[73]](#footnote-73) that he commanded to Yisrael. However, it seems to me, that nach would be permitted to teach [to a gentile]. This is because it contains the comforting words said to the Jewish people as well as fitting responses to heretics. Such material may encourage them to involve themselves with Jews and their Torah.” (Riaz[[74]](#footnote-74))*

The Riaz understands the source text of Rabbi Yochanan’s prohibition, “Moshe commanded us Torah” as referring specifically to the Torah that Moshe commanded the Jewish people i.e. *Chumash*, to the exclusion of *nach*, which is permitted, and perhaps even encouraged.

The Rokeach’s[[75]](#footnote-75) commentary on the *siddur* may be another source permitting gentile *nach* study. He explains that the verse which Rabbi Ami[[76]](#footnote-76) utilises “you have not (*bal*, spelled *beis lamed*) let your laws known [to gentiles]” to mean “the laws which start with *beis* and finish with *lamed*, you haven’t let known to gentiles (a play on the word *bal* which means you have not)”. Taken at face value, the Rokeach seems to be suggesting that Rabbi Ami’s ruling only forbids the study of the material between that first *beis* and final *lamed*, i.e. *Chumash* – which starts with *beis* (*B’reshis)*, and ends with *lamed* (*Yisrael*).

However there are a number of issues with this understanding of the *Rokeach*:

1. If the prohibition only includes *Chumash*, is the oral law permitted for gentiles to study?

2. If *bal* is understood to qualify the word “your laws”, how can it also be utilised for its own meaning (“you have not”)? Were it only utilised to qualify the laws as forbidden, the verse would read “your laws, specifically those from *beis* to *lamed*, let known [to gentiles]”. Therefore it seems that the Rokeach’s comment is that of *d’rush*, describing a deeper meaning to the verse, rather than expounding the simple meaning of the text. One may have questioned which “laws” the verse refers to. Therefore the Rokeach shows that the all-encompassing nature of “your laws” is hinted to in the following word of the verse, *bal*. The Torah which starts *with* *beis* and finishes with *lamed* doesn’t come to exclude material technically beyond the *Chumash*; rather to show that all of *Torah* is included, represented symbolically by the *beis* through *lamed* which bookend the *Chumash*.

**v. All *Torah* *shebichsav***

*“Therefore, [according to Riaz], the stories of Chumash are also permitted to teach to gentiles, for they will see the miracles that Hashem performed for the Jewish people, will recognise the strength of Hashem, and will serve to prevent them from serving idols” (Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman*[[77]](#footnote-77)*)*

However such an extension proves difficult. As explained above, the Riaz first asserted that *nach* was not included in the prohibition (since it only includes things commanded by Moshe to *B’nei* *Yisrael*, i.e. *Chumash*), and only then did he encourage its study since it could be beneficial for gentiles. However, the *Chumash* itself is prohibited, as it is the part of Torah that Moshe commanded to the Jewish people. Therefore, no logic can help permit it. It seems that Rabbi Hoffman understood that the crux of the Riaz was that Torah study is permitted when it may help gentiles, and that the first part about *Chumash* versus *nach* was merely homiletic gymnastics.

Rabbi Menashe Klein[[78]](#footnote-78) infers that Rabbeinu Gershom permits all *Torah* *shebichsav*, from his commentary[[79]](#footnote-79) to a *gemara* discussing educating either Jewish or gentile children in a jointly owned courtyard. Rabbeinu Gershom delineates the curriculum for Jewish children as “*Torah*” and the curriculum for gentiles as “medical books and scripture”.[[80]](#footnote-80) He suggests that Rabbeinu Gershom changed his description, from ‘*Torah*’ for Jews, to ‘scripture’ for gentiles, since he maintains only the written law is permissible for gentiles to study.

Finally, the Maharitz Chayos[[81]](#footnote-81) quotes that the Shita M’kubetzes[[82]](#footnote-82) distinguishes between *Torah* *shebichsav* and *sheb’al* *peh.* Whilst the Shita M’kubetzes does make such a distinction, he only does so in explaining a theoretical assumption of the *gemara*, one that doesn’t hold true in the conclusion.

**b. Format**

**i. In public**

*“In my opinion, it is clear that Rabbi Ami’s prohibition to transmit Torah to gentiles is only when one has specific intention to do so. However, if one’s intention is to transmit Torah to Jews, such teaching would not be forbidden on account of gentiles inevitably hearing the words of Torah. (Rabbi Moshe Feinstein[[83]](#footnote-83))”*

Rav Moshe finds precedent for his idea from Tavi, Rabban Gamliel’s servant. Tavi was well versed in Torah despite being a servant, who, like a gentile, is prohibited from Torah study[[84]](#footnote-84). He suggests Tavi attained his Torah knowledge[[85]](#footnote-85) through overhearing Rabban Gamliel’s discussions with his contemporaries. Rav Moshe asserts that presumably Rabban Gamliel was aware of this, yet he did not feel the need to halt his Torah discussions on account of Tavi’s presence as he was discussing Torah with those who are permitted to hear it.

Despite Rav Moshe’s precedent-based argument, there are earlier authorities who disagree. The Yad Eliyahu[[86]](#footnote-86) explicitly forbade such a case. Furthermore, Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman[[87]](#footnote-87), in discussing the permitted curriculum for a Jewish school with a gentile child, offers various suggestions but never mentions a blanket leniency based on Rav Moshe’s logic.

**ii. To correct gentiles who think a Jew has erred**

*“Explaining Torah laws to gentiles is permitted in places of Kiddush Hashem so they don’t say they have beaten us with their logic and will speak badly about our holy Torah” (Yad Eliyahu[[88]](#footnote-88))*

Like the Yad Eliyahu, the S’fas Emes[[89]](#footnote-89) explains, “it seems to me that the reason *Chazal* often answered questions from gentiles regarding *Torah* is because the prohibition is specifically to transmit Torah. However, if the gentile already knows the verse yet is mistaken in understanding it, it is permissible to explain it, lest they think we are going against what is written in the Torah”. The S’fas Emes specifies prior knowledge of a verse – i.e. *Torah shebichsav*. Similarly, in the case of Rabban Gamliel and Proklos, Proklos was knowledgeable of the *passuk* but he misunderstood its application. One could conclude, based on the above, that such a leniency is limited to explaining *Torah* *shebichsav*. However, it seems that the logic offered by both the S’fas EmesandYad Eliyahu would hold true irrespective of the type of Torah being taught. Indeed, the S’fas Emes himself suggests that *Torah shebichsav* may be more stringent than *Torah sheb’al peh*, being the only material included in Rabbi Yochanan’s ruling[[90]](#footnote-90).

There is precedent for rabbinic leadership studying with gentiles to ensure the good of the Jewish people. Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman[[91]](#footnote-91) cites as examples that Rabbi Ovadiah S’forno taught the German Humanist Johann Reuchlin, and that Rav Eliyahu Bachur studied with gentiles, yet their rabbinic colleagues vociferously disagreed.

**iii. Conclusion**

Rav Moshe and the S’fas Emes only explain why specifically Rabbi Ami’s prohibition does not apply within the parameters of the specific circumstances that they were discussing. Perhaps they would argue that the issue of *lifnei iver* for Rabbi Yochanan’s prohibition would not apply, since there are other avenues for the gentile to study Torah[[92]](#footnote-92). Indeed, even during the times of *Chazal* there were opportunities for gentiles to study Torah[[93]](#footnote-93). However, although some Torah study was available, it is hard to imagine that the Torah knowledge Tavi and Proklos received from Rabban Gamliel was attainable.

In regards to the prohibition of *lifnei iver*, one could argue that once one has access to some Torah study, the level is irrelevant. Furthermore, in Rav Moshe’s case, one could distinguish between the prohibition to study Torah for servants and gentiles[[94]](#footnote-94). Finally, in the S’fas Emes’s case, the gentile might transgress a worse prohibition if *Chazal* did not teach them Torah, as he writes “lest they think we are going against what is written in the Torah”. Perhaps the S’fas Emes holds, like Rabbi Akiva Eiger[[95]](#footnote-95), that transgression of *lifnei iver* is sanctioned to save someone from a worse transgression. This assumes that the *chillul Hashem* of a gentile thinking that a Jew is going against their Torah is a worse transgression than gentile Torah study.

**c. Which Gentiles?**

**i. Only Idolaters**

*A gentile who delves into Torah is liable with his life. He should only delve into his Noachide laws. Similarly, he should not observe Shabbos…. A ben noach who wishes to fulfil one of the other commandments in order to receive reward is not prevented from doing so (Rambam[[96]](#footnote-96))*

The Chasam Sofer[[97]](#footnote-97) explains that Rambam’s term ‘gentile’ refers to an idolater, whilst ‘*ben noach’* refers to one who believes in one God. Consequently, he argues that when Rambam writes that a *ben noach* can fulfil other commandments, this includes studying Torah. Although this goes against the prohibitions of both Rabbis Yochanan and Ami, he argues that “Rambam sides with a *gemara* in Nedarim[[98]](#footnote-98) which implies that gentile Torah study is permitted, since Nedarim was redacted later”. Such an explanation seems to make these paragraphs of the Rambam’s work incompatible with his responsa[[99]](#footnote-99).

At first glance, it seems that Meiri[[100]](#footnote-100) agrees. He writes that Rabbi Ami’s ruling is referring to a gentile “who serves foreign gods”. He claims that the logic for this prohibition is that we cannot teach *Torah* to someone who fundamentally denies its validity. Indeed the word Rabbi Ami uses in his prohibition is *“akum”* – an idolater. However, this differs from the Chasam Sofer’s explanation of theRambam since Meiri doesn’t qualify Rabbi Yochanan’s statement in the same way. This distinction is based on the exact wording of Rabbi Yochanan who, unlike Rabbi Ami, discusses a *“ben noach”,* not an “*akum*”. Therefore, Meiri prohibits all gentiles from Torah study but understands that the additional prohibition of Rabbi Ami only applies to idolaters.

From a Jew’s perspective, Meiri’s ruling lies similar to the ChasamSofer’sexplanation of theRambam. Nowadays, virtually all gentiles have access to some sort of Torah, be it through English language Torah books, radio or the internet, and therefore the *lifnei iver* of Rabbi Yochanan’s ruling does not apply. Hence, from a Jew’s perspective, only Rabbi Ami’s ruling is in play, which both the ChasamSofer and Meiri agree applies to idolaters alone. Therefore, they both would sanction teaching Torah to monotheistic gentiles nowadays.

**ii. Believers in the divinity of the *Torah***

*It’s permitted to teach the Torah’s commandments to Christians, but not Moslems, since they don’t believe the Torah was given from heaven… However, Christians believe in the validity of the text. Therefore, if you educate them with the correct explanation, they may return from their deviant ways. Even if they do not fully return, they will not confuse others with their explanations. (Rambam[[101]](#footnote-101))*

The sections of Torah that Rambam was permitting to Christians is disputed amongst the *poskim*. Rabbis Eliezer Waldenberg[[102]](#footnote-102) and Yehuda Hertzl Henkin[[103]](#footnote-103) maintain that this was said regarding the Noachide laws, which is what the questioner to Rambam was inquiring about. This would mean that when Rambam codified permission for gentile study of Noachide law, he only was only doing so for monotheistic gentiles. This would also be how he understood Rabbi Meir’s ruling sanctioning study of Noachide law by gentiles. The S’rideiAish[[104]](#footnote-104) disagrees; no one else, including Rambam in his codes, had limited Rabbi Meir’s ruling to monotheists. Rather he understands Rambam at face value, that he permits Torah study to all who believe in the divinity of the Torah. Such an approach would justify the fact that this ruling was not included in Rambam’s codification in the *Yad*.

**iii. Potential converts**

Potential converts must be taught the requisite material in order to be able to convert.[[105]](#footnote-105) The amount that they can be taught above this level is a matter of dispute. The Maharsha[[106]](#footnote-106) finds precedent in the Talmud for a blanket leniency, which is how Rav Moshe Feinstein[[107]](#footnote-107) rules. However, Rabbi Akiva Eiger argues[[108]](#footnote-108) with the Maharsha, quoting a Tosfos[[109]](#footnote-109) in support of his stricter approach. Finally, the Tzemach Tzedek[[110]](#footnote-110), based on the Zohar above, forbids all Torah study before the gentile is circumcised.

**3. The Absence of this Ruling from the Halachic Codes**

Rambam only codifies Rabbi Yochanan’s prohibition, not Rabbi Ami’s. The Shulchan Aruch codifies neither. There are two approaches to explaining why their rulings, which are not explicitly argued with in the *gemara*, are not codified. Some explain that their rulings are enveloped in other rulings, whilst others argue that their rulings do not need to be codified.

**a. Was already codified**

Suggestions as to what the prohibition is enveloped in include the advice not to teach a student who isn’t suitable[[111]](#footnote-111) (Yad Eliyahu[[112]](#footnote-112)), to only give over the depths of Torah to one who has five admirable qualities[[113]](#footnote-113) (S’ridei Aish[[114]](#footnote-114)), or to not teach one’s servant Torah[[115]](#footnote-115) (D’var Shmuel[[116]](#footnote-116)). The first two suggestions are difficult considering that the suggested rulings themselves are not codified. However, D’var Shmuel’s suggestion, that it is covered by the prohibition against teaching Torah to a servant, is codified by both Rambam[[117]](#footnote-117) and Shulchan Aruch[[118]](#footnote-118). Elsewhere, he argues that servants are only included in Rabbi Ami’s prohibition, but not Rabbi Yochanan’s. This is because they are considered like Jews as they are commanded to fulfil certain *mitzvos*. This might make it the perfect way to codify Rabbi Ami’s ruling[[119]](#footnote-119).

**b. Doesn’t need to be codified**

The S’fas Emes, B’er Sheva and Rabbi Chaim Pilagi all suggest that the prohibition was not codified because we do not rule in accordance with it. The S’fas Emes[[120]](#footnote-120) suggests that when *Chazal* were permitted, under the force of King Talmai[[121]](#footnote-121), to translate the Torah to Greek, the prohibition to transmit *Torah* to gentiles was rescinded. The B’er Sheva[[122]](#footnote-122) writes “were I not apprehensive of my contemporaries, I would suggest that the *poskim* did not codify the ruling since we do not rule in accordance with it”. However, he concludes that one who is careful will distance himself from studying with gentiles. Rabbi Pilagi[[123]](#footnote-123), based on the Zohar, understands that the prohibition is only to teach gentiles who worship idols, which he claims does not apply to the nations in our times[[124]](#footnote-124).

It is important to emphasise that the above three approaches are all written as suggestions and do not practically encourage teaching gentiles *Torah*. Within this category one can also mention the Yad Eliyahu’s[[125]](#footnote-125) suggestion that perhaps this ruling was so obvious it didn’t need to be codified, but even he rejects such a suggestion.

**4. Conclusion**

The *gemara* records explicit prohibitions against both gentiles learning Torah and Jews teaching them. Two general approaches are found to understand these prohibitions. The maximalist Kabbalistic approach forbids all forms of gentile Torah study, including the Noachide laws and for potential converts to study. It understands that fundamentally words of Torah are not compatible with gentiles. In contrast, the rationalist approach of Rambam and Meiri understand the prohibition more practically. Its role is to ensure that Jews are not led astray by a gentile’s misunderstandings of Torah. Therefore they have a more permissive attitude to gentile Torah study.

The scope of the prohibition is a matter of a number of disputes. In regards to material, there are discussions about permitting study of; the Noachide laws, simple rulings, and various parts of *Torah* *shebichsav*. There are further discussions about teaching in public where gentiles may hear, or teaching gentiles who think a Jew erred, in order to correct them. Finally there is discussion about whether there are gentiles that are excluded; non-idolaters, believers in the divinity of the Torah or potential converts.

Hopefully, through understanding the background of the prohibition we will be better able to understand how different *poskim* and communities have such different attitudes to this prohibition.

1. Psalms 119:97 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See S’ridei Aish (2:55-56), Yabiah Omer (YD 2:17), Shevet HaLevi (2:59), Minchas Yitzchak (3:98), Mishna Halachos (2:4), Igros Moshe (YD 3:89-90 & 4:38:10) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Deuteronomy 33:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sanhedrin 59a [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Psalms 147:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Chagigah 13a [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ritva (Bava Basra 21a), Tosfos Chagigah 13a s.v. *ein mosrim*, Tosfos Rid Bava Kamma 38a s.v. *shor*, Shiltei HaGiborim in his glosses to Rif, Avodah Zara 6a [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cf. Tosfos (Bava Kamma 38a s.v. *k’ra’o*) who describes Rabbi Ami’s ruling as a positive transgression. See also Yad Eliyahu (responsa 48) who points out the logical flaw in such an approach and Maharatz Chayos (Bava Kamma 38a) who seems to understand that Tosfos was merely quoting a deviant version of Rabbi Ami’s ruling. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For an alternative approach see Kuntras Divrei Sofrim section 1 (mainly subsections 8-10) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Deuteronomy 17:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sanhedrin 59a [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rav Yaakov Emden says that this is theft since “a gentile who delves in to Torah and expounds it in a way that a Jew could have has taken it from a Jew”. Perhaps this statement is a proof that *Halacha* recognises theft of intellectual property. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Based on the similarity of the word *morasha* (inheritance) and the word *m’orasa* (betrothed) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. those brought in 2aii [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Sanhedrin 59a, Avodah Zara 3a, Bava Kamma 38a [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Chagigah 13a s.v. e*in mosrim* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Avodah Zara 6b includes gentiles in *lifnei* *Iver* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See later (footnote to end of section 3a) for a discussion whether Rabbi Ami’s ruling covers cases covered by Rabbi Yochanan’s [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Chagigah 13a s.v. e*in* m*osrim* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This answer seems difficult, the Torah is an inheritance for all Jews and the rest of the Jews haven’t consented to this one Jews giving over of the Torah! The Turei Even addresses this question and suggests that in cases of theft of an object owned by numerous people, intangible theft is not forbidden once one of the owners has consented. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The Mishne L’Melech (Laws of Lending and Borrowing 4:2) proves from the fact that Tosfos specifies another gentile (rather than another person, or another Jew), that it would still be *lifnei iver* had there been another Jew willing to teach the gentile. He maintains that one is only taken out the category of *lifnei iver* if the potential sinner can act alone, or, at most with the help of a gentile. This is against the P’nei Moshe (who he quotes) who maintains that even if the potential sinner can only achieve their sin with the help of another Jew, one who aids them is not in the category of *lifnei iver* (but will still be in the category of *m’sayei’ah*). The K’sav Sofer (Responsa, YD:83) rejects the Mishne L’melech’s inference from Tosfos, arguing that Tosfos is simply describing a typical situation. This approach could be utilised by the P’nei Moshe to rebut the Mishne L’Melech’s proof. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Tosfos Shabbos 3a s.v. *bava d’reisha* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This concept is often mistakenly referred to as rabbinic lifnei iver. Rabbinic lifnei iver is mainstream lifnei iver (i.e. cannot occur without input from the person in question) however regarding a rabbinic transgression [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. YD 151:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Chagigah 13a s.v. e*in mosrim* [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See section 1cii [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Tiferes Yisrael, Mishna Zevachim 14:4:36, who compares the prohibition to that of women’s Torah study. Also, see Mishna Sotah 3:4 and its accompanying commentaries for a background to this prohibition [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Chagigah 13a s.v. *Tosfos* [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. His exact intentions are unclear. It seems he distinguishes between in depth study of Torah, versus simple rulings. Such a distinction, although in a slightly different context, is made by the Machane Chaim (OC 7:12) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. A similar inference of language, but to a differing conclusion, is made by the Shiltei Giborim (later 2a) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Chidushei Aggados Chagigah 13a s.v. e*in* m*osrim* [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See S’dei Chemed, P’as HaSadeh, Vol. Aleph, Chap. 102 s.v. *Misbaer* (p240 Freidman ed., pub. 1961) [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. To Chagiga 13a. This appears to be the understanding taken by the contemporary *poskim* [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. D’varim 4:44 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Achrei 73a [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Maseches Sh’vuos Ner Mitzvah note 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Section 3, Sod HaMilah, s.v. *v’dah* [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Sh’mos 12:48 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Mitzvos Asei D’rabanan 4:37, brought verbatim, but not directly quoted, in Sh’lah above [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Siman 238 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Mishlei 4:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Yaffe L’Leiv, Volume 3, YD, Siman 246:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See section 3b [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See Rabbi Avigdor Berger’s comments in Z’chor L’Avraham (Cholon), 5760-5761, p853 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Laws of Kings 10:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Responsa 149, discussed in Section 2cii [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Sanhedrin 59a [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. It may well be that he is explaining Rambam’s words from the *Yad* [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Sanhedrin 59a [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. See Tosfos HaRosh in 1bii [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. See Sefer Chareidim in section 1ci [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. See Rabbis Eliezer Waldenberg and Yehuda Hertzl Henkin’s explanation of Rambam’s responsa in section 2cii [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Rambam Laws of Kings 10:9, Igros Moshe YD 3:89 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Mishna Zevachim 14:4 Os 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. A discussion about the recent revolution in women’s Torah study is beyond the scope of this article [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Sanhedrin 59a, towards the end of s.v. *ben Noach* [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. D’varim 13:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Avodah Zara 3:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. See Maharshal (Yam Shel Shlomo Bava Kamma 4:9) who maintains that Torah rulings can only be told to gentiles when the issues of s*h’lom* *malchus* are so pressing that there is a threat to life [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. See Yad Eliyahu and S’fas Emes in section 2bi [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Responsa 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Responsa 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. See Bava Basra 116a s.v. *lo* – it is forbidden to reveal to them the reasons of the *Torah* [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. See 1bi [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. He explains that it also exempt from Rabbi Ami’s ruling which is “merely an *asmachta* and is rabbinic in nature. Therefore, study on a temporary measure, especially when it aids communal relations, was not included” [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Kesubos 111a s.v. *ushelo* [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. See Kesubos 111a for the three or six vows that Hashem adjudicated between the gentiles and Jews as they went into exile [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Sotah 35b [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ha’amek Davar Vayikra 18:5, Meshiv Davar 2:77 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Chelek 2, Yoreh Deah 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Deuteronomy 33:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Assumedly referring to *Torah* *sheb’al peh* [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Piskei Riaz, Sanhedrin Chap. 7 Halacha 2 Siman 22. Also quoted in Shiltei HaGiborim, glosses to Rif, Avodah Zara 6a [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Siman 29, commentating on the paragraph beginning *Hal’luya Ki Tov Zamra* [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Rokeach’s version of the text says Rabbi Eliezer [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. M’lamed L’ho’il, Volume 2, YD 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Mishne Halachos 2:42 [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Bava Basra 21a [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. I have assumed that scripture refers to *Torah shebichsav.* The word he uses is *mikra*, usually synonymous with *Torah* *shebichsav*. Furthermore, had he meant other books, he should have written “medical books or other books”. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Chagiga 13a [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Presumably referring to Kesubos 28a s.v. *v’lo*. (He merely references the end of chapter 2) [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Igros Moshe, YD 2:132 [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Kesubos 28a, Rambam Laws of Servants 8:18, Shulchan Aruch, YD 267:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. See Succah 20b [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Responsa 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. M’lamed L’ho’il, Volume 2, YD, 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Responsa 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Chagiga 13a [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. See section 1bii [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. M’lamed L’ho’il, Volume 2, YD, 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. See Tosfos brought in section 1b [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. According to Tosfos, the availability of such opportunities was the impetus for Rabbi Ami’s prohibition [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Rav Moshe entertains this distinction but rejects it (when discussing if his proof from Tavi is applicable to teaching gentiles) [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. YD 181:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Laws of Kings 10:9-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Chulin 33a s.v *v’ayin* [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Nedarim 31a discusses the gentiles who observe *Shabbos* and doesn’t voice an objection. Seemingly the Chasam Sofer assumes that the *gemara* permits not only gentile *Shabbos* observance, but also Talmud study, as, at least for Rambam, they are based on the same problem (see section 1cii). [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. See section 2cii [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Chagiga 13a s.v. *ein mosrim sisrei* [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Responsa 149 [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Tzitz Eliezer 21:25 [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Koveitz HaTorani S’ridim, Volume 14, page 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Responsa, 2::56 [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. See Yevamos 47a [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Shabbos 31a s.v. *amar* *lei* [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Igros Moshe, YD, 3:90 [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Responsa, first edition 41 and comments on Tosfos Yevamos 24b, specifically s.v. *ulam* [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Yevamos 24b s.v. *lo* *bimei* *david* [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. YD 200 [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Chulin 133a [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Responsa 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Chagigah 13a [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Responsa 2:55 [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Kesubos 28a [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Responsa 75 [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Laws of Servants 8:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. YD 267:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Tosfos explained that Rabbi Ami’s ruling was enacted when the *lifnei* *iver* of Rabbi Yochanan’s wasn’t relevant. The straightforward understanding of Tosfos is that although the impetus for Rabbi Ami’s prohibition may have been when Rabbi Yochanan’s wasn’t relevant, the enactment manifests itself as a blanket prohibition. Was the *lifnei iver* of Rabbi Yochanan’s ruling to apply, one would transgress that as well as Rabbi Ami’s ruling. However, perhaps one could suggest that the manifestation of Rabbi Ami’s ruling was consistent with its impetus - it only applied when Rabbi Yochanan’s didn’t. Were this to be the case, it is understandable why the halachic codes would prefer to codify the ruling in the context of servants, where Rabbi Yochanan’s can’t apply, rather than explain a case with a gentile whose situation meant that concerns of *lifnei iver* for Rabbi Yochanan’s ruling weren’t applicable. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Chagigah 13a s.v. *Tosfos* [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. See Megillah 9a [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Be’er Mayim Chaim (printed at the end of his responsa) Siman 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Above section 1ci [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. See above section 1ci [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Responsa 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-125)