

Weekly Torah Portion: Noach

Is Murder Intrinsically Wrong?

After the flood God makes a covenant with Noah and his family. Although God will eventually make a covenant with the Jewish people at Sinai, He enumerates seven laws not only for Noah and family but also for all non Jews. They are the basis of morality and the foundation of a principled society. One of the laws mentioned is murder.

He who spills the blood of man, through man (i.e. witnesses in court) shall his blood be spilled, for in the image of God He made man. (Genesis/Breishis 9:6)

Noah is warned that someone who murders a human being ought to be killed. This seems logical since every member of society understands that murder is wrong. If it's so simple that murder is immoral, how do we understand the end of the verse (which gives a reason for why the murderer should be killed, and it's not simply because of the moral depravity): *for in the image of God He made man*. Why must the Torah reveal such a lofty reason for why to kill a murderer, isn't it logical? Doesn't everyone know that murder is wrong? Let's see how much value of human life people really have.

When we look at the most civilized civilizations of antiquity we see that human life had little or no value. In the book *Hardness of Heart/Hardness of Life* Dr. Larry Milner documents that "Infanticide has pervaded almost every society of mankind from the Golden Age of Greece to the splendor of the Persian Empire." (With, of course, one exception; he writes that infanticide was "never socially accepted by the Jews."). In addition, to infanticide the Romans had gladiators, events in which tens of thousands of people watched as people were killed on a mass scale. In 107 CE the Roman Emperor Trajan had a gladiator competition in which 10,000 gladiators fought. If you stayed for the entire competition you would've witnessed 5000 deaths. Furthermore, some civilizations, even advanced cultures such as the Incas, offered human sacrifices to placate their gods. Clearly, the value of life didn't seem to have too much significance years ago.

We now return to our question: Why must the Torah reveal such a lofty reason for why a murderer ought to be killed (*for in the image of God He made man*), isn't it logical? The answer is that

pure logic in a world without God seems to have no problem with murder and the annals of antiquity prove it. Therefore, the Torah needed to give a reason prohibiting murder: the only reason we don't do it is because man is created in the image of God. Rabbi Akiva explained, "Anyone who spills blood, the verse considers as if they have diminished the Image of G-d! " If left to the human logic, people will murder—this is not a point of argument, history bears witness to it. People will surely rationalize and justify why killing the people they kill is not murder, as the Germans, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Poles, and most of the rest of Eastern and Western Europe during did during WWII because that is what seemed logical to them. The Jews were responsible for their problems and therefore they dealt with them the same way one would deal with a rabid rodent in the house endangering the lives of your family, you'd exterminate it. The Torah needs to give us a reason not to murder that transcends the boundaries of human intellect; murder is destruction of the image of God. We learn from here that without the 'God concept', nothing is sacred; even murder can be justified.

Imagine how different life would be if we looked at each person as being created in the image of God. We'd treat them with deference and dignity and we certainly wouldn't murder them. Every *image of God* has a purpose and role to play in the world. As Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch wrote in 19th century Germany, "...he who kills a man destroys all the activities in him which he could have contributed to the physical world in the service of God. Hence, our Sages say, man was created singly in order to teach that he who kills a man destroys a whole world."

We need to give people dignity simply because they are created in the image of God. The more we acknowledge this point the more we allow them to make their unique contribution to the world.

Good Shabbos

(Sources: *Midrash Aggada*, *Emes l'Yaakov*, *Horeb*)