

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

# Laws Against Murder

*Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of God.* — Mishnah<sup>1</sup>

God commands all men and all women, including every Gentile and every Jew, “You shall not commit murder.”<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew phrase is *lo tir’zach*; it doesn’t mean “you shall not kill” but, in precise prohibitory language, “you shall not deliberately kill an innocent human being.”<sup>3</sup>

Behold, all souls are Mine. — *Ezekiel 18:4*

Obviously, people may kill plants and animals for food.<sup>4</sup> Man has a perfect right to kill, at times, as he exercises the privileges of worldly dominion. Since dominion involves duties and responsibilities as well as privileges, God sometimes even requires people to kill, in certain circumstances, to preserve justice and maintain order, as His stewards over the Earth. Soldiers must sometimes kill their nations’ enemies in wartime.<sup>5</sup> Courts may execute criminals who have been justly convicted of terrible crimes.<sup>6</sup> A person may, or even must, use killing force if necessary to protect oneself or others.<sup>7</sup>

The real nature of man is the issue here. This Commandment centers around these three very basic Torah principles: everyone on Earth is truly “of” God; every living person is an “image” of and a child of God, and all of us belong to Him.<sup>8</sup> As we all have the same Heavenly Parent, Who also happens to be our Owner, we see that God has made each of us ultimately a brother or sister

to everyone else — to the whole species of man.<sup>9</sup>

Further, because God deliberately created all of us, alone of all His earthly creatures, in His very “Image,” we understand that God especially cherishes humanity, above His other creations, and that all of us partake, in some sense, of the infinite holiness of our Maker.<sup>10</sup> Since any fraction of infinity is itself infinite, *everyone* born of a human mother — regardless of any bodily, emotional or mental defects, infirmities or wounds — has infinite value. Since infinity equals infinity, we see that man by his very nature must never “trade flesh,” or sacrifice even the least of his brothers in order to save one or some of the rest.<sup>11</sup> No one’s blood is any sweeter than the blood of anyone else.<sup>12</sup>

Whoever destroys a single human life is considered by the Torah as if he had destroyed an entire world. . . . — *Mishnah*<sup>13</sup>

No other crime so defiles the earth.<sup>14</sup> Murder deforms civilizations; it pollutes them and the very places where it occurs; it overturns the natural order of the world.<sup>15</sup> Murder constitutes a kind of blasphemy.

Only a murderer altogether renounces the obligations of brotherhood. — *J.H. Hertz*<sup>16</sup>

God has so much love for humanity, the rabbis teach, that He has made all men aware, and not merely Israel, that man exists in His Holy “image.”<sup>17</sup> To deliberately and wrongfully take such a life, before God Himself has called for it, is like erasing God’s image, like assaulting the world’s Creator. It’s a completely irrevocable, terrible, arrogation of Divinity’s own jealously held prerogatives. God will hold the murderer to account as if he had diminished God’s Divinity.<sup>18</sup>

Mystics associate this Fourth Universal Commandment with the red of the rainbow.<sup>19</sup>

Traditionally, study begins with the Lord’s warning and Command to all men: “And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it; and at the hand of every man, even every man for his brother-man, will I require the life of man. Whosoever sheds man’s blood, by man shall his