

READ THE DIRECTIONS

by Rabbi Moshe Peretz Gilden

Concluding the lengthy discussion enumerating the Torah's regulations for punishing a murderer is the reprimand, "You shall not bring guilt upon the land in which you are, for the blood will bring guilt upon the land..." (Bamidbar/Numbers 35:33) The Torah's word "chanifa" is translated as "guilt" per Rashi's explanation of the phrase, but the literal translation of "chanifa" is flattery. If G-d wanted to communicate guilt, He could have simply used the Hebrew for guilt. What deeper message is being communicated with the use of "chanifa"? How does murder "bring flattery upon the land"?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986; Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem in New York City; the leading Halachic/Jewish legal decisor of his time and one of the principal leaders of Torah Jewry through much of the last century) clarifies that most governments outlaw murder as an essential component of maintaining a civil society. Therefore, when society determines that it would be better served without the presence of certain persons, license is given to remove them. When a country has an enemy that threatens it, they go to war for their self preservation. The detraction of a subjective system is that it allows society to "play G-d" in determining what does not serve the interests of society. At what point does compassion dictate that doctors should no longer strive to continue the life of the elderly? Which profoundly handicapped newborns are best off not being saved? How does society balance limited medical resources with the needs of those who will never live "productive" lives? These questions are moot in the paradigm of Torah, which values life above everything (except for rejection of G-d Himself). All but three mitzvos (Divine commandments) fall by the wayside if their violation will allow for the sustenance of life. Even the Sabbath - one of the key expressions of the Jew's recognition of G-d as the Creator and Master of the Universe - is violated to add seconds to the life of another, even those whose lives society says have no quality remaining within them.

Webster's defines flattery as "the act of pleasing by artful commendation or compliments." The effect is the negation of that deemed to be unimportant through the elevation of that which we want to please, such as false, insincere, or excessive praise offered to politicians to gain their good graces. When society negates the value of its members' existence to promote its own interests, it is flattering the "good of society"; it is flattering the land. This is not the way of the Torah, concludes Rabbi Feinstein, where nothing comes before human life.

Such life altering decisions are almost too great for a mere human to have to contemplate. If computers and VCRs, even wristwatches, have operation manuals, does it not make sense that G-d -

He Who makes life and death decisions on a daily basis - should give us an instruction manual for our lives, guiding up through all of life's challenges and difficult decisions? He did...it is called "the Torah".

Have a Good Shabbos!

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