

MURDER: GOING FOR THE KILL

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah: The prohibition against murder is one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17).

Eisav is the personification of a murderer, wielding the instrument of death. "By your sword you shall live" (Genesis 27:40) - rang out his father's prophetic words. Eisav returned home fatigued to trade a red bowl of lentils for his birthright, having just killed the warrior and king Nimrod. When cheated out of his father's blessings, he resolved to kill his twin brother Yaakov.

Murder became a way of life for Eisav.

At first glance, the mitzvah against killing seems straightforward enough. Life was given to be lived, to fulfill the specific purpose of man's existence, to be productive and fruitful within all of his endeavors. It should not be cut short by an assassin who, in effect, robs man of his precious life and represents a deviation from the divine plan that has given him life (See Sefer HaChinuch, mitzvah 34).

Other violations of interpersonal contact impinge negatively on the civilization's operations, but death destroys it completely. Murder abruptly terminates mankind's lifeline. And naturally, without a life force, there can be no development, no further vitality or growth because the very notion of existence in this world ceases to be.

What was Eisav's philosophy that transformed him into a murderer?

A killer sees no further than his egocentric existence, which, in his mind, is paramount and assumes center stage. He ideologically concludes how this somehow confers upon him the G-d-given right to relate to the world as he sees fit. And that he is empowered to pursue his personal agenda, ignoring or trampling over any member of the human race that gets in his way. He presumes that the victim's life lies in his hands.

Eisav's father Yitzchak was a man of Gevurah, "power" or Din, "judgment", someone who willingly surrendered his very "life-force" before G-d. And he knew that this was how his existence had to be. His entire existence was, therefore, just an extension of doing precisely what G-d asked of him. Indeed, his life was a manifestation of G-d's dictates, insofar as the Torah laws defined him into who he was.

Inheriting a warped sense of Yitzchak's legacy, Eisav came full circle and arrived at the diametric conclusion! His reasoning went something like this: My starting point is the principle of my very

immutable existence. I am who I am and it has to be as I will it. Eisav thus usurped G-d as the one to determine what the "Din, the law" was to be. Taking his *raison d'être* as assumed, he embarked to live life in whatever direction this took his fancy. This included killing others.

Because Yitzchak understood and lived life as dictated by G-d, it was as if his "ashes were placed before G-d" at the Akeidah. There he "died" only to experience the "rebirth of a new lease of life". (The resurrection in the Amidah's second blessing thus corresponds to Yitzchak, second of the patriarchs). Yitzchak's "death transferring into life" was countered by Eisav whose viewpoint and outlook - that undermined the function of human existence - was to murder, "transferring life into death".

Judaism is unequivocal in proclaiming Chaim, "human life" to be the greatest gift that man has. This is the toast we cheer: "L'Chaim, To life!" All commandments thus pale into comparison and can be violated (except the three cardinal sins) in the preservation of life. This makes the violation of human life -or even hastening death- all the more reprehensible.

Human existence is not compulsory as Eisav advocated; no person can ever take their life for granted. The first words uttered every day by a Jew are Modeh Ani, gratitude to G-d for his very existence - for having woken up, to be granted the gift of another day. Human life is so very precious because it is sacred. Life only functions so long as the soul - the divine spark within man - resides within the body, "not" by separating the two through the spilling of blood.

Life is created, lived and is terminated in accordance to the divine will, not our own. The commandment against murder is a timely reminder of the sanctity and value of every human life - something that has been fiercely eroded in our contemporary society of Hollywood action heroes, euthanasia activists and suicide bombers. Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and **Torah.org**.