

עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים לא תרצח - Word Number Six

THE SIXTH WORD of the Ten words is:
“You shall not murder.”



Unfortunately, some of the English translations have “You shall not kill.” While the verb רָצַח, *ratzach*, can mean “to kill” (cf. Num 35:30), it primarily denotes the taking of an innocent life, that is, outside of that which is warranted by the Divine Justice. In fact, the Torah demands the taking of the life of the murderer, for he has wrongly taken the life of an innocent individual.

God is the God of life. He is the source of all life. He is not the God of death. Death is so contrary to His nature that He will not allow death to invade His presence. Death is connected to sin, because the penalty for sin is death. “The soul that sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4). Whenever a person came into contact with death, even a “small death” (like a flow of flood, or being in the same room with a corpse), that person became “unclean” in the sense that until the death was dealt with, that person could not come into the holy place set apart for the worship of God. Anyone who had come into contact with death needed to be made clean. That was done symbolically by washing with clean water (we call this a *mikvah*). God gave us this symbol to teach us a very important lesson: He intends to save us from death by giving us life—not only life in this world, but also life in the world to come when there will no longer be any death.

There are negative and positive aspects of this Sixth Word.

Negative Aspects: First, we are not to take innocent life. To take an innocent person’s life is to strike out against the Giver of Life. This is why abortion is always wrong. Abortion is the taking of an innocent life. Secondly, a person is never to take his own life. Suicide is murder and is as much a breaking of this commandment as taking another person’s life. Thirdly, we must guard ourselves from bitterness and hatred. These attitudes are the first steps toward murder (Matt 5:21ff). If we learn to forgive and overcome bitterness, we will guard ourselves against the urge to hurt and kill.

Positive Aspects: First, we must do all in our power to protect life. We must be careful in all respects to guard the lives of others. Secondly, we must love justice. We must purge from our communities those who have no regard for life, and follow God’s instructions regarding the punishment of murders. Finally, we must learn to love in word and deed. We must teach ourselves and our families to love others, and to seek their good. If we do this, we will be honoring God by honoring His commandments.