

NOACH (GENESIS 6:9-11:32)

Murdering the Murderer?

2008 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

“Two wrongs don’t make a right! If it is wrong to kill, it is wrong to kill! When we execute murderers we become no better than they are!”

So goes the argument of the anti-capital punishment crowd. When we kill a killer we become killers ourselves.

There seems to be a certain amount of merit to that argument, except for one little detail. G-d disagrees:

“He who spills the blood of man shall have his own blood spilled by man, for G-d made man in His own image.” (Genesis, 9:6)

G-d made this statement to Noah and his children shortly after He wiped out almost every man, woman, and child from the face of the earth. Although every human being is created in G-d’s image, G-d had no problem eliminating all but the eight members of the Noah Family.

Why not?

To help us find the answer, let us look at a different question and answer raised about this verse by Rabbi Elazar Shach, of Blessed Memory.

The Talmud, (Midrash Rabba) in interpreting this verse, quotes Rabbi Akiva: “Anyone who spills blood is considered as if he has diminished (G-d’s) likeness. *‘He who spills the blood of man shall have his own blood spilled by man...’* Why, asks Rabbi Akiva, is that so? *‘... for G-d made man in His own image.’*”

Rabbi Shach asks: What is Rabbi Akiva adding to this verse? Doesn’t the Torah already say that you when a person commits murder he is destroying the life of a person who bears G-d’s image? What is Rabbi Akiva’s point about diminishing G-d’s likeness? Doesn’t that mean the same thing?

Rabbi Shach explains that Rabbi Akiva is not talking about the victim; he is talking about the murderer!

Every person possesses G-d’s likeness, which was put into him when G-d created man. This likeness is supposed to propel us to be G-dly. Just as G-d is merciful, so too, must we be merciful. Just as G-d is gracious, so too, are we required to be gracious.

When a person does not use his innate G-dliness to treat others kindly, he diminishes the likeness of G-d in the world. G-d created the world, expecting us to fill it with charity and benevolence.

All the nations of the world will see that the name of G-d is proclaimed over you... (Deuteronomy, 28, 10) We are obligated, explains Rabbi Shach, to demonstrate to others that we carry G-d's image. In so doing, we positively influence the world around us.

Our G-dliness places a tremendous responsibility upon us.

Sarah was upset with her husband. Sarah and Abraham wanted a child, so they prayed for one. G-d answered Abraham's prayer and sent him a child -- through Abraham's OTHER wife, Hagar. Hagar was Sarah's servant, and now that she was pregnant, she belittled Sarah, claiming that she, Hagar, was more righteous than Sarah. Sarah blamed her husband for the abuse she was experiencing:

"My injustice is upon you!" (Genesis, 16, 5) Rashi explains that Sarah faulted Abraham for praying to G-d for a son for himself, rather than praying for Sarah as well.

Is that injustice?! Did Abraham treat his wife unfairly by not praying for her? What does Sarah want from her husband? Let her pray for herself!

Rabbi Shach explains that this is part of our responsibility as carriers of G-d's image. Our likeness of G-d requires us to express a G-d-like concern for our fellow man. G-d expects us to improve the lives of those around us. One of the ways to do that is to pray for them. If I can help you through my prayers and I don't, I am guilty of injustice! I have diminished my own G-dliness.

If I don't help you, uplift you, and pray for you, I am cheating you! If I treat you with arrogance and indifference, rather than honor and concern, I will need to confess to G-d on Yom Kippur that I have been unjust and unfair. I have withheld from you the kindness to which you are entitled. I was created as a reflection of G-d, and I have tarnished and dulled that divine reflection.

And here, I believe, we can see the answer to the original question posed above. *"He who spills the blood of man shall have his own blood spilled by man, for G-d made man in His own image."*

Why is it that we don't become murderers when society executes a murderer? How do we justify punishing the destroyer of one image of G-d by destroying another? Why did G-d wipe out a planet full of creatures in His own likeness?

Simple! A murderer is a failure. He has lost his right to exist. His own G-dly image required him to be G-dly. When he destroyed his fellow man, he destroyed his own holiness as well. When a person commits physical murder, he concurrently commits spiritual suicide as well.

Noah's generation was wicked. It was unjust. They killed and stole and lived lives of decadence and immorality. G-d made it rain and washed away a world full of "dead" people.

Have a great Shabbos.

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