SIXTH COMMANDMENT: Killing vs Mudering

There is a difference in English between killing and murdering. While “killing” is a verb than can be applied to causing the death of humans or animals, “murdering” refers exclusively to the act of killing another human being.

Our rabbis explain that the context of the 10 Commandments refers to actions from a person to another person, and not from a person to someone’s property. The Eight commandment □□ □□□□, for example, usually translated as “You shall not steal” has been explained by our rabbis as “You shall not kidnap” (You shall not steal…a person), an unfortunate practice that leads to forced-labor or slavery. There is another commandment in Vayqra (Lev. 19:11) that uses the same words, □□□□□ □□, but the context refers to damages against other people’s properties. In Leviticus, therefore, □□□□□ □□ is translated as: “You shall not steal”. This method, the understanding of a word or a law according to its context, is one of the 13 principles of hermeneutics (=legal interpretation of the Bible) known in rabbinic literature as □□□□□□ □□□□ □□□, “a law that is deduced by its context”.

Going back to the Sixth commandment, we should then translate it as “You shall not murder”, referring to the act of killing another human being, and not “You shall not kill”.

This is a short commandment in terms of its length, just six letters, but it is, perhaps, the most comprehensive in terms of its details, scope, applications, etc.

First, Jewish Law, similar to American Law differentiates between different levels of murder: premeditated murder, murder by negligence, accidental murder, etc. Then, we also have the case of killing as an act of self defense or

preemptive murder. We also need to define the application of this commandment to complex situations, Halakhic scenarios which are very prevalent in our days. For example: is abortion considered murder? Is euthanasia (=killing a person who is suffering) permitted in Jewish law? Does Jewish law allow organs' donation? These subjects require a clear definition of the moment in which life begins or end; quality of life vs. termination of life, passive vs active euthanasia, etc. In the following weeks BH we will analyze these matters one by one.