

Sacrificing One's Life for One of the Seven Noahide Commandments

4. With one exception, a Gentile is not required to sacrifice his life to avoid transgressing one of the Seven Noahide Commandments; i.e., a Gentile is *permitted* to transgress in order to avoid being killed (with one exception, and its offshoots). (Topic 9 below explains the circumstances under which a Gentile is permitted to give up his life to avoid transgressing any of the Seven Noahide Commandments.) The one exception is in regard to committing murder. Even if one is threatened with losing one's own life or with excruciating torture beyond endurance, nonetheless, he must submit to being tortured and/or murdered rather than murder another human being. The reason for this is to comply with the common-sense dictum, "Who says that your blood is redder (than that of your fellow)?"¹ (It is not due to any obligation to more strongly uphold the *Divine commandment* against murder, compared to the other six Noahide commandments from God that are associated with this leniency. See below in topic 8.)

5. Even if a person is being forced to kill someone who is already dying, or an embryo in its mother's womb, he should rather let himself be killed than kill the sick or dying person or the embryo.

It would appear that the same applies to injuring another person. One should let himself be killed² if he is being forced to injure another person or commit rape³ of a male or a female person, rather than commit the act in order to save his own life.

¹ Tractate *Sanhedrin* 74a. Based on Rambam, *Foundations of the Faith* ch. 5, it is logical that one must give up his life rather than murder, so this must apply to Gentiles. Hence, the reason that the prohibition of murder outweighs a Gentile's own life is not because of the severity of the sin to God, but because of the logical moral reasoning, "Who says that your blood redder than that of your fellow?"

² Rabbi Zalman Nehemiah Goldberg views the law as unclear in regard to whether one must let himself be killed if he is being forced to injure or rape.

The author finds reason why it should at least be *permitted* for the person to let himself be killed to avoid this, and not considered as a prohibited

6. The above only applies if the person is being forced to physically commit direct or indirect murder. However, if one is being forced to stand in a certain spot where his body will be used by others as an instrument for murder, there is no obligation to give one's life up to save the intended victim, since the murder is being done through the actions of others.

It need not be mentioned that one is not obligated to give up his or her life to save another person's life. Nevertheless, it appears permissible to do so.⁴

7. If a person committed homicide because another person was threatening his life (or limb or severe torture), this killer has committed an offense and is a murderer and will be punished by Heaven. However, a court of law does not have permission to punish him, because he was severely pressured.⁵

8. If a group of Gentiles is told, "Give over one of your group to be killed, or else all of you will be killed," they have no permission to

suicide, because of the dictum, "Who says that your is blood redder than that of your fellow?" This can be seen *a fortiori* from Tamar (Gen. 38:25), who submitted herself to be executed rather than embarrass Judah (since publicly embarrassing a person is likened to murder). However, it is unclear whether a person is *obligated* to give up his life to avoid injuring or raping another.

It therefore appears to the author that a Jew or a Gentile may not cut off or break another person's limb or commit rape to save his own life, and the common-sense dictum, "Who says that your blood is redder than that of your fellow?" would apply even to the other person's limb. Nevertheless, some sources say that this is permitted.. (In any event, one who is forced to transgress on pain of death is **not** to be judged or punished by a court of law for committing the forced act – including homicide, as explained in topic 7 below, even though one who **kills** under duress is held accountable in the judgment of Heaven.)

³ Pursuit for the purpose of raping is tantamount to pursuit for the purpose of murdering. See Rambam, *Laws of Murderers* 1:10-15, who says this is learned from the verses Deut. 22:26 (a consecrated maiden who is raped in a field), and Lev. 19:16 ("you shall not stand [idly] by the blood of your fellow").

⁴ See topic 9.

⁵ Rambam, *Laws of Kings* 10:2.

hand over one person from the group, for the reason given in topic 4. However, if the murderers singled out their victim, and will either kill that one particular victim or the whole group, it is permissible to hand over the one victim, since it cannot be said that the victim's blood is "more red" than that of the whole group.

9. Although a Gentile is not obligated to sacrifice his life for the sanctification of God's Name⁶ (i.e. to avoid committing idolatry or one of the other capital sins prohibited by the Noahide commandments, at the cost of his life), it is permissible for him to do so, and this is not considered suicide.⁷ It appears that this applies even if he is being forced to transgress the commandment in private.

Likewise, if one is being forced through torture to transgress one of the Seven Noahide Commandments, and is unsure whether he will be capable to withstand the suffering, it is permissible for him to take his life so as not to transgress, and this is not considered suicide. This permission only applies to avoiding a transgression for which a Gentile would be liable to capital punishment in a Noahide court, if it were committed willfully.

⁶ See Tractate *Sanhedrin* 74b, from which it can be learned that although a Gentile is not commanded to sacrifice his life so as not to transgress one of the Noahide commandments, it is, nevertheless, still considered a sanctification of God's Name if he does so, and even if there are no witnesses. Therefore, this should be permissible (but not required) for a Gentile in either a public or a private situation.

⁷ See *Shulhan Aruh Yorah De'ah* ch. 157, which rules this way regarding a Jew. We can also take a proof from Abraham, who allowed himself to be thrown into a furnace by Nimrod, instead of being forced to commit idolatry. (Since Abraham was not Jewish within the Divine Law, this proves that what he did is permitted for Gentiles, and it is not considered to be like suicide.)