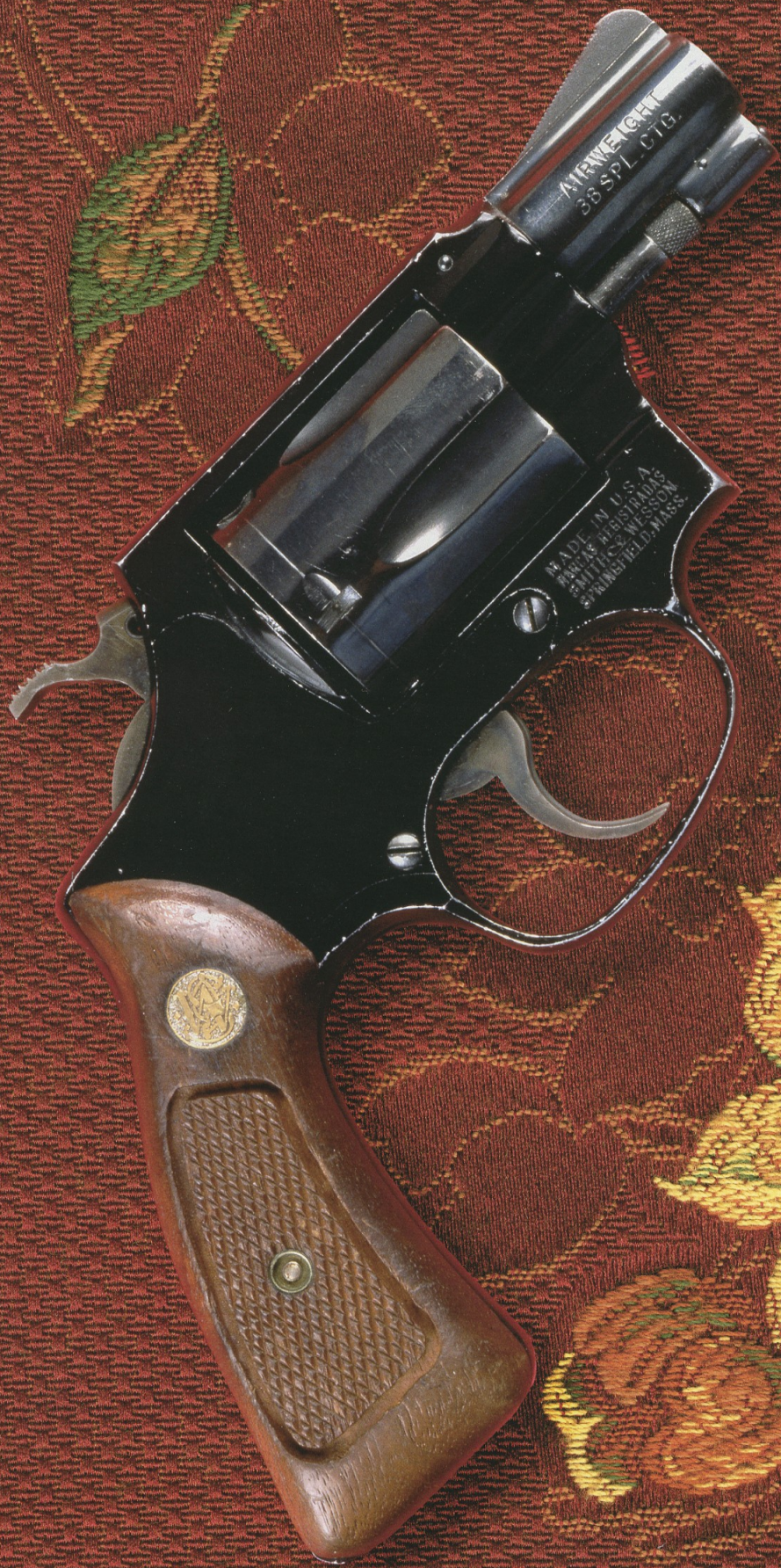


BY LOUIS KAPLAN

LAWS OF GLASS
THE TEN
COMMANDMENTS/
PROHIBITED
WEAPONS



If you visit the studio of photographer Simon Glass at 401 Richmond Street West in Toronto, you are greeted by the Hebrew letter “aleph” painted on the door. To enter into the artist’s space and his world, you must go by way of the aleph, as the opening unto the letters and numbers of the Hebrew *aleph-bet* and to the mysteries of creation. The aleph holds a special place in the teachings of the Kabbalah as the primary transcendent sign that partakes of the air and new beginnings.



Previous spread
 Simon Glass
 "Eighth Commandment" (detail)
 from *The Ten Commandments/
 Prohibited Weapons*
 Giclée print with
 23.5 karat gold leaf
 2005

In his *Book of Formation* (1993), a series of sepia-toned silver prints with gold leaf, Glass permutes and recombines the aleph with the next eleven letters of the Hebrew alphabet (*bet* through *lamed*) and thereby takes as his starting point a passage from the *Sefer Yetzirah* that discusses the inextricable link between language and the creation of the world. In *Book of Formation*, Glass performs and articulates the linguistic mysticism of this formidable text: "Twenty-two letters He engraved, hewed out, weighed, changed, combined, and formed out of them all existing forms, and all forms that may in the future be called into existence."¹

But there is also a *Midrash* (an interpretation) that brings the aleph into relation with one of the central pillars of Jewish law – the Ten Commandments – and thereby with Glass's *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons* (2005), a suite of ten 115 x 57 cm Giclée prints, embellished with gold leaf, which combine the full Hebrew text of the Ten Commandments with photographic images of the palms of hands, floral tapestries and various weapons. In these "Laws of Glass," the artist meditates on the Ten Commandments through a photographic sampling of weapons currently prohibited by the Canadian Criminal Code. This *Midrash* has to do with the question of what the people of Israel actually heard at the time of the announcement of the Ten Commandments and, as per usual (and this is what the law initiates), there are numerous interpretations. The most populist and anthropomorphic reading claims that the nation of Israel heard YAHWH giving voice to all ten commandments. Other interpretations declare that the people heard only the first two commandments that dealt with monotheism, while Moses alone was privy to the remaining eight. But Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov has a much more stringent interpretation: he maintains that the people of Israel heard nothing more than the aleph at the beginning of the first word of the First Commandment, *Anokhi* (the first person "I" stated in the name of the Divinity). Rabbi Mendel's *Midrash* describes for us a liminal experience – the people of Israel certainly heard something, but what they heard (the aleph) stands as the barely audible consonant that precedes the utterance of the inaugural word. As Elisabeth Weber writes, "To hear the aleph is to hear nothing, but at the same time, the aleph constitutes the passage to all audible, articulated language."² Beginning with the aleph, *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons* abounds in these kinds of paradoxes, delivering visual *Midrashim* (interpretations) at the wavering and co-constitutive borders of law and violence, taboo and transgression, sound and silence.

It is important to remember that the Ten Commandments (according to these "Laws of Glass") do not begin with prescriptive imperatives (i.e., do this, don't do that). Rather, the first commandment asks the Jewish people to remember who was, is and will be responsible for their liberation. It reminds the Israelites by whose hands they were delivered from bondage in Egypt and suggests that such liberation is linked to the ethical actions required by these commandments. The first commandment declares the children of Israel's incalculable indebtedness to the Unnameable One: "I am YAHWH your God who delivered you from the land of Egypt, from a house of slaves."³ The ten plagues by which YAHWH smote the Egyptians are thereby directly invoked in relation to the Ten Commandments. In Glass's first law, the extensive arsenal of divine violence used by YAHWH to defeat the Egyptians is hinted at by the tiny stiletto knife whose vertical shape represents who is number "1." It becomes the weapon of choice for the staging of the opening scene that presents the two tablets of the Law. Even as it announces itself as primary and primal, the stiletto makes the

cut that brings judgment's binary oppositions into play – left and right, good and evil – and simultaneously exposes these terms to each other. The silent stiletto and the other knives and guns of these fragile “Laws of Glass” proclaim that the inscription of the law and language depends on violence and that there is a necessary violence on both sides of the law – in its institution or administration as well as in its breaking or breach. What Walter Benjamin dubs the “divine violence” of Judaism involves a threatening and angry God holding human beings hostage at knife- or gunpoint. Indeed, Glass claims that it was the discussion of divine violence and the sixth commandment in particular (“Thou Shalt Not Kill”) in Benjamin’s 1921 essay “Kritik der Gewalt” (“Critique of Violence”) that sparked his interest in this project.⁴ But whether the knife bearer is divine or human, whether he or she acts in or against the interests of the law (and this is often at issue), there is a way to read these first five commandments such that they graze or touch upon vulnerable human flesh – the palm, the wrist – where blood cannot be far away.

Nevertheless, a more anthropomorphic way to view these palms is to attribute them to YAHWH. (“He’s got the whole world in his hands....”) But in such a case, a strictly orthodox interpreter, upholding the aniconic tradition that forbids the creation of graven images, would surely condemn Glass for violating the second commandment and the prohibition against the deployment of artistic weapons that produce a likeness of the invisible and Unnameable One. Here, Glass finds himself on the side of heterodoxy in order to speak the law. His First Commandment (as well as commandments two through five) signals that, when it comes to the law, it is a matter of palmistry – the prognostication of fate and destiny by reading the lines on the palm of the hand – of coming into contact with mysterious ways and powers that are acknowledged to be beyond human comprehension. Yet the need to make sense of YAHWH’s commandments persists. Even if the source is divine, the question of how to interpret the law remains. *Midrash* – the job of rabbis, lawyers, scholars, artists, as well as chiromancers – goes hand in hand with palm reading.

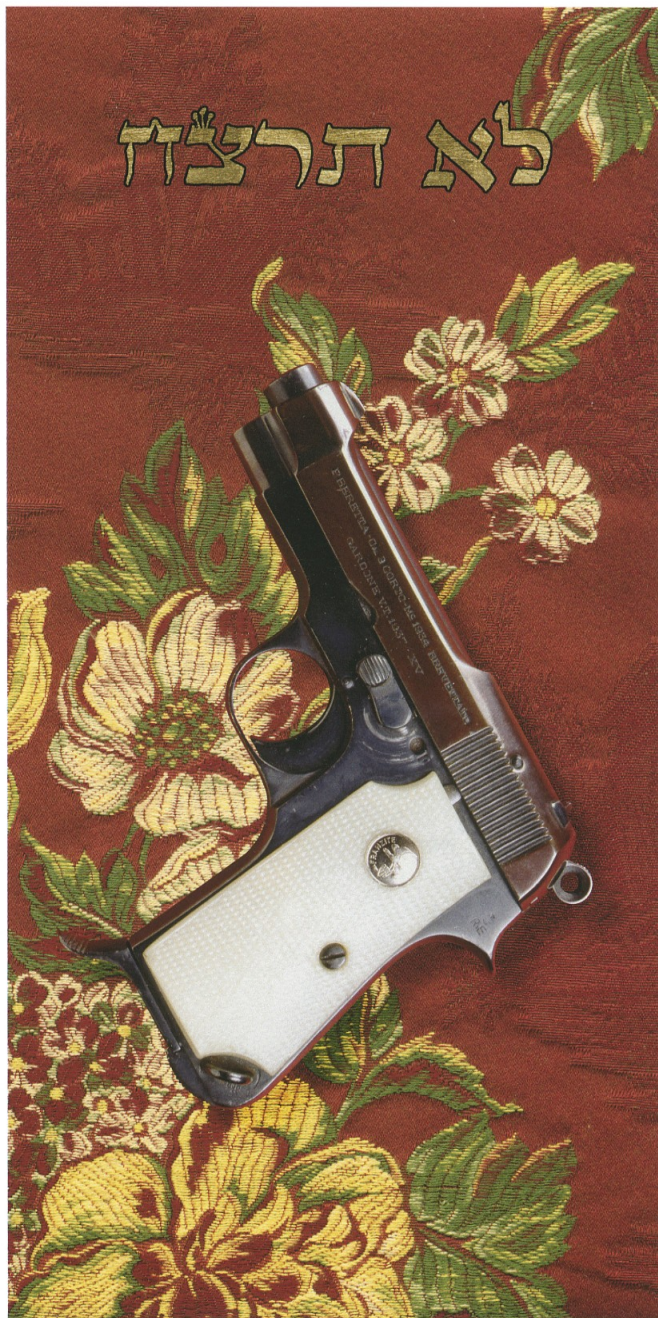
What does it mean to juxtapose prohibited weapons (guns and knives) with the Ten Commandments? Here, Glass brings diction into play with its opposite (interdiction); a slash divides yet also conjoins them. In these “Laws of Glass,” the Ten Commandments offer the sacred words (which come to us as diction, dictate and law) about matters that lie in the gap between words and diction – the prohibited weapons that have been outlawed, interdicted. *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons* poses the following paradox: In order to execute this project and pay homage to God’s commandments that restrict human behaviour and delimit the boundaries between the law and the outlaw, Glass had to come into contact with prohibited objects – the weapons he has so meticulously photographed. In other words, by gaining access (he won’t tell us how) to these banned-in-Canada weapons, he had to get his hands dirty. One of the key criteria for the state’s prohibition of these weapons has to do with the fact that they can easily be concealed. A concealable handgun is defined as a gun with a barrel length of less than ten centimetres. A prohibited knife is defined as a device (no matter how innocuous in appearance) with a length of thirty centimetres or more that is designed to conceal a knife or blade.⁵ It is important to note here that Glass has only skimmed the surface of the range of prohibited weapons. For a complete review of the Government of Canada’s more than ten commandments on this subject, I refer the reader to a Department of Justice online

document with the following bureaucratic title: "Government of Canada Regulations Prescribing Certain Firearms and other Weapons, Components and Parts of Weapons, Accessories, Cartridge Magazines, Ammunition and Projectiles as Prohibited or Restricted."⁶

In putting these guns and knives on display, Glass extends and deepens the relation between photographic and legal discourses. *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons* reminds viewers that one of the classic functions of photography and one of the main purposes of the legal trial involve the giving of evidence. Glass enters these guns and knives into evidence against the backdrop of skin (commandments one through five) and red floral-embroidered tapestry (commandments six through ten). Both of these materials – human skin and velvet tapestry – evoke the sense of touch and make the viewer aware of the tactile dimensions implicit in the relation between the Ten Commandments and prohibited weapons – that which has to do with sensation and the sensational. Moreover, Glass's juxtaposition of sacred Hebrew texts with the forbidden weapons of outlaw street culture also carries a certain amount of shock value because it plays with sociological codes and stereotypes of race and class. Instead of "other-ing" these contraband weapons as belonging to "those black people," Glass's subversive move places them in Jewish sacred space, at the altar of the Ten Commandments.⁷

This remarkable suite of images also situates itself in the tradition of illuminated Hebrew manuscripts. To cite Glass, "They show the full Hebrew text of the Ten Commandments combined with visual imagery: illuminated Hebrew manuscripts."⁸ They hearken back to the intricate hand-painted Ashkenazi manuscripts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which were painstakingly designed to adorn and to beautify the sacred texts. According to one medieval Jewish scholar, these visually striking manuscripts possessed "beauty, splendor, and aesthetic quality."⁹ The illuminated manuscript *Kol Nidre* (which is the High Holiday prayer offered at the commencement of the Day of Atonement), found in the *Padua Ashkenazi Makzor* and attributed to David bar Pesach during the fourteenth century, provides a good example of this type of ornamental image, and the floral patterns surrounding the illustration bear comparison with the embroidered tapestry designs in the second half of Glass's commandments.

One of the most important features of the illuminated manuscript tradition – both Christian and Jewish – is the use of raised gold leaf as a marker of distinction, value, purity and holiness. *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons* also features the use of gold leaf for the first word or words of each commandment. Here, Glass paints on the surface of the print with a water-based sizing solution which, when dry, is tacky; the gold leaf is applied and adheres to the tacky sizing, and any excess is brushed away. In this return to handcraft and the production of auratic objects of art, Glass takes up a proven and well-established method for the manual application of gold leaf and ably executes Hebrew calligraphy as well. Of course, these traditional elements create tension in relation to the more contemporary computer-based aspects of the work, such as the digital montage that facilitates the rearrangement of guns, knives, tapestries, Hebrew letters and skin. By its use of scanning technology and "the layering of the various elements" by means of Photoshop and printing,¹⁰ Glass's work is delicately balanced between the cutting edge of digital technology and a sacred tradition of Jewish art-making.



Simon Glass
 "First Commandment" (left)
 "Sixth Commandment" (right)
 from *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons*
 Giclée print with 23.5 karat gold leaf
 2005

לא יהיה

לך אלהים אחרים
 על פני לא תעשה
 לך פסל וסל תמונה
 אשר בשמים ממעל
 ואשר בארץ מתחת
 ואשר במים מתחת
 לארץ לא תשתחוה
 להם ולא תעבדם
 כי אני יהוה אלהיך
 אל קנא עוקד עון
 אבות על בנים על
 שלשים ורבעים
 לשנאי ואתה חסד
 לאלפים לאהבי
 ולשמרי מצותי



לא תנאף

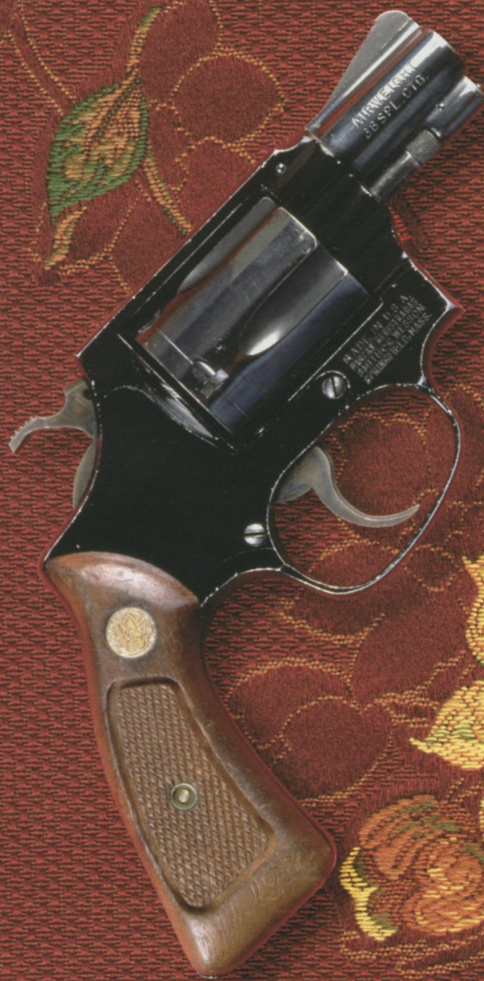


לא תשא



את שם יהוה אלהיך לשווא
כי לא ינח יְהוָה אֶת-
אִשֵּׁר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוֹא

לא תגנוב



Simon Glass
"Eighth Commandment"
from *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons*
Giclée print with 23.5 karat gold leaf
2005

זָכוֹר אֶת

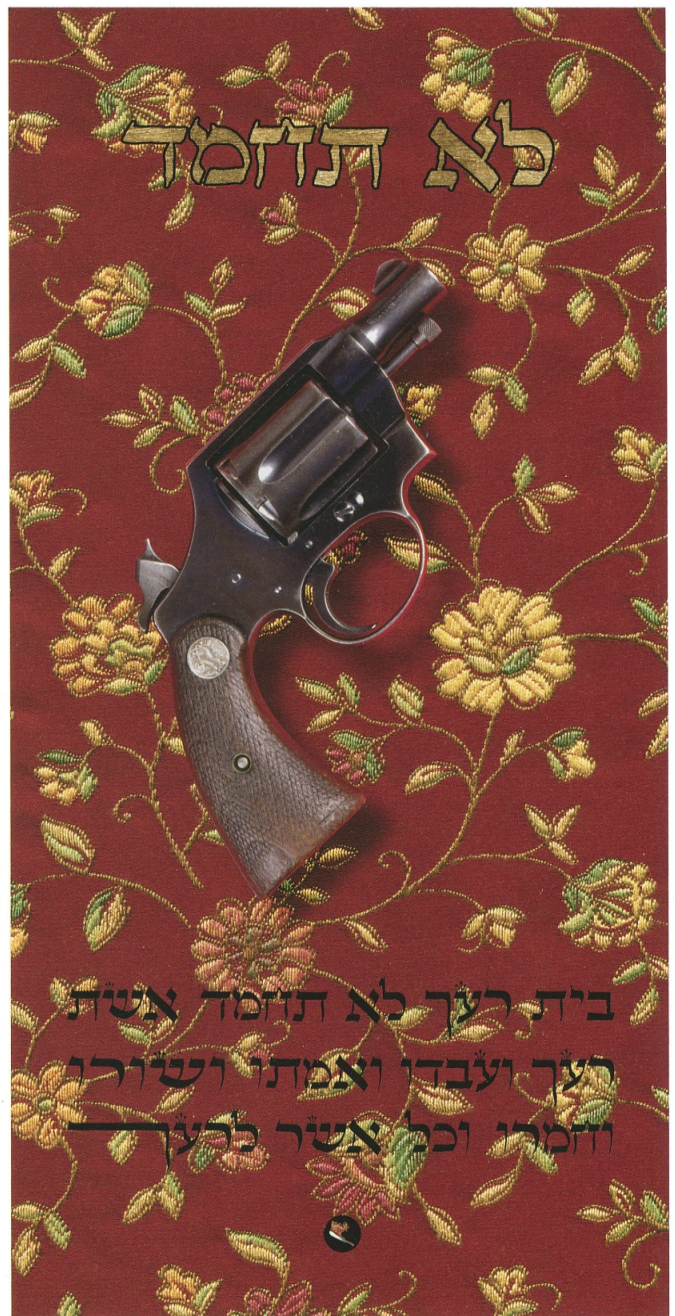
יום השַׁבָּת יִדְשׁוּ שֵׁשֶׁת
 יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד שְׁמִית כָּל
 מְלֹאכְתְּךָ וְיִשְׁבִּיעֲךָ
 שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה לֹא
 תַעֲשֶׂה כָל
 עֲמָלְךָ וּבְתָךְ וְאִמְתָּךְ
 וּבַהֲמֹתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר
 בְּשַׁעֲרֶיךָ שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים
 עָשָׂה יְהוָה תִּשְׁמֹם
 וְאֵת הָאָדָם וְאֵת הַבְּהֵמָה
 וְאֵת כָּל הָאֲדָמָה וַיָּנַח
 בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל כָּל
 בְּרִךְ יְהוָה יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת
 וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ



לֹא תַעֲזֹבָה



בְּרֵעֶךָ עֵד שִׁקָּר



In titling this essay "Laws of Glass," I have sought to do more than merely generate wordplay on the artist's name. I want to think about the law as fragile and breakable; I want to highlight that this fragility is an ineluctable consequence of the violence of the law itself (its institution and enforcement), as well as the violence of its transgression. I quite consciously allude here to the Kabbalist Isaac Luria's creation myth, according to which the breaking of the vessels occurred when God contracted in a deep breath (the aleph again) in order to open up the space necessary to create this world. This withdrawal of God shattered the vessels of Holy Light into fragments and we continue to struggle to reassemble these fragments (montage operations again) in the hope of repairing the world (*Tikkun Olam*).¹¹ There are no shattered vessels – only guns and knives – in Glass's suite of photographic images – yet these weapons signify a world in fragments, a world in which people are cut up and gunned down, a world in which laws are made to be broken and justice is not served.

In his artist's statement, Glass identifies another profound paradox: "There can be no justice without law, yet no law will always be just."¹² One looks for justice in *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons*, but one finds only obstacles to *Gan Eden* or Paradise, to *Meshiach ben David* or messianic justice. Benjamin's post-Edenic notion of the judging word that differentiates good and evil is discussed in his essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man": "This judging word expels the first human beings from paradise."¹³ Glass visually references the grand theme of the expulsion from Paradise and the obstacles preventing return in two small, circular insets at the bottom of the First and Tenth Commandments. In the First Commandment is the thistle, a reminder that, after the expulsion from Paradise, Adam was made to struggle against the thorn and the thistle in order to produce food. Glass's Tenth Commandment features a final weapon – the rotating flaming sword at the east entrance to the Garden of Eden – that signifies the impossibility of human re-entry. Are we to understand the flaming sword of paradise as God's prohibiting weapon? If so, how can we extinguish its flame and "get ourselves back to the Garden" (as Joni Mitchell phrased it)?

But any messianic impulse to transform the legally bound world of judgment and sentencing into one of justice and peace requires much more than a simple plea for utopia. There can be no final end to violence because it inhabits the founding of the law; non-violence (in which the Messiah presumably abides) must be viewed as the *telos* rather than the essence of discourse. In his essay "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," Jacques Derrida locates a similar problematic in Levinas's thinking. By exploring the violence that institutes and constitutes language and discourse through an examination of the relations between war and peace, Derrida arrives at a similar paradox: "There is war only after the opening of discourse, and war dies out only at the end of discourse. Peace, like silence, is the strange vocation of a language called outside itself by itself. But since *finite* silence is also the medium of violence, language can only indefinitely tend toward justice by acknowledging and practicing the violence within it. Violence against violence. Economy of violence."¹⁴ To apply Derrida's analysis to the case at hand, the Ten Commandments, in their attempt to stringently codify these foundational Jewish laws, can be viewed as the first defeat of violence – but it is a victory achieved only through the inscription and threat of violence.

« Les lois de Glass :
The Ten Commandments/
Prohibited Weapons »

Dans cet essai, Louis Kaplan offre une interprétation de la série d'épreuves numériques de Simon Glass, intitulée *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons* (*Les dix commandements/Armes prohibées*). La série juxtapose les commandements sacrés, rédigés en hébreu, et des images d'armes prohibées au Canada (armes à feu et armes blanches). Kaplan aborde cette série en relation avec les textes philosophiques de Walter Benjamin et de Jacques Derrida sur les liens entre la loi et la violence, de même qu'en termes de quête de justice et de « messianisme ».

It is possible to think of these "Laws of Glass" – a meditation on the broken tablets of Moses – as practising their own economy of violence by digital photographic means. Simon Glass's *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons* are not so self-assured and definitive as to claim to be hastening the coming of the Messiah. Such an interpretation of these "Laws" produces an unreasonable expectation that depends on a rule-bound and inflexible dogmatism. Nevertheless, I am suggesting that Glass, in this photographic series, engages with what Derrida calls "messianicity," which is linked to the question of and the quest for justice.¹⁵ In this way, *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons* grants the idea of justice the possibility of coming to be through the promise and the impact of a light writing that shoots and cuts its way toward justice, using the camera and digital montage as weapons, even as the work risks injustice by accepting and practising the violence of the law and of photographic writing itself.

Notes

- ¹ *Sefer Yetzirah*, 1:5. This passage serves as one of the epigraphs for David Meltzer's essay, "The Doors of Heaven, The Path of Letters," in *Wallace Berman Retrospective* (Los Angeles: Fellows of Contemporary Art, 1978): 91. It should also be noted that Simon Glass's interest in Wallace Berman as Jewish artistic precursor is formative.
- ² Elisabeth Weber, quoted in her interview with Jean-François Lyotard, "Before the Law, After the Law," in *Questioning Judaism: Interviews by Elisabeth Weber*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 108.
- ³ Exodus, 19:20. I have cited Richard Elliott Friedman's translation of *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 2003): 235.
- ⁴ Benjamin's discussion of the sixth commandment begins, "For the question 'May I kill?' meets its irreducible answer in the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill.'" See Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996): 250.
- ⁵ Glass specifically refers to Section 84 (1) of the Criminal Code that prohibits "any knife that has a blade that opens automatically by gravity or centrifugal force or by hand pressure applied to a button, spring or other device in or attached to the handle of the knife."
- ⁶ See the Canadian Department of Justice website, <<http://lois.justice.gc.ca/en/C-46/SOR-98-462/82866.html>>. Last accessed June 4, 2006.
- ⁷ In this context, I am reminded of the collaboration between Jewish sampling musician Socalled (Josh Dolgin) and black rapper Killah Priest on *Hip Hop Seder*, a work that plays upon the shared histories of Jewish and African-American slavery. In "The Ten Plagues," Killah Priest underscores the violence of the Jewish law in a lyric that recalls the tenth plague and the killing of every first-born Egyptian son: "Turn out the lights, kill all your sons to reveal what I've done, God has a gun." This poetic imagery resonates with the images of guns that appear in commandments six through ten of the "Laws of Glass."
- ⁸ Simon Glass, "Artist Statement," in Louis Kaplan, ed., *Command J: Jewish Laws, Digital Arts* (Toronto: ReJewvenation, 2005): 6.
- ⁹ Profiat Duran, *Ma'aseh Efod*, p. 19. The Spanish scholar is quoted in Joseph Gutmann, Evelyn M. Cohen, Menahem Schmelzer, Malachi Beit-Arié, *An Introduction to Hebrew Manuscripts*, at <<http://www.fathom.com/course/72810016/session4.html>>. Last accessed June 4, 2006.
- ¹⁰ E-mail from Simon Glass to Louis Kaplan, October 15, 2005.
- ¹¹ For an excellent cosmogonic discussion of God's contraction (*Tsimtsum*) and its importance for the Kabbalist school of Isaac Luria, see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961): 260–65.
- ¹² Simon Glass, "Artist Statement": 6.
- ¹³ Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979): 327.
- ¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978): 117.
- ¹⁵ Derrida discusses "messianicity without messianism" in a number of later writings, including *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 166–68, and "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002): 56. In the latter text, he defines messianicity as follows: "This would be the opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration."