

We have a very unique idea in our Torah portion for this week. We are told that if a Jew killed someone completely by accident, with no malice at all, then that person can flee to a city of refuge. The accidental murderer needed refuge because it was a custom in those times (and in some Middle Eastern communities today) that a relative of the murder victim would kill the murderer to get revenge for the death of his relative. But once the murderer reached the city of refuge, he would be safe from the avenger.

On the surface it might seem like the city of refuge was an easy out. But it was not like a cushy spa, more like a minimum security prison. He would be safe from the avenger but could not leave the city until the High Priest died at which point the murderer was freed.

Let's imagine what life was like for the murderer in the city. He remained there for many years, possibly for the rest of his life. His family was back home, caring for the crops and the animals, hopefully making enough money to keep their household going. In the meantime, he was sitting in this city with a lot of time on his hands. We can assume he thought about how he ended up there and how he would act if and when he was released.

This portion, *Shoftim*, is always read during the month of *Elul*, the month before our High Holidays. We are told to do a *Heshbon Hanefesh*, an accounting of our soul so that we can arrive at *Rosh HaShanah* feeling pure and open-hearted.

Just as these physical cities were designed to be safe places for people when they committed accidental murder, so to the month of *Elul* is a safe time for us to think about what we have done during the year to hurt other people. The cities were protected places while *Elul* is a protected time. It's a time for us to look at ourselves closely and honestly to see how we can change.

Just as the murderer would think about how to live a better life when he was released, so too we spend *Elul* thinking about how we can live better lives during the next year. How we can treat people better. How we can give more of ourselves to others rather than expect others to give to us.

It's important to note that these cities of refuge were only in the land of Israel and not in the Diaspora. The Midrash tells us why.

The *Midrash Sifri* gives us an interpretation of the open words of our portion: 'You will set judges and officers in all your gates.' It says 'at all your gates' means anywhere that Jews are living. *Sifri* continues, we might think that cities of refuge would also exist in and outside the land of Israel. But the Torah tells us 'you will set aside three cities in the land that Adonai your God is giving you.' It is clear from these words that the cities are located only in Israel.

*Sifri* tells us that the aim of the cities of refuge was to place the murderer in a state of atonement. He is isolated from his family and friends so that he is not distracted from his primary task, feeling remorse for his actions until he is able to reconnect himself with God in a true way.

Even if one murders by accident, he will certainly experience the pain of taking someone else's life. He will still need time to accept what he did and to come to terms with his actions. The city of refuge was not a punitive place but a place of reflection, remorse and atonement.

We know there are three steps in the process of *teshuva* or repentance: first, understanding what we did wrong, second, feeling remorse for the commandments we transgressed and third, acting differently in the future.

Even if we do the first two parts of this process, understanding what we did wrong and feeling remorse, we have not really done *teshuva*. Changing our behavior is the real test of *teshuva*. We can have remorse all we want but if we continue to hurt people, we have not really changed.

The ninth *Mishna* in the tractate of *Yoma* tells us "If one says, 'I will sin and repent, I will sin and repent,' he will not be given an opportunity to repent." If he continually makes the same mistakes, he is clearly not sincere in his repentance.

We can compare the cities of refuge needing to be in the Land of Israel, a place that is intrinsically holy, to a person removing himself from temptation to sin when he is engaging in *teshuva*. That means we remove ourselves from both inner and outer environments that encourage our transgressions. Giving ourselves the room to see our actions clearly and honestly is providing the same kind of holiness that the city of refuge gives the accidental murderer.

Providing ourselves with this kind of holiness is the task of the month of Elul. It is a time of self-examination when each of us must ask ourselves if we have been as righteous as possible. And if not, we can see how we can do better in the next year.

As we continue to prepare for our High Holidays, let's take the time and space to find the holiness we know we can connect to and become the most righteous people we can be.

Shabbat Shalom.