

Our Refuge

A lesson on Parashah's Mattot and Masa'ei
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At my work, we have books to tell us step by step how to do everything we do. There are warnings and cautions to tell us of particular things to be careful of or steps to make sure we pay attention to. Most of these instructions are there because someone at some point didn't and either hurt themselves or damaged something. One way or another, these special notes are there for a reason to deal with a particular problem related to that task. In Torah, we have the same thing. The laws we read are instructions given to Israel in order to address particular problems relating to their social, religious, political, economic, and geographic conditions. They were nomadic, as we see from all the different encampments at the beginning of chapter 33. They were primarily agricultural. They were the children of Israel, the people of God.

They were preparing and already beginning to take over the Promised Land. They were getting more and more accustomed to warfare, and God was teaching them more and more how to trust in Him for the victory.

God dwelt in the midst of His people, but sin and Ha Satan had its influence in the camp as well. God kept His people alive in the wilderness, but life was not easy. Throughout history, we continually see that when conditions get difficult in a society, crime and selfish behavior increases. An animalistic sense of self preservation often takes over in which one person may kill another person for a piece of bread. What we think of today as gangs can develop, where groups of people or families look out for their own, and if something happens to one person in the gang, the others seek revenge on the offender, or the gang he or she comes from. I don't know for sure if this was happening in Israel at this point in their history, but I suspect something like this was happening to some extent, or the potential for it happening was seen by God.

This is the background behind the need for the laws concerning the cities of refuge in chapter 35. The land was being divided up amongst the various tribes and families within the tribes as their inheritance. In addition 48 cities are given to the L'vi'im including 6 cities of refuge. What are cities of refuge you ask? I was hoping you would, so thanks. God is a god of life, and likewise one of the ten commandments includes a prohibition of murder. Torah sets the penalty for murder at death of the murderer. However, murder is not the same as killing. We certainly see plenty of that throughout the whole Bible, and some of it is even rewarded.

There is killing in order to remove sin from God's camp as God's judgment on sinners, as we see from the death penalty for murderers, and the many plagues God inflicted upon certain people and groups of people in Israel for their rebellions. We see killing of sinful Gentiles living in the cities of Kena'an, also as God's judgment on the wicked and God

providing land for His chosen people. We see murder, which is the purposeful killing of another out of selfish ambition or sinful desire. Conviction can only be made through the testimony of two or more witnesses. What if there were no witnesses, or what if the death was not intentional?

These instances fall into another type of killing. Intentional or not, witnesses or not, someone is dead, and that someone has family who is not. If conditions in Israel were anything like what I described, the offender would have cause to worry about his own safety. God, being a God of justice would naturally want the death of a murderer, who could live to kill again. Once someone commits a sin or crime like that once, they are more likely to do it again. Accidental death is different. The likelihood of a repeat killing is very little, as long as the person doesn't do what caused the death again. However, the human sense of revenge being what it is, a next-of-kin may want to see death for death, same as murder. God, being a God of life wants the bloodshed which has already been shed to stop there rather than the typical game of death tennis that happens between gangs. You kill one of my people so I kill one of your people, which makes you kill one of my people again, and so on.

This is where the cities of refuge come in. These provided a safe haven, a guarded city, for the offender to go and be safe from the avenger of blood. As long as the person stayed in the city, they were safe. Outside the city, if the next-of-kin saw them, their life would be a risk. These laws we find in Torah are given to address specific problems in Israel, in this case, accidental death or death without sufficient proof of murder. However, these laws have specific application as they are written, but also more general application to include other problems, perhaps not as severe, that people then and now could use in their own relationships with God and people. This is what Yeshua did in His Torah teachings. "You have heard that our fathers were told, `Do not murder, and that anyone who commits murder will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who nurses anger against his brother will be subject to judgment; that whoever calls his brother, `You good-for-nothing!' will be brought before the Sanhedrin; that whoever says, `Fool!' incurs the penalty of burning in the fire of Gei-Hinnom!

So if you are offering your gift at the Temple altar and you remember there that your brother has something against you, leave your gift where it is by the altar, and go, make peace with your brother. Then come back and offer your gift. If someone sues you, come to terms with him quickly, while you and he are on the way to court; or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer of the court, and you may be thrown in jail! Yes indeed! I tell you, you will certainly not get out until you have paid the last penny.
[Mattityahu/Matthew 5:21-26]

When God says, “Thou shalt not murder”, bloodshed is not all He is concerned with. God is not only a God of life, but He is a god of peace and love. Wherever there are two or more people, there will be conflict of some sort. However, there are good and bad ways of resolving that conflict. By the time there is bloodshed, multiple possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation have been missed. Where do we learn of these tools for reconciliation? Take a look at this passage from the book of Ya'akov/James.

What is causing all the quarrels and fights among you? Isn't it your desires battling inside you? You desire things and don't have them. You kill, and you are jealous, and you still can't get them. So you fight and quarrel. The reason you don't have is that you don't pray! Or you pray and don't receive, because you pray with the wrong motive, that of wanting to indulge your own desires... Moreover, take a stand against the Adversary, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and he will come close to you. Clean your hands, sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded people!...

Brothers, stop speaking against each other! Whoever speaks against a brother or judges a brother is speaking against Torah and judging Torah. And if you judge Torah, you are not a doer of what Torah says, but a judge. There is but one Giver of Torah; he is also the Judge, with the power to deliver and to destroy. Who do you think you are, judging your fellow human being? [Ya'akov/James 4:1-12]

There is a lot of stuff here! First we see murder coming out of deeper, personal, spiritual issues of greed, envy, jealousy and anger. It also stems from a lack of trust in God. We also see these things resulting in bickering, hateful words, and a judgmental spirit. We see the importance of prayer, which comes from a sincere desire to see God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, not man's palaces given to him by God to feed his own lusts. If God is our King, and we are His servants, who are we to harbor anger toward someone else, who is just as much a servant as we are.

Shlomo/Solomon teaches us in Kohelet/Ecclesiastes that when others wrong us we need to remember the times when we have wronged others. Nobody is perfect. In the passage above, we see something else interesting. Ya'akov is a New Covenant Jewish believer in Yeshua, who obviously sees the value of Torah. If speaking against a brother goes against Torah, then we can reverse the logic and say that if a person is following Torah, he or she won't speak out against his brother. In fact, Ya'akov/James being Jewish, and being a talmidim/ disciple of Yeshua who was Himself Jewish, would have known this:

Do not be unjust in judging – show neither partiality to the poor nor deference to the mighty, but with justice judge your neighbor. Do not go around spreading slander among your people, but also don't stand idly by when your neighbor's life is at stake; I am YHVH. Do not hate your brother in your heart, but rebuke your neighbor frankly, that you won't carry sin because of him. Don't take vengeance on or bear a grudge against and

of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; I am YHVH. [Vayikra/Leviticus 19:15-18]

The writers of the New Covenant did not make up a new code of ethics and behavior for God's people. They used the Torah knowledge they already had, and their people had already been following for thousands of years and applied the general meaning of the laws to the problems of the early community of Believers in Messiah. It is not enough to say, as a community, we are different from other people who do not know God because though we hate each other we don't kill each other. The body of Messiah is to be characterized by our love for one another and the peace and joy we share amongst ourselves and outside the community. The cities of refuge were developed to deal with a problem in Israel, but it is God's ultimate desire that His people have no need for any cities of refuge.

My soul, wait in silence for God alone, because my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and salvation (Yesha), my stronghold; I won't be moved. My safety and honor rest on God. My strong rock and refuge are in God. Trust in him, people, at all times; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.

So we see another “phrespit” (physical representation of a spiritual truth). The cities of refuge were “phrespits” for God Himself who is our refuge in all types of trouble. Whether it is a person who we have wronged or our own sin haunting us, we are to flee to God. He is there to protect us as His children. He defends us against all enemies, physical and spiritual. We are safe as long as we live in the refuge of our God.

Now here's the cool part. A person who had to flee to a city of refuge stayed there until the death of the Cohen Gagadol (High Priest). Well, guess what? Our city of refuge also has a Cohen Hagadol, who according to Messianic Jews/Hebrews is Yeshua Himself, who already died, resurrected, and now sits at the right hand of God the Father interceding for us to this day. He will never die, so our stay in the city of refuge, which is God, will never end!

I have three main points for you from this lesson. First, all have sinned, whether intentionally or accidentally, and come short of the glory of God. Second, the Adversary goes about like a hungry lion seeking whom he may devour and drag to the pits of hell. Third, All who flee to God as their refuge and believe in His Son Yeshua, the great High Priest, Savior, and Messiah are saved from death and the clutch of The Adversary. They are given eternal life along with all the blessings of God's Kingdom and His Torah. So, flee to the Father, and find refuge in His loving arms today.