**FLEEING TO A SAFE CITY**

A Joke to Begin With…

A deeply religious Jew, who was not a member of the Chassidic community, was walking through the streets of Yerushalayim, gripped by a frenzied state of fear and trembling, as befits the month of Elul… Right past him, a Chassid walked by with a happy and cheerful expression on his face. “Business as usual”…

Confused and astonished, the Jew asked the Chabadnik: “How can you be joyful? Don’t you know that in the month of Elul, even the fish in the sea tremble…soon it will be the Day of Judgment!”

“Yes,” the Chabadnik said with Chassidic simplicity, “I know, I know…”

“Why, then, are you so happy?”

“It’s quite simple,” the Chassid replied. “My father is the presiding judge!”

We are in the midst of the month of Elul, the month of *Cheshbon Hanefesh*, personal accounting, the month of mercy and forgiveness. This week’s Torah portion, **Parshas** **Shoftim**, is always read during this month, an indication of the clear connection between the two. This connection penetrates every aspect of the parsha, from start to finish. The parsha begins with the commandment to appoint judges and officers, continuing with a discussion of the laws of kings and their wars, it moves on to the laws of an idolatrous city and the commandment on cities of refuge. It concludes with the mitzvah of *egla arufa* (the calf decapitated to atone for the murder of a Jew whose slayer is unknown).

The Appointing Judges Connection

The **Shach al HaTorah** explains that the commandment to appoint judges and officers also relates to the individual. Each and every one of us must place “judges and officers – at all your gates.” The gates of man are the seven gates of the body (and the soul), i.e., the eyes, the ears, the nostrils, and the mouth, which every Jew must guard to make certain that whatever goes in (and comes out…) is befitting the spirit of Torah and Yiddishkeit. While this is a constant demand throughout the year, it receives additional importance in these days, during the month of Elul.

The City of Refuge Connection

Furthermore, the month of Elul also constitutes a kind of spiritual city of refuge for the whole year, where anyone who “who killed someone inadvertently” can flee. Chassidus explains that every sin and transgression is a case of bloodshed, as they cause the spilling of blood and the vitality of holiness to descend into the depths of *kelipah*. The mitzvah commanding each of us to flee to a city of refuge means to “run” into the month of Elul, into an aura of personal accounting and repentance. The purpose is to repair and straighten out what we have distorted, for no Jew really wants to sin… Everything is done “inadvertently,” by a mistake which we commonly call – the *Yetzer Hara!*

In addition to the month of Elul, the mitzvah to build cities of refuge has a strong connection to the True and Complete Redemption. The Torah commands in this week’s parsha (Devarim 19: 8-9): *“And when Hashem, your G-d, expands your boundary, as He swore to your forefathers… you shall add three more cities for yourself, in addition to these three.”* This means that after the lands of Edom, Ammon, and Moav (known as the lands of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites) will be given to Melech HaMoshiach, we will have to designate three new cities of refuge in these lands. This command is one of the biblical sources for the coming of Moshiach, as this is the only Mitzvah waiting to be fulfilled, “and G-d has not commanded it for naught…” (Rambam, Hilchos Melachim 11:2)

Killers in the Days of Moshiach?

This arouses much amazement: Why, in the Future to Come, will there be any need to designate any cities of refuge – and on top of that, to add another three? Don’t we say of that glorious time that “Nation shall not lift sword against nation.”? If even the Gentiles won’t fight among each other, then surely a Jew will not cause harm to another Jew. So why will we need all these cities?

All the great Torah giants have already taken their stand on this question, each one with his own solution. The **Minchas Chinuch** and **Zayit Ra’anan** explain this is a *G’zeiras HaKasuv,* a Scriptural edict – a mitzvah without reason. The **Shelah Hakadosh** and many others say that these things pertain to the first period of the days of Moshiach, regarding which our Sages have taught, “There will be no difference between the present era and the era of Moshiach except the emancipation from our subjugation to the Gentile kingdoms”, and “the world will continue according to its pattern.” In the normal and regular world, even when people are kind to each other, accidents happen and there is (regrettably) an inherent need to designate cities of this type...

As always, the Rebbe MH”M, brings a unique approach to this matter. The future cities of refuge will be for those who *r”l* inadvertently killed someone *previously,* in the times of galus. During the days of Moshiach, they will have to flee to a city of refuge.

However, this still requires some explanation. The Torah stipulates that the need for cities of refuge is in order to save the person who killed someone inadvertently from the hands of the blood avenger (ibid. 19:6): *“Lest the avenger of the blood pursue the killer, while his heart is hot, and overtake him, because the way is long, and he strikes him to death.”*

This begs the following question: The Rambam states at the end of Mishneh Torah, “In that era, there will be neither famine nor war, envy or competition…the occupation of the entire world will be solely to know G-d.” Could it be possible that in such a wondrous time, when the powers of intellect, spirit, and thought will prevail over the natural impulses, we will need to be concerned about some hotheaded blood relative who wants to take the law into his own hands and murder someone who is not subject to the death penalty?

Killing Must Be Attoned For

Here, the Rebbe proves that the “hotheadedness” *(“while his heart is hot”*) of the blood avenger is not an emotion of natural and cruel revenge, rather a Torah obligation and command. The Torah decrees that for every act of killing, there must be atonement *(“And the blood which is shed in the land cannot be atoned for except through the blood of the one who shed it” —* Bamidbar 35:33). However, when the killing is a deliberate act, preceded by a warning and seen by witnesses, the *beis din* condemns the murderer to death, and in certain cases, it is the obligation of the “blood avenger” to do this…

For this purpose, to save those “who killed someone inadvertently,” we must build, prepare, and designate another three cities of refuge in the days of Moshiach!

And what remains for us to do is…to flee to a safe city – “the study of Torah provides refuge.” In other words, energetic and vigorous involvement with Torah study in general, and the subject of Moshiach and Redemption in particular, through a proper *cheshbon nefesh* and appropriate *Teshuva*, while remembering that “Father is the presiding judge!”

To Conclude with a Story

We will conclude with a beautiful story testifying to how Torah study can save a person’s life and that of his family:

A Jew living in a town on the outskirts of Yerushalayim had become entangled financially with the “black market.” The depths of his state of despair had reached such a low-point that he made the terrible decision to put an end to his misery… The next day, as he drove along a curve in the hills leading to Yerushalayim, he would take his car over the ridge, G-d forbid.

On that gloomy morning, his wife gave him a small package and asked him to deliver it to their son learning in one of the prominent yeshivos in Yerushalayim. As he set out on his journey, he resolved that he would deliver the package to his son, and carry out his plan of self-destruction when he returned from Yerushalayim.

When he reached the yeshiva where his son studied, he met one of the rabbis at the entrance. The rav asked the father who he was looking for, and when he gave his son’s name, the rabbi’s eyes lit up. He began to praise the boy and his unique qualities with great enthusiasm, emphasizing to the father his tremendous privilege of having such a successful and studious son. The rav continued to relate how the boy properly uses every available moment, studying Torah diligently with the utmost seriousness and dedication. Naturally, the father was very pleased to hear this outstanding report, and he left to bring the package to his son.

When he got back into his car, he said to himself: “If I have merited to fulfill the mitzvah of ‘And you shall teach them to your sons’, and thank G-d, I have such a successful son, learning Torah with tremendous diligence, regarding which it is said, ‘For they are our life and they lengthen our days’, I must immediately shelve this wretched idea and start a new life!”

Good Shabbos! **■** **Based on Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 24, second sicha, Parshas Shoftim.**