



Finding Refuge in Difficult Times

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

At the end of *Pashas Masei* (the second of the two Torah portions we read this week) the Torah discusses the six Cities of Refuge (*Arei Miklat*). These were specifically identified throughout Israel and designated to provide refuge to the individual who had inadvertently killed another. From the Torah's perspective there is a strong level of personal liability even for an accidental act. Therefore, the accidental killer must remain within the city of refuge in order to avoid the vengeance of the victim's surviving relatives.

The Apter Rav, known affectionately as the *Ohev Yisroel* (Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heshel, Poland, 1748-1825) explains that the original six Cities of Refuge correspond to the six words we recite daily in the Shema, *Shema Yisroel Ado-nai Elohey-nu Ado-nai Echad*, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." After crossing the Jordan and settling in Israel there were another forty two cities designated as cities of refuge – for a total of forty-eight cities of refuge. The number of words from the beginning of Shema through the end of the first paragraph (*V'Ahavta*) totals forty-eight.

The *Ohev Yisroel* explained the deeper meaning behind this connection. The declaration of *Shema Yisroel* is a "City of Refuge" in which any Jew, no matter what his sin or history, can find shelter and protection.

We live in an ever-changing world. Often, we face much uncertainty as individuals and as a nation. We look to find an anchor, something to hold on to, something to ground us, a stabilizing force in the sometimes turbulent waters of life. The Rebbe explained that it is a relationship with God that provides stability, it is a relationship with Hashem that grounds us, and it is a connection with the Divine that steadies us. This is the connection between the cities of refuge and the words of *Shema*. Just as the city of refuge provided safety and security for one in a dangerous and precarious situation – the words of *Shema*, the *Torah*, *Mitzvos* and all forms of connection with God endow us with a sense of protection, safety and security. And in the same way that the city of refuge welcomed the individual despite the fact that he had made a terrible mistake – God's embrace is open to all – even those who may be spiritually tarnished or compromised.

This past week we welcomed the Hebrew month of *Av*. A month in which we commemorate two thousand years of tragedy, sadness and persecution. It is during *Av* that we remember the destruction of our two Temples, the crusades, the pogroms and the Holocaust. It is during this month that we remember the millions lost throughout centuries of hardship and sadness. It is during this month that we focus on our present day challenges as individuals and as a nation. The agreement forged by the world powers with Iran is cause for great concern and we must mobilize and do all we can to let our elected officials know of our concerns not just for our beloved State of Israel but for all democratic nations on the face of this earth. The possibility of a nuclear Iran is not simply a problem for the Jewish people – it is a problem for mankind.

Despite the adversity we face, we must always remember that we are truly privileged to have the opportunity to create, cultivate and nurture a relationship with God. It is this relationship that is our anchor, it is this relationship that fills us with courage, it is this relationship that provides us the safety and security we so desperately need. The words of our Torah, beautiful *Mitzvos*, moving prayers, and acts of kindness are the cities of refuge to which we must journey.