



### **Matos-Masei: Accidents Happen, But They Shouldn't**

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

*"The Lord spoke to Moses saying: Speak to the children of Israel and say to them, When you cross the Jordan to the land of Canaan, you shall designate cities for yourselves; they shall be cities of refuge for you, and a murderer who killed a person unintentionally shall flee there. These cities shall serve you as a refuge from an avenger, so that the murderer shall not die until he stands in judgment before the congregation. The cities that you provide shall serve as six cities of refuge for you. You shall provide the three cities in trans-Jordan and the three cities in the land of Canaan; they shall be cities of refuge. These six cities shall be a refuge for the children of Israel and for the proselyte and resident among them, so that anyone who unintentionally kills a person can flee there" (Bamidbar 35:9-15)*

Accidents happen, or so the famous adage goes. While this is true, the Torah teaches us that we are responsible for our actions, both intentional and unintentional. And so, if one accidentally killed another, he must run to the *Ir Miklat*, the City of Refuge, to escape the vengeful wrath of the *Goel HaDam* (literally, redeemer of blood, relative of the victim). These cities were strategically scattered throughout the land to provide refuge in times of need.

It is clear that the Torah assigns some degree of fault to the perpetrator, otherwise he would have been totally exempt and the *Goel HaDam* wouldn't have right to revenge. The accidental killer did something wrong and exile is his punishment. In Judaism, punishment is rehabilitative and not punitive. So, what is he supposed to learn during and from his time in the *Ir Miklat*?

Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv zt'l (1910-2012) provides a beautiful insight. The Gemara questions why the accidental killer should be subject to any punishment. After all, as we said before, accidents happen. To which the Gemara responds, "*D'ibayey L'yunei*,(he should have been more cognizant and aware). Accidents are often the result of not being attentive to the task at hand. But it is not only tragic accidents which occur when not paying attention. Sometimes, we fail to progress and move our lives forward because we are too busy multi-tasking. There are times when we fail to place our full strength and abilities into a particular endeavor and therefore, we remain stagnant. The accidental killer is the extreme example of one who lives life without focus. This is a dynamic many of us struggle with. We begin something meaningful and beautiful and then lose focus on the intended aspiration. We create lofty goals and then get busy with other things. How many projects have we started only to lose focus and move on to something else? How many dreams have never materialized simply because we stopped paying attention?

The accidental killer must remain in the city of refuge in order to regain his life focus. The cities of refuge were also home to the Tribe of Levi. The *Leviim* were individuals with a singular focus. Their tribal mandate was to serve in the Temple and provide religious instruction and leadership for the nation. They demonstrated absolute dedication to this mission and mandate and would allow nothing to derail them. Hence, they were not given additional lands in Israel lest they get distracted with farming and agriculture, and were instead supported through various tithes. They embodied the power of singular focus. When the Jewish people in a moment of panic lost focus and built the Golden Calf, the tribe of Levi maintained their steadfast allegiance to God. Even the possibility of Moshe's death did not distract them from the greater mission. And so, the accidental killer who is stricken with "life distraction" must remain in the *Ir Miklat*, where he can observe the *Leviim* and learn about "life focus."

We must try to carve out a personal *Ir Miklat*, a place we can go to steady and regain our life focus. We must take the time to think about what is important. Where do I want to put my energies? What do I want to accomplish? What are the pitfalls I must avoid? Some use *Teffilah* as an *Ir Miklat*. Davening provides us with the opportunity to clear our mind and think. Some use learning, others take walks in the forest and some meditate. We must each create an *Ir Miklat* that works best for our personal circumstances.

"Accidents happen," does not hold up under the scrutiny of Divine judgement. May we find the strength to live and lead more attentive lives.