

# The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

**MATOT-MAS'EI 5785**

Let us investigate some of the deeper lessons from the institution of the Cities of Refuge (AREI MIKLAT) in our Parsha (35:9-34).

The first: S'forno (Bamidbar 35:25) writes that there are several degrees of unintentional homicide (manslaughter). Sometimes, it's a complete accident, and there wasn't much that could have been done to prevent it. Other accidents involve an element of negligence. Therefore, the Torah did not set an amount of time of exile for all murderers. Those who were only slightly guilty of the murder would enter the AREI MIKLAT shortly before the Kohen Gadol died, while others die in the AREI MIKLAT before the demise of the Kohen Gadol. "And this is just, for HaShem knows the degree of punishment each individual deserves." It would therefore seem that each person needs to spend a different amount of time in the AREI MIKLAT to attain his atonement, and through hashgacha p'ratis (Divine Providence), each person gets exactly what he deserves. In other words, no crime goes unpunished, and while we all yearn to witness - right now - how good is vindicated and wicked crushed, the eventual reward and retribution will inevitably be

executed. A valuable belief as we struggle against the many evils and malevolent characters who seek to harm us.

The second: One of the halachot of the AREI MIKLAT is the requirement for three arei miklat on the east side of the Jordan and three in Israel proper. The three on the east side would only begin to function as AREI MIKLAT when the corresponding three in Eretz Yisrael are established. What is the reason for this halacha? Why should the AREI MIKLAT on the east side of the Jordan be unable to operate immediately and instead have to wait another fourteen years until the AREI MIKLAT in Eretz Yisrael would be designated and arranged? The Meshech Chochma (Bamidbar 35:28) explains that this ruling was promulgated because we must always give people a glimmer of hope. If the three AREI MIKLAT EIVER LAYARDEIN functioned straightaway, the people who lived there would despair of any quick release. But why?

When someone kills through his own negligence (SHOGEG), he must flee and be confined in the AREI MIKLAT. There, while affording him the atonement and protection he needed, he always nurtured the hope to go free. He never despaired because he knew that with the death of the Kohen Gadol, he would leave the AREI

MIKLAT (see Bamidbar 35:25), and the Kohen Gadol could die any day. The problem was that Elazar was the Kohen Gadol, and HaShem indicated that Elazar would live another fourteen years until the land of Israel was conquered and divided. As such, if the three AREI MIKLAT cities in EIVER LAYARDEIN were immediately operational, those guilty of manslaughter would lose any hope of freedom for another fourteen years, and it would be simply cruel to allow people to live without such hope for such a long time. Therefore, only after the Land is conquered and divided, and the three AREI MIKLAT are established in Israel, would the three in EIVER LAYARDEIN begin to function as well.

To live without hope is a harsh and merciless fate that is totally foreign to our Jewish world-outlook. Especially during these days prior to Tish'a b'Av which remind us of our woeful exilic existence, it is absolutely essential to remember that our belief in the eventual end of our exile - our hope - springs ever eternal! All of which leads into our final message of the Cities of Refuge.

The Mishna states (Makot 2:6) that "[The death of the Kohen Gadol would] facilitate the return of the murderer [from the city of refuge to his home] ... Therefore, the mothers of the Kohen Gadol would provide

[those exiled to the cities of refuge with] sustenance and garments so that they would not pray that their sons would die." In other words, the more comfortable they would be in the city of refuge, the less urgency they would feel to leave, and the less likely it would be that they would pray for the death of the Kohen Gadol. As the Talmud later explains (Makot 11a), the reason why such prayers might prove efficacious was because the Kohen Gadol's behavior might be culpable since he could have prayed that such careless homicides not occur. The Kohen Gadol's seeming abandonment of his solemn religious responsibility to inspire the people to adhere to a more ethically responsible life made him vulnerable to the prayers of the manslaughterer.

This explanation, however, raises a serious theological problem. It is one thing to pray that HaShem protect us from those natural disasters that are beyond our control, but to plead with Gd that He intervene to safeguard another human being from their own mistakes would violate the fundamental principle of Free Will. Every person is accountable for their own sins; the choice is his/hers to behave properly. If so, whether the Kohen Gadol deserves to die because of his negligence, should not be influenced by anyone's prayers. To this question, the Chazon Ish draws an extraordinary conclusion. To wit: that earnest

and sincere prayer is so incredibly potent that it can actually override the Free Will system!

The Maharsha, in another context (Kiddushin 29b, s.v. EFSHAR), states that the belief that all prayer is heard and answered by HaShem - although not always in the way we would hope - has nothing to do with the miraculous, but is built-in to the very fabric of our this-world reality, no different than any of the other immutable laws of nature. In a word, prayer works! True, at times, HaShem says, "No." Other times, the prayer is applied differently or stored away for someone else. But in all cases, no prayer is ever ignored! HaShem is always: SHOMEI'A T'FILA (He hearkens to our prayers), and is, The Lord is near to all those who call upon him, to all who call upon Him in truth." (T'hilim 145:18)

This insight is further strengthened by the opening topic in Parshat Matot which deals with the institution of the vow - neder. In introducing this complex subject, the Torah states (30:3): "When a person takes a vow to HaShem... he shall not profane his word..." The Midrash (Sifrei 153), quoted by Rashi, admonishes against desecrating one's speech. Our words are holy; they matter and can make a real difference when they are uttered properly and thoughtfully. Prayer is surely one of the most sublime forms

of speech. As such, when we pray sincerely and use our prayerful words to beseech HaShem for His salvation and our redemption, that imploring speech may very well have the power to see our wish fulfilled and thus bring these Three Weeks to a happy ending.

This last message is so very relevant to the often-desolate feeling that the average Jew experiences when contemplating what, if anything, he/she can do to help remedy the current painful and sorry state of affairs that has ensnared and continues to plague us. Certainly, there are acts of charity and chesed, but one must never-ever underestimate the incredible power of prayer!

