

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

MATOT-MAS'EI

You shall not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer who is worthy of death... You shall not bring guilt upon the Land in which you are; the blood will indeed bring guilt upon the Land. And the Land will not effect atonement... You shall not contaminate the Land in which you dwell... for I am G-d who dwells among the Children of Israel (35:31-34).

Though the Torah provides for a person who caused the accidental death of another through the AREI MIKLAT, cities of refuge, it makes it quite clear that a murderer with intent cannot escape the ultimate consequences of what he did by offering to pay compensation to the victim's family. It is not one law for those who can pay and another law for those who cannot pay.

Rashi translates the words V'LO TACHANIFU ET HA'ARETZ as "You shall not (in this way) bring guilt on the Land." The Ramban explains this to mean that the Land's high level of k'dusha will subtly act in guilty way. It will give the farmland the appearance of being fertile and demand a lot of input, but it will yield meager harvests as the produce will be blighted by worms, locusts, and premature over-ripening, as Moshe warned the

Israelites before his death (D'varim 28:38-40).

But unlike Rashi, Chizkuni translates V'LO TACHANIFU ET HA'ARETZ literally, as "You shall not flatter the land." The simple meaning of CHANIFUT is flattery, where a person dishonestly openly attributes good things to people who are unworthy. Where a person praises when he should condemn. Chizkuni implies that this is a statement about the Land that is patently false: that it tolerates guilty people pleading to a lesser charge so that they can evade the due penalty in favor of buying their way out. Quite on the contrary. Israel's presence on the Land works on the principle of "Justice, justice you shall pursue" (D'varim 16:20), that the same law applies to rich and poor alike.

It may be worth applying this principle of the Chizkuni to the way that some people erroneously view their being in Eretz Yisrael. They had been observant or were at least connected with observance in Chutz La'aretz, outside Israel. They belonged to communities, they followed some traditional practices on Shabbat and Chagim, and they kept a modicum of kashrut. They then made Aliya. Despite feeling considerable uncertainties about how they would fit in, they continued to personal fulfillment in just being here, working here, and sharing the burdens of Israeli society.

They thus felt they were doing their bit by being here. In so being, they slowly jettisoned many of the practices that they kept "in the home country". In the mind-frame they "flatter the Land", holding that being here and involved in Israeli society compensates for their abandoning the practices of their faith.

It is then in this spirit that the Torah warns: "The Land will not effect atonement". Do not think that G-d expects less from you just because you moved here. On the contrary, the Land is spiritually charged: He expects more. He expects us to spiritually and observance-wise to progress, in harmony with: "For I am G-d who dwells among the Children of Israel".  