

Places of Refuge-Matot/Massei

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In these week's Torah portion *Mas-ey*, we have an interesting description of the cities of refuge. God tells Moses to have the Israelites assign six cities for the Levites. This priestly tribe will not only dwell in these locations but they will also be places of refuge for a person who has accidentally or unintentionally killed a person. This is not for the premeditated murderer but only for true mishaps. This was needed because in the Torah, if a person's relative was killed by any means, then a family member could literally take justice into his own hands and have vengeance. I can imagine how satisfying it would be if someone killed a loved one of mine, then I could grab the ax and go after the perpetrator. Quite barbaric and primal! And yet, we can see the problems with it. What if one is falsely accused or if it was an accident? The Torah wants there to be these cities of refuge where a person could flee to so there would be time for a trial and in case of innocence the unintentional manslayer could live peacefully.

Today of course, people are not allowed to go after others no matter how terrible the act is. We have our system of laws and courts. While I could easily go into the ways that they work and are flawed, instead, maybe because I just got back from vacation, I would rather explore with you the idea of refuge. The Hebrew word is *Miklat*, meaning shelter, sanctuary, haven, or refuge. While our Torah portion deals with physical safety, it begs the question of what would be a refuge for you? Do you have a place of sanctuary? Where do you feel secure?

For those who are lucky, we may say it is our homes. If we have enough food and there is peace and comfort in our homes, it may truly be a shelter for us. Not all can say that because there are many who live precariously or with unstable members of their family. Home for such people is obviously not much of a refuge.

We normally connect shelter or sanctuary with a physical place but even if we have reliable housing, we are also in need of an inner refuge. There is so much uncertainty with the trajectory of the virus, the news reports are despairing, and we don't know what will happen in the year to come with our work, school, activities, and more. There are turbulent waters and storms swirling around us and even the most even minded are being rocked. And here we are. How can we stay anchored in the midst of upheaval? How do we get to our *Miklat*?

The answer is different for everyone. I see with many who watch too closely the network news day after day leads to heightened sense of agitation. I'm not advocating disavowing news in general but those on the T.V. are designed to sensationalize and provoke so one will keep tuning in day after day. Maybe a Shabbat, a break, can be helpful to our spirits. It not just about avoiding something but focusing on what we have. We can talk about our happy place. What is

yours? Where do you go or what do you do that makes you feel content and connected? Is it facetimeing or skyping with your children or grandchildren? Sharing a laugh with a friend. Taking a walk outside? Planting a new flower? Baking chocolate chip cookies?

Abraham Joshua Heschel, in The Sabbath, reminds us to make time meaningful and to sanctify our day of rest. He writes, “Even when the soul is seared, even when no prayer can come out of our tightened throats, the clean, silent rest of the Sabbath leads us to a realm of endless peace, or to the beginning of an awareness of what eternity means.” He is quite the poet to be sure. Our soul can feel seared, blistered, and weary. And so, we need a break now more than ever.

We need to create our own *miklat* and there is no better time to do it than on Shabbat. This day is given to us to free ourselves of the burdens of the week, to act as though we long for nothing. In Judaism, we are supposed to see it as a taste of *Olam haBa*, taste of the world to come. This is why pleasures of tasty food, marital relations, and rest is part of this day. It is also a day to count our blessings. Gratitude and appreciation can anchor us and remind us what is most important to us. And so, what are they things that you are grateful for? What relationships do you have that you treasure? Was there anything good that happened to you this week?

Heschel writes, “Nothing is as hard to suppress as the will to be a slave to one’s own pettiness. Gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly, man must fight for inner liberty.” (pg. 89) We must free ourselves from time to time from the fear, to allow our spirit rise up and feel the joy of life. There are times when we need to unchain ourselves to seek our own *miklat*, our own refuge, whether that is out on our patio, walking by the ocean, or calling someone we love. To be reminded of why we live and who we are can help bring a respite to the worries that are seemingly ubiquitous.

And we are here, now, you in your homes looking at our screens, me and Cantor here in the sanctuary. We are connected not just to one another but to God on this sweet day of our Shabbat. Heschel teaches that, “Eternity utters a day.” As we pause to celebrate and observe Shabbat, may we feel renewed and have a sense of the meaning of days, the meaning of our lives as we create *miklat* of peace and community together.