

**Pardes from Jerusalem – Weekly Parsha Podcast –**  
**Parshat Matot-Masei –**  
**ערי מקלט - Finding Safety Within the Cities of Refuge**

This podcast discusses the spiritual practice of finding safety within our internal “cities of refuge – arei miklat,” based on a teaching from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, in *Likkutei Sichot*, volume 2, pp. 363-365, as adapted by Yanki Tauber.

The Rambam teaches in his Mishneh Torah that the court is obligated to straighten the roads to the cities of refuge, to repair them and broaden them. They must remove all impediments and obstacles. . . . Bridges should be built over all natural barriers so as not to delay one who is fleeing to the city of refuge. The width of a road to a city of refuge should not be less than thirty-two cubits (approximately 48 feet). “Refuge, Refuge” was written at all crossroads, so that the murderers should recognize the way and turn there. (from the Laws Regarding Murder and the Preservation of Life 8:5)

The Rebbe explains that the “cities of refuge” were six cities in the Land of Israel designated as havens for murderers. A person who killed would flee to the nearest city of refuge, where he would be safe from the vengeance of his victim’s closest relative (the “avenger of the blood”) until he was brought to trial before the Sanhedrin, a tribunal of twenty-three judges that tried capital cases. It was the court’s responsibility to ensure the accessibility of the cities of refuge by improving the roads leading to them and posting signs with the words *miklat, miklat* (“refuge, refuge”) to show the way.

The source for establishing this compassionate custom is found in *Parshat Masei*. “You shall designate cities for yourselves, cities of refuge shall they be for you, and a killer shall flee there – one who takes a life unintentionally. The cities shall be for a refuge from the avenger, so that the killer will not die until he stands before the assembly for judgment. As to the cities that you shall designate, there shall be six cities of refuge for you” (Numbers 35: 11-13).

והקריתם לכם ערים, ערי מקלט תהיינה לכם, ונס שמה רוצח מכה נפש בשגגה. והיו לכם  
הערים למקלט מגואל, ולא ימות הרוצח עד עמדו לפני העדה למשפט. והערים אשר תתנו,  
שש ערי מקלט תהיינה לכם (במדבר לה, יא-יג).

On the spiritual plane, there also exist six “cities of refuge” for the spiritual “murderer.” Our sages teach in *Berachot* 18b that life, in the true and ultimate sense, is **connection with the divine source of being and vitality**; an act of transgression against the divine will is a sort of spiritual “murder,” as it hinders the flow of life and vitality from G-d to creation. They refer to two specific verses: “And you who **cleave to** the Lord your God, you are all **alive** today” (Deuteronomy 4:4) and “To love the Lord your God, to listen to His voice and to **cleave to** Him, for He is **your life** and the length of your days...” (Deuteronomy 30:20).

ואתם הדבקים בה' א-להיכם חיים כלכם היום (דברים ד, ד)  
לאהבה את ה' א-להיך, לשמוע בקולו, ולדבקה בו, כי הוא חייך ואורך ימיך... (דברים ל, כ)

*We understand from this that the sages view the observance of the mitzvot as being in alignment with the source of life, as channeling the flow of life and as nurturing the connection with the Giver of life. In fact, the word in Aramaic for mitzvah is tzavtah, which means connection. Hence, when one disregards "listening to His voice" by not observing a mitzvah, one is unintentionally depriving him or herself of the life force inherent in that particular mitzvah. Consequently, this is tantamount to a type of spiritual murder.*

In *Makkot* 10a, we learn that the words of the Torah are the "cities of refuge" for the destroyer of spiritual life: if he flees into the Torah and immerses himself in it, the Torah will protect him from the adverse results of his misdeed. *I ask though, what does this teaching in Makkot actually mean? It seems to be a circular argument. If not following the words of the Torah results in a type of "spiritual murder," then how will immersing oneself in those very words provide a sort of safety net – a spiritual city of refuge?*

The Rebbe explains that the Torah contains 613 *mitzvot*, or commandments. However, the great majority of them require certain circumstances to obligate and enable their fulfillment: there are mitzvot that can be observed only at certain hours of the day, or only on certain days of the year; mitzvot that can be observed only in the Land of Israel, or only in the Holy Temple; mitzvot that pertain only to men, only to *kohanim* ("priests"), only to employers, or only to farmers; and so on.

The *Sefer HaChinuch* (13<sup>th</sup> century Spain, published anonymously) writes in his introduction that there are six mitzvot that pertain to all times, to all individuals, to all places and in all circumstances. They are: to believe in God, to avow His oneness, to renounce idolatry, to love Him, to be in awe of Him, and to avoid temptation to sin.

להאמין בשם, שלא להאמין זולתו, ליחדו, לאהבה אותו, ליראה אותו, ושלא לתור אחר מחשבת הלב וראית העינים.

In this way they are readily accessible to one who seeks refuge from his faults and failings, whomever he might be and wherever and whenever the desire to rectify his life might arouse him. These are the six readily accessible spiritual "cities of refuge" for the errant soul.

ממנים "שש ערי מקלט תהיינה לכם".

*According to this, the sages and Sefer HaChinuch are suggesting that if disregarding a mitzvah brings about a type of spiritual murder and cutting off of the flow of life, then the very observance of these six specific mitzvot can actually bring about a type of protection and safety net. They protect us from any spiritual harm caused by neglecting the other 607 mitzvot. These six mitzvot indeed become our spiritual cities of refuge – ערי המקלט. I would like to suggest that these six are interconnected and share a consciousness that is essential for every Jew to cultivate. These six provide the foundation for being in relationship with the Divine, as they speak to the essence, the core and the deepest aspect of what it actually means to be in this relationship.*

*Additionally, I would like to suggest that when the Sages teach in Berachot 18b, that “an act of transgression against the divine will is a sort of spiritual “murder,” as it hinders the flow of life and vitality from G-d to creation,” they may be referring to something else in addition to neglecting mitzvot. There very well may be another means by which one can inadvertently cause a type of spiritual murder to one’s own inner being. This has to do with negative midot – emotional dispositions and the consequential behavior that cause separation, disconnection and loneliness. For example: egocentricity and self-centeredness, arrogance, greed, jealousy, seeking honor at all costs, lack of compassion, lack of gratitude, cold hearted and cruel behavior. What can bring healing to this type of loss of life and cutting oneself off from the world (Avot 4:28)? In a sense, when we feel spiritually weak, compromised or hurt, “fleeing back to the basics” can literally save our spiritual lives, as we then cultivate and restore nearness, rather than remaining distant from sensing the Divine Presence in our lives.*

*In conclusion, I would like to invite you to consider cultivating the following contemplative practice: When considering your relationship with the Divine, in the most visceral and immanent way, do you sense more of a distance than closeness? I would venture to say that all of us, at various times along our spiritual life journeys, do in fact feel far rather than near to the Divine --- that deep essential dimension of our own inner being. Perhaps you inadvertently made decisions that compromised your personal integrity of the relationship, resulting in leaving you in a space of loneliness, remoteness and disconnection. During these times, find safety and encouragement by moving, even fleeing, to a city of refuge within you. Choose one of the six mitzvot, our six spiritual cities of refuge. Learn more about it, reflect on it, hold space for it, consider how you might approach observing it in a new or different way. These are opportunities to regain, to reclaim and to reexperience your spiritual life in a deeper, more lively and vivacious way.*