



Even So

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Parashat Shoftim 5785

What do you do when you feel—or when you know—that because of your actions, you are entirely alone in the world?

That is the question faced by the accidental killer, the *rotzei'ah bishgagah*. Suddenly, his life is forever changed. It was an accident—not the result of hatred and premeditation, but of sheer negligence. After the manslaughter, the *rotzei'ah bishgagah* is supposed to leave his home and go to a designated place:

דברים יט:ב, ד

²שְׁלוֹשׁ עָרִים תִּבְדִּיל לָךְ בְּתוֹךְ אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: ...⁴וְזֶה דִּבְרַר הָרֹצֵחַ אֲשֶׁר יָנוּס שָׁמָּה
וְחִי אֲשֶׁר יָקָה אֶת רֵעֵהוּ בְּבִלִי דַעַת וְהוּא לֹא שֹׂנֵא לוֹ מִתְּמַל שְׁלֵשׁ:

Devarim 19:2, 4

²You shall set aside three cities in the land that your God is giving you to possess. ...⁴Now this is the case of the killer who may flee there and live: one who has slain another unwittingly, without having been an enemy in the past.



Suddenly, he has gone from being an ordinary person to being a killer—and his life will never be the same.

But what is the purpose of these cities of refuge (called *arei miklat*, sing. *ir miklat*)? Why does the accidental murderer have to uproot his life and venture to a new place?

In the Torah, the cities of refuge seem to exist purely for the accidental killer's protection, a place where the blood avenger cannot touch him, where he can live out his life in safety. Interestingly, however, the *arei miklat* are not small spaces, far away from normally functioning society. They are fully functioning cities, cities that, the Talmud points out, must have everything needed to sustain normal life—farms, stores, and schools—institutions that seem unnecessary if the primary purpose of the *ir miklat* is for protection.¹

Hazal, who no longer lived in a society that allowed blood avengers, understand the *arei miklat* additionally as places of punishment. In Massekhet Makkot, the chapter about accidental killers, entitled “*elu hein ha-golin* - these are the exiled ones,” follows the chapters about other sorts of punishments—“these are those who are burned,” “these are those who are strangled,” “these are those who are killed.” In this conception, *arei miklat* are a place of punishment for an ambiguous sort of crime: while the murder was not premeditated, the Mishnah emphasizes that it must have involved some sort of negligence.² In this framework, the city of refuge does not only protect the accidental killer from punishment that would be too severe for his crime, but also punishes him appropriately by forcing him to uproot his entire life.

¹ See Makkot 10a (and Tosefta Makkot 2:3).

² For the *mishnayot* referenced here, see Mishnah Makkot, chapter two.



But there is a third, more subtle purpose of the *ir miklat*, which stems from its strangeness: it is a city composed only of killers and Levi'im. It is a city where, no matter where an accidental killer might go or who he talks to, his sin is known. It is implicitly understood that every non-levi in the city has a terrible event in their past. This community of killers, this community of collectively acknowledged sin, is not only a place of protection or a place of punishment. It is a place where no one has to hide what is monstrous within them. It is a place where darkness can be acknowledged. It is a place where the energy human beings usually spend hiding their flaws and their past misdeeds can instead be used to move toward redemption.

Massekhet Makkot explains that when an accidental killer arrives at an *ir miklat*, if the inhabitants of the city want to honor him in any way he is required to inform them of his past. “*Rotzei’ah ani* - I am a killer.” If the people of the city insist “even so,” he can accept the honor:

משנה מכות ב:ח

כִּי־יֵצֵא בּוֹ, רוֹצֵחַ שֶׁגָּלָה לְעִיר מִקְלָטוֹ וְרָצוּ אֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר לְכַבְּדוֹ, יֹאמְרוּ לָהֶם רוֹצֵחַ אָנִי. אָמְרוּ לוֹ אִם עַל פִּי כֵן, יִקְבַּל מֵהֶן, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דְּבָרִים יט) וְזֶה דְּבַר הָרֹצֵחַ.

Mishnah Makkot 2:8

Similarly, in the case of a murderer who was exiled to a city of refuge and the people of the city sought to honor him due to his prominence, he shall say to them: I am a murderer. If the residents of the city say to him: We are aware of your status and nevertheless, we wish to honor you, he may accept the honor from them, as it is stated: “Now this is the case (*davar*—i.e., word) of the killer.”

This is the essence of the *ir miklat*. It is a place where the *teshuvah* process is open, a place where people are required to speak about the things they have done wrong, and a place where it is safe for them to speak that truth because everyone around them is doing the same.

When a person is feeling the most unworthy because of their past, it is a place where they can speak their fear out loud: remember the terrible things that I have done, are you sure that you want me here, in this position of honor?—and it is a place where, because the people around him have accepted the darkness in their own past, they can answer “Yes, we know, and we want you here, doing this, even so.” It is only in this community of acknowledged, collective sin that the accidental killer has a chance for redemption. It is in this community, where everyone acknowledges the monstrous within them, that they can also reach what is most human.

While most of us, thank God, are not accidental killers, we all need spaces like these: spaces where we can speak the darker truths of our lives, without fear that we will be rejected because of them. And so, we are left with a question: in a world without *arei miklat*, where do we find our communities of healing?

Makkot 10a states: “*divrei Torah koltin*”—like an *ir miklat*, Torah provides refuge. Torah, like the *ir miklat*, is a way that we can talk about things that otherwise feel impossible to say. Torah, when we come to it with trust and vulnerability, offers the possibility for us to share the darkness of our lives in a context where we can trust it will be seen and accepted.

In Torah, when we are lucky, we are given the opportunity to build a different sort of community—a community much like an *ir miklat*, where the darkest parts of ourselves are exposed. In engaging in Torah as a community, we create space where we can acknowledge that we are each flawed, that each of us contains mini-monstrosities. We create space where we are invited to speak our inner darkness out loud. And we create communities where we can trust that our community won’t reject us for our inner weaknesses, but will tell us that yes, we know about this part of you, and we accept you even so. We accept you because, like you, we are flawed—and, like you, we are here because, in Torah, we are striving to be better.



Even So

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May we all be blessed to find the communities that we need to be able to tell the truth about who we are. May we all be blessed to find, in Torah, a refuge.

