

Accidents can happen and even in our own day tragedies unfold where individuals die at the hands of those who did not intend their demise. Having a way of recognizing the seriousness of the loss, while still not perpetuating a feud or allowing individuals to take the law into their own hands, is of obvious benefit to society- and thus the city of refuge that Sami mentioned earlier this morning. But however beneficial these cities of refuge might theoretically be, we have no evidence that they ever existed, and certainly they had no legal status once Jewish independence ended with the Roman destruction of the Temple in the year 70 C.E. Why then do they continue to be discussed in such detail by Jewish scholars for the past two thousand years? What are they supposed to teach us today, when these laws are no longer in practice?

The cities of refuge come to break the cycle of injury and reprisal, and reprisal and reprisal, which continues in our world today. We see this in the war torn Middle East, where individuals and groups hold on to their pain from events that took place decades or even centuries ago and continue to see it their responsibility to take revenge. This was a part of the troubles in Northern Ireland, and remains an obstacle to reconciliation between India and Pakistan. This human impulse to revenge makes us appreciate even more special organizations like the Parents Circle-Families Forum which brings together in dialogue parents who have lost

children in the Israeli Palestinian conflict, whether Israeli parents who lost a child to Palestinian terrorism, or Palestinian parents whose child was killed by an Israeli soldier. Currently this joint Palestinian Israeli organization, has over 600 families involved, all of whom have lost a close family member. They are living out the message of the cities of refuge, that continuing reprisals lead only to further pain.

But bearing a grudge and seeking tit for tat, is not just something that happens far away from us, in another part of the world, or in the extreme circumstances of a death. In many families there are people who do not speak to one another for decades because of hurt feelings. If you discuss it with them, they may say, interestingly enough, "what am I supposed to do, let her get away with murder". And until one side or another is willing to let go of their claim to a pound of flesh, the grievance will continue, often beyond anyone's remembering what it was really all about in the beginning. The accidental manslayer was not set free, but neither was he required to stay in the city of refuge forever. When the high priest died, he was allowed to return to his regular life, helping us to see that there is a time limit, even to very serious grievances.

There is one other thing that we can learn from this section of Jewish law, and that is the importance of taking responsibility even for unintentional hurts that one has caused “I didn’t mean to” does have bearing on the punishment, but it doesn’t fully excuse the hurt. The hurt is real, it happened, it is not wiped away with a quick I’m sorry. Therefore the rabbis taught that one must guard against any measure of negligence in things that can be hurtful to others. This means being careful in our speech, where words can come back to harm others. It also means being more than careful in engaging in any action that could possibly hurt someone, such as driving a car, handling a weapon, or working with any possibly dangerous substance. It is not enough that one didn’t intend damage, one must also have taken every possible precaution such as keeping a gun in a gun safe, and not distracting oneself while driving. Earlier rabbis, and they were talking about carts, which seem much less likely to do damage, urge a driver not to set out if he was too tired or too upset. How much the more so is that important for us, with our 300 horsepower automobiles.

Sami, as you mentioned, Tisha B’av is approaching and its, its dual themes of loss and warning. May we cope with our losses in ways that do not perpetuate hatred. May we overcome hurts and put an expiration date on past grudges. And finally, may we talk and act with care, that we not leave a trail of damage in our wake.

