



Leadership of the Land • Parshat Mattot-Masei

This week's double-Torah reading, *Mattot-Masei*, contains one of the strangest laws of the entire Torah: a detailed description of the city of refuge as a place where an accidental murderer can live to escape capital punishment. The accidental murderer is consigned to an interstitial space - a place not of his own choosing that signifies his removal from society for murder while, simultaneously, acknowledging his innocence. It is a difficult place to be, a place of guilt and limbo, but a place of life, nonetheless. Someone has died. Someone is responsible for that death even if it was unintended.

The playwright David Mamet wrote a book of his own Torah interpretations, *Five Cities of Refuge*, with the help of Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. There, he invites us to visualize life in a city of refuge: "What must it have been like to live in a city of refuge, this place of neither acquittal nor punishment? Every single person you'd meet, every single day, had accidentally murdered another human being...They were all united by shame; they all had innocent blood on their hands. And there was no escape either." They conclude: "Perhaps it was no different from life in any city, anywhere, anytime." Cities of refuge had other residents who were not guilty of manslaughter, but it's not clear if you could tell them apart. Casual encounters with shopkeepers and neighbors must have had a small charge of danger and mystery.

The chapter that discusses these laws concludes with a general warning: "You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I Myself abide, for I God abide among the Israelite people" (Num. 35:33-34). Keep the land pure by keeping yourselves pure. Devote yourselves wholly to God by remaining spiritually clean through good moral choices.

Understand that the land is a reflection of its inhabitants. It cannot withstand hypocrisy. This exhortation reaches a crescendo in the book of Leviticus: "Thus the land became defiled; and I called it to account for its iniquity, and the land spewed out its inhabitants" (Lev.18:25). Land that cannot withstand human destruction will spit out its residents. What happens to the spilled blood of those who are murdered? It seeps into the ground, as God told Cain after the very first murder: "What have you done? Hark, your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!" (Gen. 4:10).

This outcry is more than an environmentalist's creed. In the Hebrew Bible, the land and those who reside in it do so in equipoise, a counterbalance of forces that are delicately aligned and dependent on human behavior and an aspiration of purity or freedom from moral contamination.

Purity, like sacrifice, submission, and sin itself are words central to all major faiths but alien to modern sensibilities.

In her book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas introduces her subject by stating that, “rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience. So far from being aberrations from the central project of religion, they are positive contributions to atonement.” The impurity of sin distances us from God, from others, and from ourselves. Douglas believed that, “ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose a system on an inherently untidy experience.” Nothing is morally messier than murder. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in his article *catharsis* contends that the sinner needs to withdraw, acknowledge that the sin has distanced himself from God, confess and repent so that he can bridge that lonely abyss.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that, “There are aspects of Judaism that never change, wherever and whenever we are. The laws of purity and impurity, permitted and forbidden, sacred and secular – these have barely changed through the centuries” (*Numbers, Covenant and Conversation*). We no longer observe many of these laws because we do not have a Temple. But these laws are still studied because they teach us about how we demarcate experiences in the attempt to achieve holiness as individuals and as a society.

There is no greater breach for sacred societies than murder. The Talmud is explicit about this: “Due to the sin of bloodshed, the Holy Temple is destroyed, and the Divine Presence leaves Israel, as it says: ‘So you shall not pollute the land wherein you are; for blood, it pollutes the land; and no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it. And you shall not defile the land which you inhabit, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord dwell in the midst of the children of Israel’ (Num. 35:33–34). However, if you defile the land, you will not inhabit it, and I will not dwell in it.”

One midrashic reading of these verses helps us understand why the city of refuge was critical to the creation of a holy community. When it states in Numbers 35:34 that “I the Lord dwell in the midst of the children of Israel,” one midrash suggests that even when the Israelites are impure, the Divine Presence remains among them (*Sifrei Bamidbar* 160:15. See also BT *Yoma* 56b-57a). When you are marked by a sin so great it disturbs the universe, you can feel that you are your sin. There is no escaping from the terror of self-loathing. You do not feel that God is with you. You are wrecked by shame and guilt for a murder you never intended. But in a city of refuge, you are with others who share this burden. Your vulnerability is acknowledged. You can express other parts of your being. You know that the Divine Presence is with you.

We have no modern-day equivalent of the city of refuge. The most we can do is create environments that feel both safe and accepting and also inspire personal and communal growth. In her *HBR* article, “The Best Leaders Aren’t Afraid to Be Vulnerable” (July 22, 2022),

Janice Omadeke asks “How do you create a culture where your team feels empowered to be honest, share without fear of retribution, and ask for what they need?” She observes that, “The perception of what it means to be vulnerable has shifted from the grand gesture to the small act of bravery.” Leaders have to model that bravery to “open the door for people with less formalized power to safely emulate your behavior.”

Omadeke suggests two ways to open that small, important door of vulnerability. 1) Be honest about your own struggles. You cannot expect others to share their obstacles and frustrations, if you cannot do so. This means asking for help when you need it or mentioning the difficulty of a task. It may mean sharing a hardship in your life outside of work or volunteering that may be getting in the way of your best performance. 2) Do the difficult thing – even when others are hesitant. What Omadeke means by this is “standing up for your values and beliefs, publicly and privately.” This means speaking up

and challenging groupthink. It means being a voice for others who may be mistreated in the workplace or society. And it means respectfully addressing uncomfortable issues that are papered over in leadership.

No one can live free of sin and without regrets. The city of refuge was a place where those guilty of manslaughter could continue to live despite sin and regret and be accepted and productive. One role of leaders today is to create similar environments of shelter and psychological refuge so that others may live.

What step can you take as a leader in creating a spiritual city of refuge for yourself and others?