

-Date: 22 Tammuz 5786 (July 7, 2026)

Torah Portion: Mattot/Massei

Topic: The Path of Elohim, Part 1

It is written: “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” (Num. 35:11). At first glance, the institution of the cities of refuge appears to be a compassionate provision for those who accidentally caused another person's death. Yet the Torah reveals a far deeper spiritual truth. The unintentional killer is not treated as entirely innocent, nor is he regarded as a deliberate murderer. His exile demonstrates that even sins committed without malicious intent carry consequences, because negligence itself reflects a deficiency in one's spiritual condition. The cities of refuge therefore become more than legal sanctuaries; they reveal YHWH's perfect harmony of justice and mercy, showing that even while judgment is administered, He prepares a path for restoration.

The Midrash connects this commandment with David's declaration: “Good and upright is YHWH; therefore He guides sinners on the way” (Ps. 25:8), together with his prayer, “Remember Your mercies, YHWH, and Your kindnesses, for they are from time immemorial” (Ps. 25:6). David recalls the very first demonstration of Divine mercy shown to humanity. YHWH had warned Adam, “For on the day you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). Yet Adam did not die immediately after eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Instead, he was expelled from Gan Eden and lived another 930 years before his death (Gen. 5:5). Divine justice remained true to its word, but Divine mercy postponed the full execution of judgment.

The Midrash explains that Adam's punishment resembled that of an unintentional killer. Adam committed two offenses. First, he violated YHWH's explicit command by eating from the forbidden tree. Second, he introduced death into the entire human race. For the first offense, he deserved immediate death, yet YHWH mercifully allowed him to continue living. For the second, instead of immediate destruction, he was exiled from the Garden, just as the accidental killer is exiled from his home to a city of refuge. David therefore praises the everlasting mercy of YHWH, whose first response to fallen humanity was not annihilation but exile accompanied by hope.

Bereishis Rabbah (19:8) further explains that Chavah gave Adam wine extracted from grapes of the Tree of Knowledge, while Adam himself was initially unaware of its origin. Although this tradition does not remove Adam's responsibility, it introduces an element of inadvertence into his transgression. Like the accidental killer, Adam sinned without fully grasping the consequences of his actions. The Midrash thereby establishes an enduring biblical principle: a person may sin unintentionally and still require both justice and restoration.

This same principle governs the cities of refuge. When YHWH instructed Moshe to establish them, Moshe asked how a person living in the far reaches of the land would know where to flee. YHWH answered: “Prepare the way for yourself... and it shall be for any killer to flee there” (Deut. 19:3). The roads were to be repaired every year, widened, leveled, and cleared of every obstacle. Bridges were built across rivers, and crossroads were marked with large signs bearing the single word **מִקְלָט** (*Miklat*—“Refuge!”), pointing the fugitive toward safety (Makkot 10b). The Torah thus reveals an astonishing truth about the character of YHWH: He not only provides refuge—He prepares the road leading to it.

This is precisely what David means when he says, “Good and upright is YHWH; therefore He guides sinners on the way.” Throughout Scripture, a road symbolizes one's moral and spiritual direction. Abraham was chosen to teach his household “the way of YHWH” (Gen. 18:19). The Sages describe righteousness as “the path of life” (Berachos 28b), while evil is called “the evil way” (Bereishis Rabbah 70:4). A person's life is defined by the road upon which he walks. The cities of refuge therefore become a living parable of teshuvah. YHWH never merely commands the sinner to repent; He prepares the path by which repentance becomes possible. Justice requires accountability, but mercy removes every unnecessary obstacle that might prevent the sinner from returning.

Rashi observes that exile itself serves as part of the atonement for the accidental killer. Separation from one's familiar surroundings humbles the heart and awakens repentance. Ramban likewise explains that although the killing was unintentional, human life is so sacred that negligence cannot simply be ignored. Carelessness regarding life reveals a failure of reverence toward the Divine image borne by every human being.

Shalom.