

**-Date:** 23 Tammuz 5786 (July 8, 2026)

**Torah Portion:** Mattot/Massei

**Topic:** The Path of Elohim, Part 2

Sforno sees the city of refuge not as a prison but as a place of rehabilitation. Removed from the environment in which the tragedy occurred, the killer is given opportunity to rebuild his inner life before returning to society. Kli Yakar similarly observes that accidents often reveal hidden spiritual carelessness. What appears accidental before human eyes may expose inattentiveness that only YHWH fully sees. Thus the exile is designed not merely to protect the fugitive but to awaken his conscience.

The Maharal develops this idea further. He explains that exile creates an entirely new existential condition. A person leaves behind the identity that contributed to his failure and enters a place where spiritual transformation becomes possible. One cannot truly become a different person while remaining unchanged in the same environment. Exile therefore becomes the birthplace of renewal.

Ramchal builds upon this principle in *Mesillat Yesharim*. He teaches that genuine accidents are often the product of spiritual sleep. A lack of vigilance (*zehirut*) gradually dulls the soul until negligence becomes possible. The accidental killer thus serves as a warning that holiness requires continual awareness. Many so-called accidents are prevented by a heart that remains awake before YHWH.

The Zohar carries the discussion into the realm of Kabbalah. It teaches that exile itself becomes an instrument of *birur* (refinement) and *mituk ha-dinim* (the sweetening of judgments). When a person is removed from the place where spiritual damage occurred, the hold of impurity is weakened, allowing the soul to be purified. The city of refuge therefore represents more than physical protection; it is a sanctuary where Divine judgment is transformed into Divine healing.

The Zohar also sees Adam's expulsion from Eden as the prototype of every later exile. Adam was exiled from the Garden. Cain became a wanderer. Israel was exiled from the Land. The Shechinah itself went into exile with Israel. Yet in every case, exile was never YHWH's final word. The Divine Presence accompanies His people even in their banishment, ensuring that every exile contains within itself the possibility of return. The city of refuge thus becomes a miniature Eden—a place where communion with YHWH begins to be restored.

The Tanya internalizes this entire pattern. It teaches that every person possesses both the *nefesh ha-behamit* (animal soul) and the *nefesh Elokit* (Divine soul). Whenever a person sins, the Divine soul enters a kind of exile beneath the dominance of worldly desires. Teshuvah therefore means far more than receiving forgiveness. It is literally a return of the soul to its Divine source. Just as the accidental killer leaves the place of death and enters the city of refuge, so the Divine soul leaves its exile and returns to the embrace of YHWH. The Baal Shem Tov therefore taught that every descent exists only for the sake of a greater ascent (*yeridah l'tzorekh aliyah*). Even failure can become the beginning of greater intimacy with YHWH when it produces genuine repentance.

The Sefat Emet observes that the cities of refuge continue to exist spiritually in every generation. Since the destruction of the Temple, Torah itself has become the refuge to which every wandering soul may flee. Every page of Torah, every mitzvah, every sincere prayer, and every act of repentance becomes another step toward the city prepared by YHWH. Kedushat Levi similarly teaches that the truest refuge is not merely a physical place but conscious awareness of the Divine Presence. One who truly dwells with YHWH already lives within the ultimate city of refuge.

Shalom.