

CREATURES OF OUR ENVIRONMENT

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

In this week's reading, G-d commands the nation of Israel to set aside Cities of Refuge throughout the land -- three in the Land of Canaan, and three east of the Jordan River.

A City of Refuge could only be used by a person who killed another accidentally, but negligently. An alleged murderer would be taken from the city and judged, and returned only if the killing was unintentional. A truly accidental killing, on the other hand, was not punished -- a person was liable only if he or she might have taken appropriate precautions and avoided the accident. So the Torah prescribed very different treatment for those who murdered, those guilty of manslaughter, and those who were blameless.

The Talmud tells us that there were two parallel lines of three Cities of Refuge running from north to south, on each side of the Jordan. The three cities on each side were divided such that each was equidistant from the others and also from the borders -- dividing the Land of Israel into equal quarters from north to south.

There is, however, an obvious problem with this division. A person living in the middle of the country would have to travel no more than half the distance that a person on the northern or southern border would travel in order to reach the nearest city. Someone who lived at the midpoint between the northern and middle cities would have to travel one-eighth of the length of the country to reach either city, but someone living in the very south of the country would have to travel one quarter of its length to reach the southernmost City of Refuge.

Perhaps one could resolve this question by saying that the center of the country was more populous, so more cities were required. But if so, we have a different problem: there were three cities on each side of the Jordan River, while the great majority of the population lived in the Land of Canaan on the western side.

Abbaye, one of the great scholars of the Talmud, provides a very simple answer: there were more cities where there were more murderers! Those areas with more cities per square mile had more people who needed to make use of them, resulting in a roughly even division of population between the six cities.

There is something wrong with this answer, though. As we just discussed, the Cities of Refuge were not for murderers, but only for those guilty of manslaughter, those who had negligently but not

deliberately killed someone. The relative abundance or paucity of murderers should not matter.

Some of the early commentators, such as the Ramba"n (Nachmanides), answer by pointing out that murderers would also flee to these cities, in order to make their actions look accidental or under the misconception that they would be safe there. Since it took time to clarify who could stay and who would be removed, more cities were needed where murderers were more common.

There is also, though, another possibility. Indeed there were more Cities of Refuge where there were more murderers, and not only because the murderers would run there. In places where there were more murderers, there was less concern for life -- and this was something that affected even those who would never contemplate deliberate homicide. Those who were exiled were hardly murderers - they made a mistake! They didn't look carefully, they didn't think carefully -- but this very lack of caution and concern for human life also enabled the lowest members of society to contemplate murder.

We cannot imagine that when we live in a world where not only common street criminals but corporate executives engage in thievery, we will not be tempted to "borrow" that which is not ours. And we cannot delude ourselves by thinking that we can expose ourselves to thousands of murders per year on television and in movies, and we will remain every bit as committed to the sanctity of life. We are, indeed, creatures of our environment.

It is our responsibility, then, to build a different environment - to remove poisonous influences from our lives as much as possible, and to surround ourselves with role models, friends and other influences that promote love, life, and holiness.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken