

YOUR FLATTERY WILL BE THE DEATH OF ME

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"Do not take a ransom . . . And you will not pollute the land . . . rather you shall execute him."(35:33,34)

The Sifri sees in the words "lo sachnifu" es ha'aretz, a prohibition against flattery, for the word "chanifa" means "flattery". The Ramban attempts to show the connection between flattery and the prohibition against condoning murder which is the simple interpretation of the verse. Accepting a bribe from a murderer in exchange for his pardon is a form of flattery. We are treating him as an upstanding citizen of society, although he is a wicked person.¹

Perhaps another parallel can be drawn between flattery and murder. Murder destroys a person's physical reality. However, a person can be destroyed emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually as well. Flattery gives one a false sense of his reality. A person who is not in touch with who he really is, is not considered to be alive. This is a false sense of existence. Flattering a person, thereby being the catalyst to his losing touch with his true reality, is akin to murdering him.

1. Ramban, 35:34

Respecting Human Life

"Then Moshe designated three cities" (Devarim, 4:41)

The Talmud teaches that the three cities of refuge on the east bank of the Jordan River only became functional after the three on the west bank were established. Although Moshe knew that the latter three would only be established fourteen years after his passing, he insisted on establishing the three on the east bank. The Talmud uses this as an example of Moshe's alacrity in the performance of mitzvos.¹

Generally, alacrity in the performance of a mitzva leads to the mitzva being accomplished sooner. However, in Moshe's case, since the cities offered no refuge until after they all were completed, what was there to be gained by his promptness?

The cities of refuge served a dual purpose. One function was as a safe haven for the perpetrator of an accidental murder, while the second was to create a higher degree of awareness amongst Bnei Yisroel concerning the sanctity of human life. The mere presence of the city sent a message to everyone to be more cautious with their actions. Although the first function did not take effect until

after the conquest of Eretz Yisroel, Moshe was able to immediately set the second function into motion.

1. *Makkos, 10a*

Murder Desensitizes Us

"You must designate for yourselves cities of refuge" (35:11)

Hashem commanded Moshe to designate six cities of refuge. Three of the cities were located on the east bank of the Jordan River, and three were on the west bank. The Talmud questions this designation, for only two- and-a-half tribes were located on the east bank, while the remaining nine-and-a-half tribes were located on the west bank. Our Sages explain that the disproportionate allocation was due to the high incidence of murder which took place on the east bank of the Jordan.¹ The Baalei HaTosfos question this explanation. These cities offered refuge only to someone who had killed inadvertently. Therefore, the high incidence of murder, which is a premeditated act, should not be a determining factor in the location of the cities of refuge. The Baalei HaTosfos answer the question by citing the following passage from the Talmud: When a person murders without being detected, Hashem sees to it that he is punished. Hashem orchestrates a scenario whereby the murderer is killed accidentally. Therefore, a higher incidence of murder will result in a higher incidence of inadvertent killing.²

The Talmud relates that the individual responsible for killing the murderer, is himself a person who had previously killed inadvertently. However, since the first killing went undetected, he did not feel the necessity to run to a city of refuge. Therefore, Hashem created a similar situation which was detected, thus forcing him to flee to a city of refuge. If so, it would seem that the high incidence of murder has no impact on the high incidence of inadvertent killing, for the murderer who was killed accidentally, needs to be killed by someone who has unintentionally killed in the past. The number of inadvertent murderer would appear to be independent of the number of murderers. Thus, the question still remains.

The Rambam makes a distinction between an "-oness" and a "shogaig". An "oness" is a person who kills someone without the slightest degree of negligence. Such a person is absolved of all responsibility, and is not required to flee to a city of refuge. In the case of a "shogaig", there is a certain degree of negligence, and it is under these circumstances that the perpetrator must flee to a city of refuge.³

The Talmud is teaching us that in an area where there is a high incidence of murder, the populace becomes desensitized to the sanctity of life. Therefore, in these areas there is a higher propensity for

carelessness involving potentially life-threatening acts. The reason why there was a greater need for the cities of refuge on the east bank of the Jordan was that the higher incidence of murder reflected a lack of sensitivity to the sanctity of life and therefore resulted in a higher incidence of killings due to negligence.⁴

1. *Makkos, 10a* 2. *Ibid. See Ramban's commentary to the Torah.* 3. *Rambam, Hilchos Rotzeach 6:1-5* 4. *See Gur Aryeh*
