

TIME ZONE OF REFUGE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 249, May A Daughter Say Kaddish. Good Shabbos!

A Kaddish Story

Since the halacha portion (delivered in the live class, but not included in the e-mail version) of this week's shiur discussed the saying of Kaddish, I would like to begin this portion with a Kaddish story, based on a true (and verifiable) incident which happened a number of years ago.

Rav Gifter was once traveling from Cleveland to Baltimore with a group of students in order to attend a wedding. The routing for their flight was through Pittsburgh and the connecting flight was late. They waited for a long time, until they realized that they would not arrive in Baltimore until well past the time of the Chuppah. Rav Gifter decided that they would be better off boarding the next plane back to Cleveland and passing up on the wedding altogether. However, since it was getting late in the day, they decided to daven Mincha [recite afternoon prayers] at the airport in Pittsburgh.

They did not want to daven in the middle of the terminal, so they found a fellow with a big ring of keys who looked like he worked in the maintenance department and asked him to open up a private room so that they could pray. The man agreed, quickly found a room for them, and they all gathered there to daven Mincha. When they concluded the prayers, the man approached them and asked if someone could teach him to recite Mourner's Kaddish. Someone helped him recite the Kaddish, one word at a time.

Rav Gifter inquired of the man the reason he needed to say Kaddish. The man related the following story:

"Last week my father died. I come from an alienated home that observes nothing. However, I had a dream the other night in which my father appeared to me and told me that he wanted me to say Kaddish for him. I protested to my father that I did not know how to say it or even where to go to recite it. My father told me, during this dream, 'Don't worry. I'll get you a minyan.'"

This is a true story. His father did get him a minyan!

The Month of Elul: A Time Zone of Refuge

This week's parsha contains the mitzvah of the Cities of Refuge. If a person unintentionally kills, he must run to the nearest City of Refuge and remain there until the death of the Kohain Gadol.

The Torah refers to this law in Parshas Mishpatim [Shemos 21:13] as well. "And concerning the one who did not hunt, but G-d brought (the victim) into his hand, and I will setup a place for him to flee there." The Rabbis point out that 4 consecutive words in this verse "...Eenah L'yado V'samti Lecha..." begin with the letters Aleph, Lamed, Vov, Lamed which spell out the name of the month of Elul. This is a hint to the month of Elul, which we are now beginning as a preparation to the High Holy Days.

There is perhaps a more commonly known acronym applied to the letters of the name of this month. Ani L'Dodi V'Dodi Lee ("I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me") [Shir HaShirim 6:3]. This latter acronym seems to be more appropriate. It connotes the fact that in Elul we feel a special closeness to G-d and He reciprocates that feeling.

It seems rather stretched and inappropriate, by comparison, to have a hinted connection between the concept of the City of Refuge, someone who killed by accident having a place to flee, to the month of Elul. What connection could there be?

I recently heard an explanation of this Chaza"l, this saying of our Sages, on a Torah tape from Rabbi Zev Leff, who is a Rav in Eretz Yisroel (formerly of Miami Beach). When a person kills unintentionally we see that he needs some form of atonement. The atonement is going to the City of Refuge and staying there until the Kohain Gadol dies. We can ask two questions: (1) Why does he need atonement -- what did he do wrong, it was an accident! (2) What type of atonement is it to go to the City of Refuge?

The answer must be that if one kills, even by accident, there is an indication that this person does not properly value human life. Had he valued human life the way it should be valued, he would have taken the necessary precautions. It was an accident, but he should have been more careful. Had he valued human life the way it should be valued, he would have been more careful.

One might object -- what does it mean "he doesn't value life" -- doesn't everyone value life?

Unfortunately, there are people who do not value life. If a person does not appreciate what he can do in his lifetime, he does not appreciate life sufficiently. It has always puzzled me that there are people in the world who will put their lives in danger for sporting and fun activities. I do not understand people who jump out of a plane, fall ten thousand feet and at the very last minute pull

the cord, just for fun.

Perhaps it is because they feel that their lives are so empty that they need the fear of death to put meaning in their lives. Perhaps they don't value what one can do in a lifetime.

At the opposite end of the spectrum was Rabbeinu HaKadosh. The Talmud [Avoda Zarah 17a] tells us of the wicked Elazar ben Durdaya who had an inspiration to repent at the end of his life and thereby acquired the World to Come. Concerning this, Rabbi cried and said "A person can acquire his World in a single moment."

It seems strange that Rabbi cried. Was he upset that he himself had to be religious his whole life to acquire the World to Come and this wicked person was admitted with one second's worth of effort? No, that was not why Rabbi cried.

Rabbi saw how much could be accomplished with a single second of effort. If one can get the World to Come with one second of effort, how much more can be accomplished by devoting every second of one's life to such effort. Rabbi cried because he valued life. If one views this world, not as an end in and of itself, but sees Eternities that he can accomplish with this world, then he has a different aspect and a different outlook on life. Life becomes so much more precious.

The person who kills unintentionally doesn't have this appreciation of life. Therefore, his punishment is to go to the City of Refuge. Who lives in the Cities of Refuge? The Levites. What did the Levites do with their time? They devoted themselves to Holy Work. They worked in the Beis HaMikdash. They sang in the Beis HaMikdash. They were the teachers of Torah. The person who killed unintentionally would now have the opportunity to get an appreciation of what one can do with life. Such an experience will forever change the person. Seeing a Levi who spends his morning, afternoon, and evening immersed in Torah and mitzvos will change his view of life.

That is what living in the City of Refuge accomplishes. This is not a jail sentence. The person had a problem. He didn't appreciate life. He didn't value life. He didn't realize what he could accomplish with life. Go to the Levites and see what one can do with life. That is what the City of Refuge accomplishes.

Now we can understand what this has to do with the month of Elul. That which the City of Refuge is supposed to be in space, the month of Elul is supposed to be in time. Just like there is a city of refuge to which one can run and contemplate what life is all about, the month of Elul is the month of refuge in which one must also contemplate what he can do with his or her life.

In less than a month we will get up and request "Remember us for Life... Inscribe us for Life...". G-d says, "Before you ask for Life, I want you to spend a month in a Time Zone of Refuge to reflect what life is really about."

The only way to enter Rosh HaShanah is by first contemplating what life is really about. People who are in a Yeshiva have the benefit of hearing ethical lectures about the importance of the month of

Elul, the davening becomes slower, and life slows down. One comes into the High Holidays with somewhat of a preparation.

I hear constantly from people who have recently left Yeshiva that the most difficult adjustment they have, when they are out in the working world, is that 'there is no month of Elul'. That is unfortunately the lot of so many of us. But we have to slow down and set aside time to think about life. Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur are holidays that one cannot enter unprepared.

That is what Elul is about. We enter into a Time Zone of Refuge to contemplate the value of Life.

Glossary

halacha --- (Jewish) law

hashkafa --- thought (philosophy)

daven (Mincha) --- pray (afternoon prayers)

Kaddish --- prayer of Sanctification, recited by mourners (as well as by the Prayer leader) at specific points in a public service.

Kohain Gadol --- High Priest

drasha --- homiletic exegesis

Beis HaMikdash --- Temple

Sources and Personalities

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (#249). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: May A Daughter Say Kaddish? The other halachic portions for Parshas Shoftim from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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