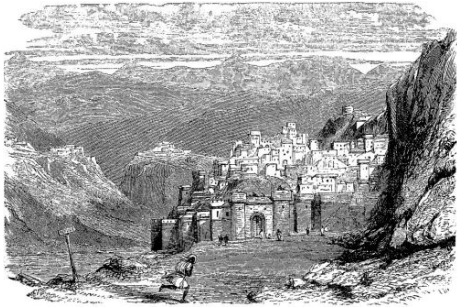


CITIES OF REFUGE

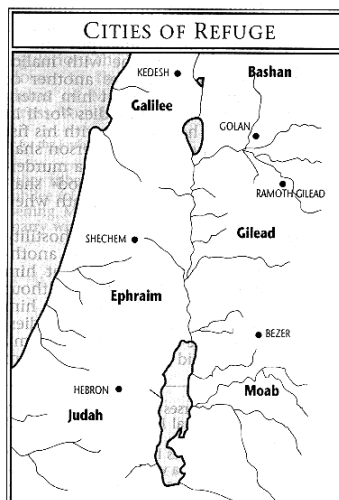


Numbers 35:9-34 discusses the Cities of Refuge.

According to Torah, Yahweh had commanded that the Levites would not receive any land in Eretz Yisrael but they would receive cities and they would also dwell in the cities of the rest of the Israelites.

The Levites would receive 42 cities of their own and an additional 6 cities of refuge. We see this in Numbers 35:6. The names of three of the cities are listed in Deuteronomy 4:43 and the other three are listed in Joshua 20:7.

Three of the cities are on the East side of the Jordan. They are Betzer, Ramoth and Golan (Deut. 4:43). The cities on the West side of the Jordan are Qedesh, Shekem, and Hebron (Josh. 20:7).



THE PURPOSE OF THE CITIES OF REFUGE

Simply put, the cities of refuge would be a place for someone who has committed an unintentional killing to escape to. According to ancient Hebrew thinking, there were four general possibilities when someone kills someone else. These possibilities exclude military service which would fall into another category all together.

1. The killing was completely accidental. The killer is considered blameless and is absolved (more or less) of the responsibility of the killing. This is not murder. He still must go to the City of Refuge.
2. The killing was unintentional but caused by carelessness on the part of the killer. The killer would be exiled to the Cities of Refuge.
3. The killing was intentional or murder. The killer deliberately sought to kill the person and did so even though he would have known that killing was wrong. The killing must be properly witnessed. The penalty is death.
4. The circumstances of the killing cannot be determined or the court cannot carry out the death penalty. This is often called “unintentional, but close to intentional”. This killing is too grave to be absolved by exile. Today this would be called second degree manslaughter.

In all of these cases, the court must decide which applies.

These laws concerning the Cities of Refuge would apply to all Israelites and all resident aliens or settlers in their midst. (Numbers 35:15).

THE “AVENGER OF BLOOD”.



In the ANE (Ancient Near East), a close relative of the victim had the right to kill the killer. He was allowed to do this even before the court heard the case. The Hebrew words here are *Goel hadam* or literally “redeemer of blood”.

In the ANE, all members of the clan or tribe were regarded as being of one blood, but the chief responsibility for avenging shed blood devolved upon the victim’s next-of-kin, who might under other circumstances be called on to redeem the property or person of a poor or captive relative

(*Vayikrah* (Leviticus) 25:25, 47-49; *Root* (Ruth) 4:1ff., though in the latter case other factors were involved also).

THE DEFINITION OF MURDER

Numbers 35:16-23 define what Yahweh considers murder. Notice that Yahweh is considering the implement used, the intention of the perpetrator, and how the act was carried out.

If, for example, a man were to take an iron rod, lie in wait for someone he was mad at, and then strike him forcefully on the head – that is murder.

On the other hand, if that same man were to strike his adversary with a pillow or were to toss a tiny pebble at him and he died some how, he would not be liable for death. The pillow or pebble would not be a weapon that would cause death under most normal circumstances.

Verses 22 and 23 show us accidents that could cause someone to die.

The key is in verse 24 – the ASSEMBLY shall judge between the assailant and the avenger of blood. This word “Assembly” or “congregation” is understood to be the court representing the people.

MORE THEN ONE WITNESS

Numbers 35:30 clearly tells us that in the case of a capital crime, MORE THEN one witness must testify. Furthermore, this states that the crime of murder (and later other capital crimes) must be proved by valid witnesses and not by other evidence.

THE SERIOUSNESS OF MURDER

Yahweh is serious about murder. In Numbers 35:31 and 32, He does not allow someone to buy their way out of punishment for murder. Ransom is allowed for such things as an ox killing a person and then the owner of the ox can make a payment (Exodus 21:29-30). However, a murderer cannot do this.

BEMIDBAR (NUMBERS) 35:33

And do not profane the land where you are, for blood profanes the land, and the land is not pardoned for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it.

Murder puts a “Blood Guilt” on the Land. The ONLY way that there can be atonement for the blood is that the one that murdered is put to death. The Land cannot be contaminated with shed blood because Yahweh lives in the Land.

Question – does that apply today to the Land of Israel? If so, that means that all the Palestinian terrorists that have killed anyone in the Land must be put to death. Would that also apply to the Irgund of 1948 who used terrorist bombings of British installations as a tool? Yes.

THE JOB OF THE LEVITES

Let’s look back at this Cities of Refuge at a deeper level. The “accidental killer” must flee to a City of Refuge rather than some place within the city where he lives. He will put himself in danger of getting caught on the highway by the avenger of blood.

It seems that the reason that he must go to these cities is because the Levites are there. What is the significance of the Levites?

The Levites were in 100% full time ministry. Their JOB was ministry. Their responsibility before Yahweh was ministry. They were to be the Kohanim and from them would come the Kohan Gadol. From the Levites would also come the Judges of the people and the courts. Almost one half of the commandments in Torah applied to the Levites or their ministry.

The Levites were to pray for all of Israel. Notice that on Yom Kippur, the Kohan Gadol made atonement for Israel – that was his job. He would have to constantly pray for Israel that they would follow Torah.

The Levites were responsible for teaching Israel Torah and how to follow it. They were what we would today call rabbis. They were shepherds. And Yahweh speaks a great deal about how the shepherds scattered Yahweh's sheep in Jeremiah 23. Yahshua also teaches about shepherds or the Levites. He knew that there were shepherds or rabbis that were leading the sheep in the path of Torah and there were also shepherds that were leading the sheep astray.

Even someone who accidentally killed someone was not free to just go about his business as if nothing happened. The cities of refuge were not jails, nor were they mere detention camps. They were environments in which reckless people became aware that careless actions have serious ramifications. They were constantly under the influence of their neighbors, the Levites. They would observe them pray, learn, and teach others. The “detainee” would be a part of these teachings and prayer.

The Levites are so much a part of the rehabilitation process that the Talmud (Bavli) explains that the Kohan Gadol is culpable for each accidental killing. Had he prayed that no stumbling blocks come before the Israelite people, perhaps this crime would not have taken place.

UNTIL THE KOHAN GADOL DIES ...

In Numbers 35:28, we read that the “accidental killer” shall remain in the City of Refuge until the death of the Kohan Gadol then he is free to return to his own city.

According to Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky of Project Genesis:

“The sentence imposed on the killers was also very unique. It was not defined by time, but rather by circumstance. The killers would go free only when the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) would die. The Talmud in Makos tells us that the Kohen Gadol's family members were quite worried. They were not concerned that there would be an assassination plot against the Kohen Gadol's life. They were worried that the convicts would pray that the Kohen Gadol would die before his due time, thus releasing them early. In order to dissuade them, the mother of the Kohen Gadol would distribute food and clothing to the inmates to deter them from praying that her son to die.”

“The mission of the Kohen Gadol's mother was not just to distribute food. It was to develop a bond with those people whose carelessness spurred a death. They saw the love a parent had for her son as she subconsciously plead with the inmates to spare her child. They saw how a total stranger, despite her great esteem, would make sure that their needs in the city of refuge were cared for. They may have even thought of the loved one they killed and his family.”

The understanding here is that prayer is so powerful.

MESSIANIC IMPLICATIONS

A common complaint among Jewish people is that Torah calls for only animal sacrifices for sin. Or, only the death of an animal will accomplish the propitiation for sin. Here we see that the sin of murder (accidental murder) is “forgiven” at the death of a man anointed by Yahweh.

The High Priest atones for Israel’s sins by his temple service. He also atones for sins (unpremeditated murder) upon his death. The exile does not expiate the crime, only the death of the High Priest (mishnah makot 2:6 Tamudi Makot 11b & Lev Rabba 10:6) This is not talking about animals. But a specific person. The High Priest was anointed like the Messiah.

There are other Messianic implications hidden deep within Hebraic thinking.

According to Talmud, Messiah will return and gather all of Israel to the Land and He will add the Three Cities of Refuge (on the east side of the Jordan). According to Talmud, when Mashiach comes that will be a time in which the commandments of the Torah will attain completeness.

There are two things being said here. There will still be Cities of Refuge to purge the Land of Blood Guilt. And the return of Messiah brings about a completeness of the commandments. This is in Talmud.

THE CITIES OF REFUGE AND THE MONTH OF TESHUVAH

The Cities of Refuge that Messiah will create are physical places on the earth. There are also Cities of Refuge, as it were, in time. Yahweh has given us times in His calendar for certain events. The High Holy Days of Yom Teruah and Yom Kippur are preceded by a month of teshuvah. The Sages relate the physical Cities of Refuge to the time of teshuvah. Yahweh has made this provision in His calendar so that we can have a refuge or haven every year.

The purpose of teshuvah would be to change our ways from disobeying Torah to obeying Torah. We are, according to Talmud, taking refuge in Torah or the Word of Yahweh. This Word of Yahweh is represented by Yahshua who is the WORD – John 1:1.

It is understood that Messiah is the Living Torah or the Word of Yahweh and therefore a refuge or haven. When Yahshua was talking to the woman at the well in our Brit Hadashah portion, He states that He is Messiah in John 4:26.

Notice that this encounter is taking place in Shekem or one of the Cities of Refuge. The fact that Shekem was a City of Refuge was not lost on the woman at the well and the people that He later taught (John 4:39-43).

My question is – where were the Levites of the City of Shekem? Were they just absent or were they listening? Shekem was not a part of Judah and was an Ephraim City but did it have Levites still living there?