

MATOS (NUMBERS 30:2-36:13)

Say a Little Prayer for Me

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

The travels of the Israelites in the desert are coming to an end. Moses has been told whom to put in charge of the distribution of the parcels of land in Canaan. Twelve of the thirteen tribes (the Tribe of Joseph has been divided into two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh) will receive land. The Tribe of Levi will not. The Levites are to be given 48 Levitical cities within the borders of the various tribes. Six of these cities are to be cities of refuge.

The Torah provides for capital punishment for certain crimes under specific circumstances. (A discussion of the rarity of capital punishment and its significance is beyond the scope of this week's message. See "A Capital Idea".) Whenever a homicide takes place, the perpetrator is to immediately flee to a city of refuge. This city was run by the Levites as a place for killers to live. As long as the killer stayed in the city of refuge, he would be protected from the *Goel Hadam* – "blood avenger", a relative of the victim who, as the name implies, was out for blood. The murder suspect was then given a protective escort to his trial. If he was found guilty of "Murder 1," he was executed. If it was determined that the slaying was accidental, he was returned to a life in exile in a city of refuge.

How long a sentence did one serve for manslaughter? That was dependent upon a factor that had no apparent relationship to the criminal or the crime: "*He must dwell in the city of refuge until the death of the Kohain Gadol* (High Priest). *After the death of the Kohain Gadol, the killer may return to the land of his possession.*" (Numbers, 35:28)

WHY ARE WE PICKING ON THE HIGH PRIEST? How do you think it made the *Kohain Gadol* feel to know that several convicts were eagerly anticipating his demise? (The Talmud tells us that it was customary for the mother of the High Priest to distribute food and gifts to the "detainees" in the refuge cities in the hope that they wouldn't pray for her son to die.) What did HE do wrong?

The Talmud (Makkos, 11a) points out that in one respect, he WAS at fault. Every Yom Kippur, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, and prayed for the welfare of his people. The hallmark of the priesthood is Peace. In the Priestly Blessing, the *Kohanim* ask G-d to grant us peace. (See "Blessing the Blessers".) What went wrong? How could this tragedy have happened? If the *Kohain* had prayed sufficiently, says the Talmud, this catastrophe could have been avoided. As the spiritual leader of the nation, the High Priest bears some of the responsibility. Therefore, the killer sits in exile until the *Kohain Gadol's* death.

This is an amazing concept. Apparently, the *Kohain* is taken to task for not praying adequately. The Torah is telling us that through our prayers, we (sometimes) have the power to influence events. Had the *Kohain* prayed more intensely, had he expressed more concern in pleading to G-d for his people, such a terrible event MIGHT not have occurred. (This is not to say that every tragedy is due to not praying enough; every prayer is answered; sometimes the answer is "No.")

We all know of situations where people have difficulties. Some folks struggle to make ends meet. We should pray for them. The world is filled with people who are challenged, saddened, and heartbroken. We need to pray for them. Life is frightening for our brethren in Israel. We MUST pray for them.

Isn't it amazing? We see someone sneeze, and we automatically say, "G-d bless you." Yet, when we see someone with a handicap, what do we do? We look away!!?

We don't have enough money to solve everyone's financial problems. But G-d does. We don't have the medical capabilities to heal every sick person. But G-d does. We don't have the time or emotional ability to fix every broken heart. But G-d does. SO WHY DON'T WE ASK HIM????!!

(Just for the record, praying for someone doesn't exempt us from doing our utmost to help. "Why should I give him charity? I already asked G-d to help him!" :-))

The Talmud (Megillah, 27B) tells us that when someone wishes us well, we should respond, "*V'chen l'Mar*" – ("The same to you"). If you pray for me, the least I can do is to pray for you. G-d listens in on all our conversations; you never know when He is most receptive to a prayer.

Someday, Tisha B'Av will be a day of feasting and celebration, rather than a day of fasting and sorrow. Let us all pray that day will come soon.

May G-d bless you all.

Have a great Shabbos.

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