

Drash for Shabbat Vaetchanan/Nachamu

by Elissa Erly

In some ways this summer is very different than any we have experienced in the past, and I know I really don't need to say much on that subject. Thankfully, in some ways, this summer is very much the same as usual. Monsoon rains bring us relief from oppressive heat, we rejoice in beautiful sunsets and rainbows, and we dine al fresco. And for me, for a second summer in a row, I prepared a drash on the same Torah portion! This presented me with a bit of a challenge, since I had already written about the consequences of Moses not following God's specific direction regarding bringing forth water from a stone. Then I came upon Deuteronomy 4.41-42:

"Then Moses set aside three cities on the east side of the Jordan to which a manslayer could escape, one who unwittingly slew a fellow man without having been hostile to him in the past; he could flee to one of these cities and live."

The purpose of these cities of refuge was to protect an individual who had taken a life, without intent or malice, from becoming a victim of blood vengeance by the family of the victim. The refugee would be punished by being forced to live out their days away from their home, their family, their community... sort of like being in a witness protection program. Only upon the death of the High Priest who had ruled during the time of the crime, could the refuge safely return to his or her home and be guaranteed to live safely from blood vengeance.

So what was to protect the High Priest from being murdered by a family of the refugee to shorten the period of isolation? The story goes that a mother of a high priest routinely delivered food and clothing to the refugees in an attempt to spoil them. Her hope was to avoid having prayers said for the death of her son. If she was really successful, the refugees might so enjoy their new privileged lifestyle that they would pray for a long life for the High Priest.

This summer, isolated from our friends, family, and community, we are refugees seeking to avoid the culpability of becoming unwitting manslaughterers by infecting others with a deadly virus. And we are the High Priest, imposing an expectation of isolation on others. But we are also the mother of the High Priest; it is each of our duty to take care of our fellow refugees, to make the burden of exile lighter on each of us through acts of kindness, connection, and comfort.

Shabbat Shalom!