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### Fugitives & the Beit HaMikdash

When my father came to America in 1949 on the RMS Queen Elizabeth, the largest ocean liner in the world, among his fellow passengers was Winston Churchill, (then leader of the opposition) on his way to a week of meetings in New York. Because my father was so young and so small he was able to make his way through the crowds and past the security guards to stand just a few feet away from Churchill. When he told this story to me decades later - something he did frequently, he would add, “he was the greatest man I ever met.” Sometimes he would say, “except for Rav Aharon Kotler” which is a story for another occasion.

Winston Churchill does not need my praise and my father was not unusual in holding him in high esteem, but I feel a special gratitude to the British people under his leadership for the lives of nearly every member of my family who survived the Second World War. As the clouds darkened over Jewish life in Germany in the 1930s most members of my family were able to escape. Several of my grandfather's sisters and brothers were able to make their way to England. My father and grandmother were the last to join them there in 1939. Several of my grandfather's sisters made their way to *Eretz Yisrael*. One brother made his way here before the war. But every surviving member of my family survived because they were protected behind the front line of an allied army. They did not survive because they were more brave or more clever or more prescient. They survived because General Alexander stopped the Germans from reaching Eretz Yisrael at the Battle of El Alamein. They survived because the British people, led by their prime minister and inspired by the personal example of the royal family, withstood the air assault during the Battle of Britain. I often think of the full year, from the fall of Paris in June 1940 until the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, when Britain alone fought against Nazism in Europe. Churchill summarized British bravery by saying “Never... was so much ...owed by so many to so few.” And I consider myself among those who owe so much.

The Torah portion of Ki Teitzei has more mitzvot than any other weekly Torah portion and so it can be easy to miss one that occupies only one or two verses but each and every mitzvah is its own universe and deserves careful study. In Chapter 23 we are told about the prohibition against returning a fugitive slave to the master from whom he escaped:

לֹא־תִסְגִּיר עֶבֶד אֶל־אֲדֹנָיו אֲשֶׁר־נִצַּל אֵלָיךָ מֵעַם אֲדֹנָיו:

You shall not turn over to his master a slave who seeks refuge with you from his master.

Many medieval commentaries focus on the context of this mitzvah in the midst of other mitzvot that concern warfare. Ramban therefore explains that there are pragmatic reasons to welcome refugees. If they are sent back to their prior homes they can reveal secrets to our foreign adversaries. Hizkuni points out that many fugitive slaves take advantage of the chaos of war to escape their servitude.

But the Torah points to a different context for understanding this mitzvah. The next verse teaches us:

עֲמִידָה יֵשֵׁב בְּקִרְבְּךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־יִבְחַר בְּאַחַד שְׁעָרֶיךָ בְּטוֹב לֹא לֹא תוֹנְנוּ: {ס}

He shall live with you in any place he may choose among the settlements in your midst, wherever he pleases; you must not ill-treat him

The Torah tells us that this fugitive slave can choose any city in Israel to settle. But the Torah does so using language that should attract our attention. The fugitive slave can live *בְּמִקְוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר* in the place that he shall choose. This is a direct echo of a phrase that appears dozens of times in Sefer Devarim in a very different context. The phrase *בְּמִקְוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר* is the Torah's way of referring to the place that God shall choose to have God's name rest. It is how Sefer Devarim refers to the future selection of Yerushalayim as the home for the Beit HaMikdash and the place where God's very presence rests.

What emerges from this comparison is that the Torah is drawing our attention to two types of choices which both demand our respect. God's choice of where the Beit HaMikdash will be built - surrounding the most exclusive location on earth where the most elevated human being, the Kohen Gadol, enters on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur. And the choice of the fugitive slave to make a new home for himself among us in a place that he shall choose where he feels safe.

As we build Jewish communities we should keep those models in mind. A shul is a "mikdash me'at" it is a small scale beit hamikdash where we dedicate ourselves to the service of God and we try our hardest to faithfully abide by all the rules and customs that allow the sacred nature of this space to be manifest. But a shul also has to be a place of refuge. A sacred community, a kehilah kedoshah, is also one where the most vulnerable and most marginalized and most victimized can find safety and support and community.

When my father was a child, the most vulnerable people on earth were Jews like him. Today there are many millions of people around the world who are facing similar dangers to those faced by our parents and grandparents. I have been proud to read Governor Pritzker's remarks upon welcoming asylum seekers bussed to Chicago this week from the Southern border:

Illinois welcomes refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants and we are working with federal and city officials to ensure that these individuals are treated with respect and safety as they look to connect with their family and friends," Pritzker said. "My great-grandfather came to this country as an immigrant fleeing Ukraine in 1881. Immigrants just like my family seeking freedom and opportunity built this country. Illinois is and has always been a welcoming state."

We face east towards Yerushalayim three times every day when we pray because God chose that location. The Torah tells us that the choice of the fugitive of a place to live among us is no less sacrosanct.