

Parshat Shoftim 5780

Our parasha details the command to establish cities of refuge so that *"anyone who has killed may flee there."*^[1] These cities serve as a place of sanctuary where a murderer can seek refuge from a blood relative of the victim who may be pursuing him- as he is entitled - to avenge his death. After the trial, if the killing was deemed to be intentional than the murderer would be put to death, but if it was decided that the killing was unintentional due to a degree of negligence, then these cities of refuge served as a prison, where the inadvertent killer was exiled until the death of the Kohen Gadol: *"The congregation shall restore him to the city of his refuge to where he fled, and he shall stay there until the death of the Kohen Gadol."*^[2]

The Gemara^[3] describes how the mothers of the High Priests would provide those exiled to these cities of refuge with food and clothing so they wouldn't pray for their sons to die. But why would the mothers be afraid of these men's prayers -men who after all were killers -compared to the prayers of the Kohen Gadol? Furthermore, how could the mothers imagine that providing these prisoners with provisions would stop them praying for the Kohen Gadol's death and their freedom?

^[1] Devarim 19:3

^[2] Bamidbar 35:28

^[3] Makot 11a

Rabbi Eliezer Biderman explains that this is an illustration of how powerful prayer is, no matter who it is that is praying.

Even though these men have killed innocent people, their prayers still have immense power because they come from the depths of their hearts. They may be praying for the death of a great Tzadik but their prayers stem from a broken heart. The strength of prayer depends on two things - on sincerity and the realisation that only God can help. It is this type of prayer that the mothers feared.

Did the mothers' really think that giving these prisoners provisions would stop them praying for the High Priest to die? Of course, they would continue to pray for their freedom and the death of the Kohen Gadol, but their prayers wouldn't have the same passion. The gratitude that they felt towards the mothers meant that their prayers would be less heartfelt. And once the prayers lose that level of intensity the mothers didn't need to fear their prayers any more.

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