

D'var Torah:

Matot-Massei

Office of The
CHIEF RABBI

What difference does it make where we live?



Video transcript: The maths doesn't add up. In Parshat Maasei we're told how six cities of refuge were established for our people: three which were to be west of the River Jordan, in Israel proper, and three in Transjordan, called Ever HaYarden, east of the River Jordan. These were cities which were wisely established for people guilty of homicide. There was a danger that family members of the victim might seek revenge, and so the person who had killed somebody inadvertently needed to flee for his or her safety to a city of refuge.

But the maths doesn't add up. Because in Israel proper there were nine and a half tribes, and in Transjordan there were only two and a half tribes: Reuven, Gad and half the tribe of Menashe. So why would there be three cities of refuge on each side?

The Talmud explains that outside of the holy territory of the land of Israel, people had less respect for the sanctity of life, therefore there was a greater need for cities of refuge in that area.

Reb Itzele of Volozhin, a great 19th century scholar, adds a further dimension.

He talks about the primary problem being the threat from members of the family of the victim. Outside of the land of Israel they wanted to seek revenge but inside Israel proper, they were more likely to consider: seeing as one person has already died, what sense will it make for another person to die? These people therefore controlled their urges. As a result there were fewer people who came into the category of 'goel hadam' - somebody seeking to take revenge.

From here emerges a hugely important lesson for all of us. It's all about the impact of our surroundings. Our environment sets a tone for our lives. I believe that there are two primary messages here.

First of all we should carefully select where we live where we raise our children because the influences of our environment will always have an impact on us. Secondly and more importantly, let us also guarantee that within our own family circles the tone of morality and ethics that we establish will be such that those growing up within the family will be committed to leading a responsible life.

If we see to it that our homes are a place of kedusha, of much sanctity, that will hopefully make all the difference to the ways of life of those within them. Shabbat shalom.

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