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Six Cities of Refuge

19: 1-13

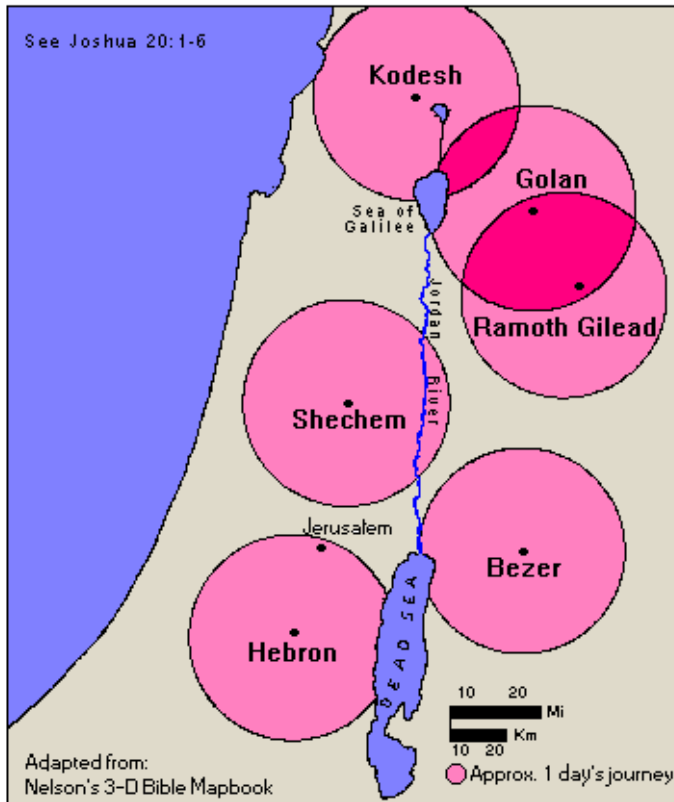
Six cities of refuge DIG: What are the cities of refuge? What was their function? Who were the ones who would judge these cases? Why was that important? What geographical guidelines were given for these cities? How were these cities an inheritance for everyone? Why distinguish between intentional and unintentional murder? Isn't murder still murder? How do these cities honor God and human life? What promise and penalty is linked with the use and abuse of these cities? Was the murderer to be protected in these cities of refuge?

REFLECT: How many blessings of ADONAI do you think you have received because you have obeyed the teachings of the Scriptures? If you have missed out on some blessings in the past, you can change that today by reading, understanding, and following God's Word. Has anger or hatred ever hindered your being conformed into the image of Messiah? How so? How did that work for you? How did it end? Has it ended? How do these cities of refuge point us to the Messiah? How did those cities illustrate our salvation by contrast?

Moses gives special attention to the issue of blood revenge since this was a common practice in the ancient nomadic societies.

Deuteronomy 19:1 to 26:15 (to see link click [DI](#) - The Social and Family Mitzvot) deals with individual mitzvot, and to today's readers they might appear irrelevant at first, but the very principles behind these commandments were the ones that have brought dignity to mankind. We need to examine these mitzvot in depth to discover the spirit in which they were given, so that we can still live in obedience to **God's Word** today. For example, in **Numbers 18**, the **Israelites** were to bring **their tithes** to the Tabernacle because **the priests** and **Levites** had **no inheritance**. But today we have no Temple and no priesthood; however, we bring our tithes to our place of worship. That is the spirit of the mitzvah.

Cities of Refuge



Therefore, after **Chapter 18**, where **the Israelites** were told about **the Prophet** to come (who would be **the Messiah**), here in **Chapter 19**, **the Ten Words** (see [Bk - The Ten Words](#)) are resumed, and **Moses** illustrates the sixth commandment (see [Bq - Do Not Murder](#)). But **Moshe** does it in a beautiful way. **He** does not begin with instructions about how to catch a **murderer**; or how to punish a **murderer**. **He** begins with a concern about the one who kills accidentally. **Murder** is a great tragedy, but because we do not live in Paradise, in an imperfect world where accidents happen, people can find themselves guilty of killing someone accidentally. **ADONAI** looked with grace upon such a one a gave **Isra'el** a remedy.⁴¹³

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for being such a wonderful and caring **Father**! Praise **You** for sacrificing the blood of **Your Son Yeshua**. **God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (Second Corinthians 5:21)**. **He** is our refuge that we run to from the awful punishment of death that each of us deserve **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)**. Praise **You** that when we believe in **Your Son** and make **Him** our **Lord**, then you*

make us **Your children** and give us **eternal life** (**John 1:12**).

You have said that the important thing is not knowledge of **Yeshua**, or even doing good deeds of service in **His name**. **Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers" (Matthew 7:22-23)! What You do desire and what gets a person into heaven - is a heart that loves You first and foremost in their life. Jesus replied: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37-38). We do love You and our greatest joy in heaven will be praising Your great name and spending time with You. In Yeshua's holy name and power of His resurrection. Amen**

The instituting of **the cities of refuge** seems to be an expansion of the simpler mitzvah contained in **Exodus 21:12-14**, where **Ha'Shem** appointed a place where one could run, presumably at **the horns of the bronze altar**, and offered protection to **the manslayer**, but not to the **murderer (First Kings 2:28-35)**. As **the Israelites** took possession of **the Promised Land**, however, the Sanctuary and **the horns of the bronze altar** would be located far away from the majority of the population. Therefore, **cities of refuge**, strategically located throughout **the Land**, would replace this particular function of the Sanctuary and **the horns of the bronze altar**.⁴¹⁴

Numbers 35:9-28 provides for **six cities of refuge**, chosen from **the 48 Levitical cities** in both the Transjordan, and in the area west of **the Jordan River**, appointed by **Isra'el** when **they** had conquered the Promised Land. **Three cities of refuge: Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan**, have already been referred to briefly in **Deuteronomy** (see **Bg - Three Cities of Refuge**), in which **they** were set aside to serve those tribes residing east of **the Jordan Valley**. The present passage resumes that theme, and the picture is completed with **Joshua 20:7-9**, which incorporates elements from both **Numbers 35, Deuteronomy 4 and 19**.⁴¹⁵

The establishment of those privileged sanctuaries among **the cities of the Levites** is probably traceable to the idea that **the Levites** would be the most suitable and impartial judges, that their presence and counsels might calm or restrain the stormy passions of **the blood avenger**. By their consecration as priests, **the Levites** were mediators between **the Israelites** and **YHVH**. As such, **they** would have been gifted to calmly mediate between the attacker and the victim's family, ensuring that no further **bloodshed** would occur.⁴¹⁶

The cities (1-3): When **ADONAI your God** cuts off the nations whose land **ADONAI your God** is giving you, and you take their place and settle in their

cities and houses, you are to set aside three additional cities for yourselves in your Land that ADONAI your God is giving you to possess. Divide the territory of your land, which ADONAI your God is having you inherit, into three parts; and prepare the roads, so that any killer can flee easily to these cities (19:1-3). Joshua later identified these cities as **Kodesh** in Galilee (in the northern region), **Shechem** in Ephraim (in the central region), and **Hebron** in Judah (in the southern region). The people are to make sure that these **six cities** are accessible to all **Israelites** in case a **murder** took place, so **he** could flee to one of those **cities** of refuge to escape the revenge of **his next-of-kin**. **The sages teach that there were signs at all the crossroads pointing the way to the nearest city of refuge. ADONAI wanted to make it easier for the innocent manslayer to escape the vengeance of hateful people.**

The accidental death (4-7): If someone kills another person accidentally (Hebrew: da'at), **without previous hostility, the slayer may flee to any of these cities to live in safety (19:4 NLT).** The killer is innocent, and thus, anyone who **kills him** spills innocent **blood**. ADONAI, watching from heaven, is primarily concerned with the human heart. If the killing was **accidental, God considered the killer innocent.**

An example would be if a man goes into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood and takes a stroke with the axe to fell a tree, but the head of the axe flies off the handle, hits his neighbor and kills him. Then he is to flee to one of these cities and live there. Otherwise, the next-of-kin avenger (Hebrew: *go'el haddam*), in the heat of his anger, may pursue the killer, overtake him because the distance [to the city of refuge] is long, and strike him dead - even though he didn't deserve to die, inasmuch as he hadn't hated him in the past. This is why I am ordering you to set aside for yourselves three more cities (19:5-7).

The accidental killer was to flee to the nearest **city of refuge**. There, **he** would be safe until all the facts of the case could be examined, and tempers could cool. **He** would wait until a trial was held to determine **his** guilt or innocence. If found innocent, **he** was allowed to live safely in **the city of refuge until the death of the high priest** in Jerusalem. So, even though **he** was declared innocent of **murder, he** still paid a steep price for accidentally killing another human being. If **he** left **the city of refuge** before **the high priest died, he** could legally be killed by **the next-of-kin** of the victim and the elders of that Levitical **city** wouldn't protect **him (Numbers 35:27).**

In judging the case, there was one thing that the Levitical judges needed to look for. **Hate**. If there was **hate**, the person was most likely guilty. **Yeshua Himself** linked murder to

hatred in the Sermon on the Mount (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Da - The Sermon on the Mount](#)): **You have heard it said to those of old, “You shall not murder, and whoever commits murder shall be subject to judgment.” But I tell you that everyone who is angry with [hates] his brothers shall be subject to judgment. And whoever says to his brother, “Raca” shall be subject to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” shall be subject to fiery Gehenna (Matthew 5:21-22).** Here **Yeshua** brings us right to the core of **the Torah** and reveals to us the source of **murder**, which is **anger**, which is **hatred**. This **anger** will grow into **hatred**, and when full grown, the person is convinced that **murder** is the only solution to the problem. It was that thing that the judges of **Isra’el** were asked to look for.⁴¹⁷

The murderer (19:8-13): If **the Israelites** had been faithful in following **YHVH**, then **He** would have **expanded their territory** to the boundaries promised to **Abraham** (see the commentary on [Genesis Eg - I am the LORD, Who Brought You Out of Ur of the Chaldeans to Give You This Land](#)). When **ADONAI your God** expands your territory, as **He** swore to your ancestors that **He** would, and gives you all the Land **He** promised to give to your ancestors - provided you keep and observe all **these mitzvot I am giving you today, loving ADONAI your God and always following His ways - then you are to add three more cities for yourselves, besides these (19:9).** But **they** missed out on the blessings of **God** because **they** did not follow the Scriptures. **Isra’el** would not have been the same, then or today, if **she** had pursued **God’s** Torah, **His** teaching.

So that innocent blood will not be shed in the land ADONAI your God is giving you as an inheritance, and thus blood guilt be on you (19:10). Here, **Moses** emphatically states that to allow a **manslayer** to be put to death, would be the same as **the shedding of innocent blood** by a premeditated murderer. The basic principle is thus stated: *the innocent should not be punished, and the guilty should not go unpunished.*⁴¹⁸

The murderer still might flee to one of **the cities of refuge**, but **he** would not be protected there. **However, if someone hates his fellow member of the community, lies in wait for him, attacks him, strikes him a death blow, and then flees into one of these cities, the leaders of his own town are to bring him back from there and hand him over to the next-of-kin avenger to be put to death. You are not to pity him** (see the commentary on [Genesis Cz - Whoever Sheds Human Blood, by Humans Shall Their Blood Be Shed](#)). **Rather, you must put an end to the shedding of innocent blood in Isra’el. Then things will go well with you (19:11-13).** The reason for the stern action was to remove the stain from **the Land** which resulted from **the shedding of**

innocent blood; since **the LORD** was believed to dwell in the midst of **His** people, **the Land** was not to be defiled.⁴¹⁹

This is a major problem today. The law generally ignores the pain and suffering of the victims and their family, and worries more about the rights of the criminals. Today people say, "How does killing the murderer **purge innocent blood**?" The modern judgment seems to ask, "Who is the 'innocent person'?" The victim is already dead, and the only one now left is this poor murderer who will now suffer in jail for 10 or 20 years, and be released. Let us help this poor murderer and not **avenge the innocent blood** that he shed on **the ground**. But when **YHVH** spoke to **Cain**, He said: **What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to Me from the ground. So now, cursed are you from the ground which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand (Genesis 4:10).**

I realize that this is not so politically correct for the eyes and ears of the world today. Some people might say the language of the Word of **God** here is to be understood figuratively. However, as long as the murderer is not brought to justice, it is as if **the blood** of the victim is exposed to **the ground**. In other words, **the ground** does not accept it, and this **blood** is not covered. **The blood** that is not covered and not avenged continues to be a curse to the murderer and to the collective community, and the curse stays on **the ground** until it is avenged. **Yeshua, Himself**, demonstrated this principle (**Matthew 23:34-36**). Therefore, the Word of **God** says: **You must show him no pity.**⁴²⁰

The cities of refuge point us to **the Messiah**, in whom sinners find a refuge from the destroyer of our souls. Just as the guilty person sought **refuge** in **the cities** set up for that purpose, we flee to **Yeshua** for refuge from sin (**Hebrews 6:18**). We run to **Messiah** to escape the danger we are in from the curse and condemnation of Torah, from the wrath of **God**, and from an eternity in hell. Only **the Lord** provides **refuge** from these things, and it is to **Him** alone that we must run. Just as **the cities** were open to all who fled to **them** for safety, it is **Messiah** who provides safety to all who come to **Him** for refuge from sin and its punishment. **For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life** (**John 3:16**).⁴²¹

But just as those **cities of refuge** illustrate our salvation in **Yeshua Messiah** to whom **we have fled for refuge to take hold of the hope set before us (Hebrews 6:18)**, they also do so by contrast. **The man** who fled in **Isra'el** did so because **he** wasn't guilty of premeditated **murder**, but we flee because we *are* guilty and deserve to be judged. Nobody has to investigate our case because we know we have sinned and deserve the punishment of

Ha'Shem. In the case of **the cities of refuge**, the innocent **man** was allowed to live, but in our case, **Yeshua Messiah**, the innocent **One**, was condemned to die. **The Israelite** had to remain in **the city of refuge**, for if he left it, he might die at the hand of an avenger. The salvation we have in **Messiah** isn't conditioned on our obedience, but depends wholly on **His** grace and promises. **I give them eternal life! They will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father who has given them to Me, is greater than them all. And no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one (John 10:28:30).** Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in **Messiah Yeshua (Romans 8:1)**. The Israelite manslayer could legally leave **the city of refuge** after the death of the high priest, but our **High Priest** in heaven will never die and lives forever **to make intercession for us, "Therefore, He is able to save completely those who draw near to God through Him, always living to make intercession for us" (Hebrews 7:25).**⁴²²