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Those Qualified to Flee to a City of Refuge

35: 22-34

Those qualified to flee to a city of refuge DIG: What was their function? Why was the innocent manslayer to stay in the city of refuge until the high priest died? Can a court of law set aside the Torah in order to be merciful? Why is it that ADONAI is the only one who can forgive sin?

REFLECT: How does the death of the high priest cancel the blood debt? What does this teach us about the Messiah? When you have conflicts with other believers, how do you resolve them? Are there biblical answers to these difficult question? Where do you go for refuge?

**The cities of refuge were established,
for the person who had committed involuntary manslaughter.**



The final section addresses the issues of the number of witnesses necessary to bring a **murder** conviction, the prohibition of monetary compensation in lieu of paying the proper penalty for the crime, and the theological basis for maintaining justice in **the Land** in capital cases. If someone was accused of **murder**, when it was time for the trial to actually make it to the court, it was necessary to provide some mechanism for protecting the accused. **The city of refuge** was the mechanism (**to see link click [Gk - Cities of Refuge](#)**). Everyone was not eligible **to flee to a city of refuge**. **The murderer** was not

eligible (see [G1 - Those Not Qualified to Flee to a City of Refuge](#)), but the man guilty of involuntary manslaughter was. **He was to flee to one of those cities, stand at the entrance to the city gate and state his cause to the city leaders. Then they will bring him into the city with them and give him a place, so that he may live among them. If the next-of-kin avenger pursues him, they are not to hand over the killer to him; because he struck his fellow community member unknowingly and had not hated him previously. So he will live in that city until he stands trial before the community, until the death of the high priest who is in office at the time. When that time comes, the killer may return to his own city and his own house, to the city from which he fled (Joshua 20:4-6).**⁷⁸³

When it was time for the trial in **the city** in which the crime had been committed, the court needed to determine if the accused was indeed the party responsible for the manslaughter. If it could be determined by the testimony of **two eyewitnesses (35:30)**, it became the court's job to determine whether **the** victim's **death** was the result of intentional malice or the result of an unfortunate accident. If they determined that the perpetrator was guilty of intentional homicide, **he** would be executed. An intentional **murderer** attempting to take shelter in **a city of refuge** is to be extradited back to **the city** where the crime occurred, where justice could be served. **Deuteronomy 19:12** says: **The elders of his city shall send for him, bringing him back to the city, and hand him over to the redeemer of blood to die.**

If **the elders** determined that he was guilty of inadvertent manslaughter, he was considered innocent and measures for the protection of his **life** needed to be taken. They would send him to live in **the city of refuge**. **Deuteronomy** gives a vivid example of how an accidental **death** might occur. The passage acknowledges that the man is in serious danger from **the redeemer of the blood**. The passage tells us that **the Israelites** are supposed to locate **cities of refuge** across **their** territory so that one will be quickly accessible from any part of the Land. **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, 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 (Deuteronomy 19:5-6).** Sending the inadvertent killer to the safety of **the city of refuge** is a mitzvah considered incumbent upon both the killer and the court.⁷⁸⁴

Those who were qualified to flee to cities of refuge (35:22-28): As stated above, **the cities of refuge** were established for the person who had committed involuntary manslaughter. But such cases are not always simple to determine, then, or now. It is possible that **the death** was unintentional. Apparently the judgment was made in **the city** in which **the death** occurred by **the city's elders**. But how did **they** decide?⁷⁸⁵ **The Torah** gives several examples. **Suppose someone shoves another man suddenly, but without hostility; or he throws something at him unintentionally; or, without seeing him, being his enemy or seeking to harm him, he throws a stone big enough to cause death; and the person dies. Then the community is to judge between the one who struck him and the next-of-kin avenger in accordance with these rules; and the community is to save the killer from the next-of-kin avenger. The people protected the one found guilty of manslaughter and escorted him back to the city of refuge to which he fled, where he lived until the high priest died.** So long as **he** remained within the walls of **the city of refuge**, **the blood redeemer** could not harm **him**. If **he** did, **he** would be regarded as guilty of **murder**. What happened outside the walls of **the city of refuge** was another matter. **But if the killer ever goes beyond the limits of the city of refuge he fled to before the death of the high priest, and the next-of-kin (*go'el*) avenger finds him outside the limits of his city of refuge, and the avenger kills the killer, he will not be guilty of the man's blood; because he must stay in his city of refuge until the high priest died. But after the death of the high priest the killer may return to the land he owns.**

Having to live the rest of **his life** in a **city of refuge** amounted to a **life** sentence, but it was not intended as a form of incarceration. It was considered a measure of protection and making amends. Nevertheless, **the inadvertent killer** was not allowed to leave **the city of refuge** or to offer a **ransom** to the court, which would allow **him** to leave. **He** was required to live out **his** days in **the city of refuge** until **the death of the high priest**. This spoke to the sanctity of human **life**. Even when a **life** was taken **accidentally**, it requires some measure of consequence. **The Torah** never bothers to explain why **the death of the high priest** canceled the **blood** debt. Obviously, **the high priest's death** was regarded as creating some form of compensation. It was as if **his death** was taken in lieu of **the death** of the guilty. The confined **man** was set free from **the city of refuge**, **his blood** debt was satisfied, and **his** fear of retribution was lifted. Somehow, by the sovereignty of **the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**, **the death of the high priest** made atonement for **his** sin.⁷⁸⁶

Believers reading these words about the effect of **the high priest** find their thoughts turning to the book of **Hebrews**, with its presentation of **Messiah** as our **High Priest** (see the commentary on **Hebrews** [Ay](#) - **Messiah's Qualifications as our Great High Priest**).

His death as **High Priest** is the antitype for the atoning **deaths** of **Isra'el's high priests** in ancient times. **Their deaths** could not save, but **they** were as an arrow pointing forward to **the death** of **the One** who is indeed our **Savior**.⁷⁸⁷

The divine perspective of murder in the Land (35:29-34): These things shall constitute your standard for judgment through all your generations, wherever you live in the Land (see **Exodus Da - The Dispensation of Torah**). If anyone kills someone, the murderer is to be put to death upon the testimony of witnesses; but the testimony of only one witness will not suffice to cause a person to be put to death (**Deuteronomy 17:6** and **19:15**). Likewise, you are not to accept a ransom in lieu of the life of a murderer condemned to death; rather, he must be put to death. The rich could not buy their way out of the consequences of their actions. **Life for life** (**Genesis 9:6**; **Exodus 21:12**; **Leviticus 24:17**; and **Deuteronomy 19:11-13**). Likewise, you are not to accept a ransom for someone who was convicted of manslaughter and had fled to his city of refuge that would allow him to return to his land before the death of the high priest. So the paying of a ransom was unacceptable in either case. And the theological principle was that **the Israelites would not defile the Land in which they were living. For the shedding of human blood defiles the Land, and in this Land no atonement can be made for the bloodshed in it except the blood of him who shed it. Again, life for life. No, you are not to defile the Land in which you live and in which I live** in the form of the Sh'khinah glory (see **Exodus Hh - The Glory of the LORD Filled the Tabernacle**); for I, ADONAI, live among the people of Isra'el.⁷⁸⁸

To allow a **murderer** to live was to pollute **the Land** (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Bq - Do Not Murder**), **the Land** in which **ADONAI Himself** lived. **The life of the murderer** was demanded by the high court of Heaven because only **the blood of the murderer** can cover **the blood** of the victim. Leaving **murderers** alive renders **the Land tamei** (see the commentary on **Leviticus Bk - Ritually Clean and Unclean Animals**), a state that might require the presence of **God** to withdraw. **In this way you will not defile the land in which you are living. For blood defiles the land, and in this land no atonement can be made for the bloodshed in it except the blood of him who shed it. No, you are not to defile the land in which you live and in which I live; for I, ADONAI, live among the people of Isra'el.** It is like **the blood** of innocent **Abel** screaming out to **God** (**Genesis 4:10**). Only **the blood of Messiah** will be able to speak a better word. **To Yeshua the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel** (**Heb 12:24**).

Yet, **the Torah** insists that **one witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any**

crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). The requirement for two or three witnesses is even more important in a **murder** trial where someone's **life** hangs in the balance. **(Numbers 35:30).** The testimony of witnesses must be examined and cross-examined. **The Torah says the judges must make a thorough investigation. If the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you (Deuteronomy 19:18-19).** If in the process of cross examination, the court discovered that a witness was maliciously lying in an attempt to convict the man on trial, a malicious false **witness** received the punishment that would have been inflicted on his victim . . . **death.**

The Torah expressly warns against showing **pity** on **the murderer. You are not to pity him. Rather, you must put an end to the shedding of innocent blood in Isra'el (Deut 19:13).** A commandment not to show mercy may sound strange to believers, but we must remember that this commandment is addressed to a court of law, not to individuals. If a court of law were to randomly dispense mercy, then justice is no longer served. For a court of law to allow a **murderer** to escape punishment is actually injustice. When you think about it, a court that pardons the guilty is no better than a court that punishes the innocent. Were it possible for a court of law to simply set aside justice in favor of mercy, then **the death of the Messiah** would have been completely unnecessary. **God** could have simply pardoned us - but justice would not have needed to be served.⁷⁸⁹

The whole system was set up to **avenge the blood** of the victim, not protect the rights of **the murderer**. In most of the world today, the legal system bends over backwards to protect the rights of the accused **murderer**, thereby victimizing the victim's family all over again for years and years and years. Many family members of the victim die before **the murderer** dies. This worldly thinking believes that it is better to let ten guilty **murderers** go free than to execute one innocent man. And what has been the result of that thinking? **The shedding of innocent blood** has proliferated to an alarming degree in the world today. **God's Word** stands in stark contrast to this. You get the feeling that once **the murderer** is found guilty **upon the testimony of witnesses**, there is little delay. **The next-of-kin avenger is to put the murderer to death upon meeting him.** We are obviously not to take the law into our own hands and track down **murderer's** vigilante style. And clearly **God** doesn't want the innocent to be executed, but there is a biblical principle that we can apply to our lives today. **The death of the murderer** inflicts punishment for the crime, and gives the victim's family a sense of justice. **God's Word** says: **Whoever sheds human blood, by a human being will his blood be shed; for God made human beings in His image (Genesis 9:6).** That hasn't changed. The **death of the murderer**

was not supposed to be a deterrent, but a punishment.

Today, guilty sinners can flee by faith to **Yeshua** and find **refuge** from the judgment of **Ha'Shem (Hebrews 6:18)**. Because **Messiah** is the **eternal High Priest**, salvation is secure forever (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer**), for **He** always lives to make intercession for them (see **Hebrews Bk - The New Priesthood Lasts Forever**). **He** bore the guilty sinner's punishment; therefore, **there can be no condemnation for those in Messiah Yeshua (Romans 8:1)**.

As **the Torah** specified **cities of refuge**, it also delineated its principles for **murder** and **involuntary manslaughter**. The reason why this is so important for **the Israelites** is that Canaan is more than just **the Promised Land**. It is **His Land . . . God's Land. The Divine Presence** cannot tolerate to live in **a Land** polluted by **murder**; the offense leads to the pollution of the earth and the abandonment by **God** of **His** sanctuary and people.⁷⁹⁰ I am sure **God's** heart is grieved by all the violence in **the Land** that took place on all the years before October 6th 2024, and all the years after. **The Land** longs for **His** Middle East peace plan. But oddly enough, there is a paradox here. In its right place, the Levitical sacrificial system (see **Leviticus Ah - The Offerings from the People's Perspective**), **blood** is the most effective purifier, the only means of atonement between **God** and mankind (**Hebrews 9:22**). But in the wrong context, it has precisely the opposite effect.⁷⁹¹

Here is a summary of the procedure if a possible **murder** happened:

1. Only the guilty one is involved, no other family member can be slain instead of or in addition to him. This limited the escalation of the damage to families.
2. The slayer's intention determines whether he is guilty or not. If it was an accident, he was qualified to flee to **a city of refuge**.
3. No ransom is accepted for the guilty.
4. The verdict is determined by a legal court and not **the avenger**.
5. The involuntary manslayer is confined to **a city of refuge until the high priest dies**.
6. **The murderer** is executed by **the nearest of kin** to the deceased.⁷⁹²

*Dear Heavenly Father, praise **Your** wisdom, that when someone unintentionally killed another person, they could flee for protection to **the city of refuge** - but only for as long as **the high priest** was still living. **Messiah Yeshua's** priesthood is an eternal priesthood and so is **His** protection. The covering of **Messiah Yeshua's blood** over me, protecting me, never ends! **But on the other hand, the One who does remain forever has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is also able to completely save those who draw near to God through Him, always living to make intercession for them (Hebrews***



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7:24-25). In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen