

## **You shall designate cities for yourselves, cities of refuge... and a murderer shall flee there – one who takes a life unintentionally... He shall dwell in it until the death of the Kohen Gadol. (35:11,25)**

The *rotzeiach b'shogeg*, unintentional murderer, is sent into exile to one of the designated cities of refuge. There, he will be safe from the wrath and vengeance of the *go'eil ha'dam*, redeemer of the blood, a close relative of the victim who has the right to exact vengeance against the murderer. The *rotzeiach b'shogeg* is safe as long as he remains within the confines of the *ir miklat*. If he leaves and the redeemer catches him, his blood is on his own hands. The *rotzeiach* remains in the *ir miklat* until the death of the *Kohen Gadol*, who, on some level, bears some responsibility for the unintentional death. He should have prayed that fatal accidents not occur during his tenure. Understandably, varied levels of “unintentional” exist, some bordering on negligence, while others are purely accidental. Thus, it is impossible for a human court to ascertain beyond a shadow of a doubt for how long the *rotzeiach* should be exiled. Hashem has, therefore, instructed us to allow the murderer to leave once the *Kohen Gadol* dies. This is His way of informing us that He will deal with the length of the exile.

The *Talmud* (*Makkos* 11b) discusses a case in which, prior to the *bais din's* issuance of the verdict against the murderer, the present *Kohen Gadol* dies. Another *Kohen Gadol* is appointed. The *rotzeiach* is remanded to the *ir miklat* until the second *Kohen Gadol* dies. *Chazal* wonder what the new *Kohen Gadol* could have done to prevent the accident. He had not yet been appointed. They reply that, from the moment he was appointed until *bais din* issued their verdict, he should have prayed that they be inspired to find him completely innocent. If one considers the length of time between the *Kohen Gadol's* appointment and the *bais din's* verdict, we realize that it is quite short – almost as if, the very moment the *Kohen Gadol* is appointed, he must immediately begin to pray! Is this realistic? Yet, this is the *halachah*. Even during the *Kohen Gadol's* exalted moment of joy, having reached the pinnacle of spiritual achievement, he must immediately pray for the *rotzeiach*.

*Horav Chaim Zaitchik, zl*, underscores the powerful lesson we all should derive from here. During the *Kohen Gadol's* greatest moment of joy – indeed, specifically during this heightened moment, it is demanded of him to think of another Jew's pain. He should drop everything and pray that this man's case be positively resolved in his favor. This is the extent to which the *gadol ha'dor*, the spiritual giant of the generation, must ascribe. He must constantly think and worry about his flock. His time is their time; his life is their life.

This concept is a paradigm of the selfless nature of leadership. A Torah leader must prioritize the well-being of the community above his own personal interests – even if it intersects with moments of joy or relaxation. Leadership should be guided by a genuine concern for the welfare of his flock. Only through such a dynamic will he succeed in inspiring change and creating an inclusive and

supportive environment for everyone. It is always about them, not him.

Some stories are difficult to write in the context of a short *dvar Torah*. The limited amount of space does not allow for a full treatment of the subject, for the reader to be able to grasp what took place and why. This challenge becomes all the more daunting when dealing with negative behaviors that are difficult to comprehend and even more difficult to justify because every story has two sides, and, when one is dealing with two people, it becomes four sides. Having said this, I cite from the wonderful biography of *Horav Shlomo Gissinger, zl*, a man who was a legend for his brilliance in *halachah*, his greatness in *chesed* to all people from all backgrounds, and for his peerless humility. In other words, he reached the pinnacle of *avodas hakodesh* – but did not talk about it.

The story is about a young woman who had her share of struggles, to the point that she was drowning in emotional pain. A kindly couple took her in when she became estranged from her parents and had nowhere to live. [At this point, I think it is prudent to state that we do not judge. I do not know what this girl could have done that would turn her parents against her, nor do I know how her parents treated her to cause her to descend to such a point.] In this couple's home, she was accepted and slowly returned to her original potential. Her self-esteem developed, and her social graces benefitted thereby. She met a fine young man to whom she became engaged. A wedding date was set. Sadly, the *kallah's* father refused to have any part of the wedding. [Whatever happened at home left considerable pain which he refused to forgive.]

Immediately, following the *bedekin*, when the *chosson* placed the veil over his bride's head, the cell phone of the husband (surrogate father) rang. He looked at the caller ID and saw that it was none other than the *kallah's* father. Finally, he thought, the father was coming around. "I would like to say a few words to my daughter," the father said when the phone was answered. "I would like to give her my blessing, as she is about to walk down to the *chuppah*." This was an amazing breakthrough – there was hope. He would not attend the wedding, but at least he was willing to give his blessing to his daughter.

A moment later, things had changed. What was supposed to be a blessing was actually a curse. When the surrogate father saw the smiling *kallah* burst into bitter weeping, he knew something had gone terribly wrong. Apparently, instead of making up for years of grief and pain (on both sides), the father issued one last salvo, when he vindictively said to her, "You will amount to nothing. Your marriage will never last!" [At this point, before I continue, it is critical that we all step back and do nothing. No blame, no judging – just sadness at how sour the most loving relationship can become. We do not know what the *kallah* did to her father to engender such unmitigated hatred, nor do we know how the father treated his daughter – and what led to what.]

The *kallah* was completely inconsolable. She was a fragile child at best, and for her father to break her heart at this most auspicious moment was too much for her to bear. Everyone was in a state of shock. No one knew what to do. One person did know, and that person saved the day, because he understood that the needs of people are fragile. Rav Gissinger attended the wedding as Rav and

friend of the kallah's surrogate parents. He understood her pain; he felt her grief. He went over to one of the tables where the centerpieces were all set up with their beautiful bouquets and plucked one large, red rose from the vase. He went over to the kallah and gave her the rose. It was his way of saying, "I understand what you are going through. You have my full support – now – and whenever you need it." This is why he exemplified Torah leadership at its apex.