

Neil Joachim, August 1, 2009, Congregation Or Chadash—Chicago

On the occasion of Neil's Bar Mitzvah

Parashat Vaetchanan

11 Av 5769

In my Torah portion G-d begins to lead the Jewish People into our new nation across the Jordan. G-d tells Moses he may not cross to the holy land, but instead he lets Joshua. Joshua will become the new leader of the Jews. When G-d refused to let Moses cross over to Canaan, Moses begs and pleads, but G-d—will not give in. But G-d was not finished with his servant Moses. At the same time, G-d commands Moses to set up three cities of refuge for people who accidentally killed a person. In modern terms, committed manslaughter rather than murder. So, if you accidentally killed somebody and you felt like you were going to be killed by that person's family, and in those ancient times that would likely happen, you could flee to one of these cities of refuge. Before being allowed to stay in a city of refuge, you would be judged by the elders for your crime. My Torah portion includes the Ten Commandments, or Decalogue, which includes the commandment, "Thou shall not murder." Murder is killing with intent. Manslaughter, though it sounds really bad, is actually accidental killing.

The part of this Torah portion in Deuteronomy that is most interesting to me is about the three cities of refuge. I think that it's good for people to be able to live in such cities because in those times, families would have sought out revenge for killing their loved ones, either by accident or with intent. In the cities of refuge, a killer would then have nothing to worry about. Instead of these cities of refuge, today we have a court system; a system that sometimes can be wrong. The Torah tells us to focus on the most important parts of the situation, and the Torah is also compassionate towards people and their circumstances. Think about if you were on a jury today. Would you be subject to peer pressure? What I mean is what if you were on a jury and you have a feeling that the accused, who may get the death penalty, is innocent. When the jury votes, you write down, NOT GUILTY. Then the counting begins. The votes show it is basically a unanimous GUILTY vote, and then they see one NOT GUILTY. Everybody groans and asks who said, NOT GUILTY, you say, "I did." At this moment in time, you should think about the evidence and try to block out all the stuff that people are saying to persuade you to get you to change you vote. Would you change your mind because of peer pressure? If you were in this position, you would probably want to make the best decision, even if it takes you forever, in the jury room. The Torah says that you should make the right decision and focus on the parts of the case that matter.

On the other hand, how would you feel if the person who committed the crime was let go and continued doing more crimes, and the innocent man was executed for no reason except that the jury was too lazy to make the correct decision? I have learned that just because somebody looks like they are guilty, you must listen to the facts. I can relate this to how I get in trouble at school, which is a lot. At my school, they actually made a new process for students who got in trouble during the school day. Instead of just having the punishment influenced by one teacher, who might exaggerate the circumstances because of anger or frustration, there are eight teachers who assess the situation. Then the Discipline Committee tries to make the most appropriate punishment from the facts they gather from all parties involved. I was the first victim of this system, one that is kinda' like our court system and mimics Moses' "court of elders." While this isn't like the jury system in a murder case, human beings are not perfect, but by paying attention to even this simplest fact, which can be important, then we can do our best to do justice.

When Joshua led the Israelites into Canaan, they were told to destroy the seven nations' alters, sacred posts, and burn their images depicting gods image as a man of a woman and all their pillars. G-d commanded us to teach our children, and our children's children to praise to love the almighty G-d when we were let into the Promised Land. G-d forbids us to give up our children for money to anyone in the seven nations, who would change our children's mind about G-d. G-d says when the time comes and your child asks you why these exhortations, laws, and rules that Adonai our G-d has given to us, you will answer in these exact words: "This is all because Adonai our G-d set us free from pharaoh in Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." But, before G-d would let us become a free nation, we had to understand that with the rule of law, must come the understanding of justice. Amen.

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