

PARASHAS MATTOS

Personal Tragedies

Two men commit identical crimes. Both are convicted and sentenced. One remains in confinement for twenty-five years, while the other goes free after six months. How is this possible?

In this week's Torah portion, we read that a person who commits accidental homicide is exiled for the rest of his life to one of the designated cities of refuge. However, when the High Priest dies all the accidental killers in exile at the time go free - regardless of whether they had been there for six months or twenty-five years. As a result, two men can commit identical acts of accidental homicide and serve widely different sentences. Where is the fairness in this system? And why indeed should the death of the High Priest result in amnesty for all exiled killers?

Furthermore, the Talmud tells us that the High Priest's mother, fearful that the exiled killers would pray for her son's untimely death, used to visit them in their places of exile and bring them food and other small gifts. But why would an old woman bringing cookies and chocolate dissuade a cooped-up killer from praying for the death of the High Priest and his early release from exile?

The commentators explain that the sentence of exile is not intended as a punishment but as the beginning of the process of rehabilitation. Accidental homicides which result in exile are due to a significant degree of negligence, of thoughtlessness and insensitivity. Had the accidental killer genuinely appreciated the sanctity of human life, he would have been extremely careful while swinging that hammer, and the accidental death would most probably never have been occurred. It is this cavalier attitude that the exile is intended to correct.

In these cities of refuge, populated for the most part by Levites, the exiled killer came into contact with people who lived not for themselves but for their Creator and their people, devoting themselves to study and prayer and to teaching, inspiring and helping others. In this environment, he learned to be sensitive and unselfish, to think about other before he thought about himself. In this environment, he also gained profound admiration and attachment to the High Priest, the peacemaker of the Jewish people, the loving father figure who tended to their spiritual needs and ailments, the ultimate Levite role model. He began to feel a personal connection to the High Priest, whether or not

they had actually ever met, and learning from his example, he began to develop those positive character traits he had been missing before.

Therefore, when the High Priest died, the exiled killers who had become so attached to him were devastated. Each of them, in his own way, felt he had suffered a deep personal tragedy. This catharsis sealed forever the bond between the erstwhile killers and the saintly High Priest, thereby completing the process of their expiation. After mourning the death of the High Priest, the exiles were fully rehabilitated.

The High Priest's mother, however, was concerned that the exiled killers would not relate to her son in a direct personal way but rather as an abstract symbol in distant Jerusalem, and therefore, they might pray for his death. Therefore, she brought them food and small gifts. Let them meet the High Priest's mother and enjoy her cookies and chocolates. Let them see him as real flesh-and-blood human being. Let them relate to him as a living, breathing father. It was important for their own rehabilitation, and at the same time, it would protect her son from malicious prayers.

A great sage once came to a town and was told by the townspeople to avoid a certain reputed informer.

Sure enough, the man approached the sage and began to question him. The sage, however, did not beat a hasty retreat. Instead, he asked the man his name, inquired about his welfare and his family and drew him into a long conversation.

In the course of the sage's stay in the town, he was visited often by the informer, and each time, he was received warmly. By the time the sage left, the man had made a complete turnaround in his life.

"How did you accomplish it?" someone asked the sage as he was leaving. "What did you tell him that changed him so completely?"

"Why, nothing," said the sage. "Because I treated him as a person, he related to me as person. And why would he want to hurt another person?"

In our own lives, we sometimes hurt and offend others with meaning to, and we excuse ourselves by saying it was all unintentional. But in the Torah system of values, lack of intention does not exonerate us, only lack of control does. If these hurts and offenses could have been avoided, we must bear responsibility for them. If, however, we learn from the example of the High Priest and from the exemplary people we meet in the course of our lives, we can refine our own characters and ultimately enrich ourselves and the people around us..