

Walk through the Parsha by Rabbi David Walk

Shelter from...

As we complete our first year here in the Proto Redeemed State, my wife and I have less and less to do with Misrad HaK'lita (the Office of Absorbition). I know Ronald Reagan said that the most common lie is, 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help', but I have felt that our dealings with this government agency were always professional, polite and productive.

It's the word K'LITA, which I want to discuss. As the name of this government agency, it gets translated as 'absorb'. Like Bounty Brand Paper Towels, which absorb more liquid than any other brand, as I learned in my misspent youth, and is 'the quicker picker upper'. So, we were sort of sucked into Israel like water on a kitchen counter into a sponge. But the term is much more fascinating than that. When you have reception bars on your cell phone, that's called KLITA. To record music is called L'HAKLIT. KELET is input on a computer. KOLEIT means to comprehend or take in information from the outside. It's sort of like being accepted into a new medium. But it's how this term is used in this week's Torah reading which I really want to analyze.

Our parsha presents the Jewish nation's final preparations for entry into the Promised Land. The tribal portions have

been divided up, and now it's the Levites turn. They get 48 cities spread out in the tribal portions. Six of these cities are designated AREI MIKLAT, which we'll call 'refuge cities' for the time being. Three are in the Transjordan (Golan, Ra'amot and Betzer) and three are in Israel proper (Kadesh, Sh'chem and Chevron). The differences between these six cities and the others is a controversy in the Talmud, which for the purposes of this article I will ignore. These 6 cities are designated for those who have killed without intent to hide in. In these cities the perpetrator is safe from the revenge of the victim's family (GO'EL HADAM). In those rougher times, family vengeance was the norm. The Torah softens and humanizes the impact of these customs by limiting rather than eliminating the age-old practices. The Rav often said that the Torah is a work of evolution, not revolution.

This use of the term is akin to the modern signs we see all over Israel: MIKLAT. That means 'bomb shelter'. So, these cities are a shelter or refuge for the killer. And generally, that's how the term is translated, 'refuge cities' (Alter: asylum). I know words change meanings over time. Joshua Epstein wrote recently in a WSJ article, 'Words, like children with Attention Deficit Disorder, won't sit still. The nature of language is change - relentless, unremitting, remorseless.' But I'm a bit perplexed by the vast difference in connotation between the terminology of AREI MIKLAT and Misrad Hak'lita. The first seems to imply mere physical



safety, while the other means a vast array of social support to assimilate the new immigrant into society. Can someone help me with this?

Well, in fact, yes. Targum Onkelos (God bless him for providing fodder for an article) translates MIKLAT into Aramaic as SHEIZAVUTA (Sounds Swahili doesn't it?). This term may be recognizable to some from Yakum Porkan passage, recited on Shabbat after the Haftora, towards the end of the two Aramaic paragraphs the word appears and is usually translated as 'save' (Artscroll) or 'delivered' (Koren). But, if you recite these paragraphs like I do, there's little chance you've noticed. However, I am most familiar with this word from Slichot. In these penitential prayers, just before we sit down to recite Tachanun (and after a series of long, repetitive petitions), we recite the following very moving sentence: O Compassionate One, Who has responded to the impoverished, the broken hearted, the humble of spirit, answer us! O Compassionate One, have pity, redeem, deliver (SHEZIV), have mercy upon us, now, swiftly and soon! This passionate plea isn't talking about shelter from physical harm; it's a petition for spiritual support. The deliverance that we so earnestly seek is from psychological or emotional harm.

But what about our killer? Doesn't he only require safety from the family of the slain? Could be, but I believe there's more going on. In our parsha this individual is just referred to as a murderer (ROTZEI'ACH) who acted in error (B'SHGAGA, perhaps accidentally).

When this topic is reviewed in D'varim 4:42, this killer is more clearly defined as having 'killed the neighbor without intent (Hebrew: DA'AT, knowledge), and without prior enmity.' I think that the critical term is DA'AT. This is what separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom. Our behavior must be thought out and planned. If we found ourselves acting impulsively, a time-out is required. It's time for a reset for the purpose of considering carefully our actions. Perhaps, there's a lot more than just the physical safety of the killer involved. We are concerned for his psyche and soul as well.

This brings us to the duration of the killer's stay in these AREI MIKLAT. One stays until the death of the Kohen Gadol. Rashi gives two explanations. One is that the Kohen Gadol brings Divine presence which prolongs life, while this killer shortened a life. The other is that the Kohen Gadol should have prayed to prevent such tragedies. Maybe, the killer is supposed to learn these lessons. Our job as humans is to bring God and life into this world and to ask Divine guidance for our behavior.

We have to protect the inadvertent killer from the custom of vendetta. But, maybe, we also want to deliver this individual from the lack of mindfulness in life. The Torah requires this person to live in this Levitical city for safety, but also for redemption. We want this person to be absorbed and assimilated into a life of humanity, called DA'AT. 🍷