

Parshat Matot-Masei: Life After Death: Modern Day Cities of Refuge

Ariel Wolgel, Class of '26

Content Advisory Notice: This article contains sensitive discussion about unintentional harm and death. Reader discretion is advised to prevent inadvertent exposure to trauma-inducing content.

In the Torah's vision for society, outsiders are cared for and the vulnerable are protected. We are obligated to support people experiencing poverty and grief and are required to welcome guests and newcomers to the community. Supporting "outsiders" can be uncomfortable! It can be difficult to connect with people who have different experiences from us, and interacting with suffering can remind us of our own human frailty. Even with this discomfort—or perhaps especially with this discomfort—the Torah instructs us to bring our awareness to those outside of our immediate circle, to create inclusive communities that can hold the complexity of being human.

One example of this is the obligation to create cities of refuge for people who have caused unintentional death.

Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall provide yourselves with places to serve you as cities of refuge, to which someone who has slain a person unintentionally may flee (Numbers 35:10-11).

Causing a death can suddenly catapult a person to the outskirts of society. While mistakes and accidents are something all humans can relate to, causing harm at a fatal level is extremely isolating. In the Torah's vision for cities of refuge, the community is required to be mindful of this vulnerable experience through building a supportive environment where those who have caused unintentional death can be protected.

Unintentional death is tragic on all sides of the experience—the shock, sadness, and rage of those grieving an untimely death, alongside the guilt and fear of those who never intended to do harm. The mitzvah to establish cities of refuge holds both of these experiences simultaneously. It recognizes that it is human nature to be vengeful when faced with sudden and tragic loss, to look for someone to blame, or a way to bring justice into an unfair world. And it also requires us to protect the life of the person who unintentionally caused death, to halt the cycle of harm and bloodshed in the aftermath of tragedy.

Although we no longer have cities of refuge in the traditional sense, the reality of unintentional death remains prevalent. The World Health Organization reports that unintentional injuries take the lives of 3.16 million people every year.

In the United States, someone unintentionally kills another person every 18 minutes.

That is 82 people a day. 300,000 people a year.

In *Accidental Killing: A Survivors Handbook*, Maryann Gray and Chris Yaw share from personal experience that “unintentional harm is a lonely affair. The shame, guilt, and unsavory nature of causing an unintentional death motivates us to bury, avoid and even deny our pain” (p. 85).

Burying pain can cause a fractured self-concept, exacerbating mental health struggles that are common among those who have unintentionally caused harm. While the Torah describes a physical exile to the cities of refuge, it also invites us to consider the potential psychological exile, spiritual disorientation, or moral injury experienced by those who have caused harm.

Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock, Vice President of [Moral Injury Recovery Programs at the Volunteers of America](#), explains:

Moral injury is the trauma of moral conscience, when harm cannot be amended, and empathy yields only pain and self-condemnation...Like a missing limb, it is not a reversible injury, so survival is a process of learning to live with an experience that cannot be forgotten.

Moral injury is a modern term for an age-old experience. While they didn't use the term “moral injury,” the Rabbis of the Talmud imagined how cities of refuge could protect residents from physical harm and support recovery from the moral injury of causing a death. The process of learning how to live after causing a death is too big of a task to accomplish on one's own. It requires the support of compassionate relationships, as the Talmud teaches:

The Sages taught: In the case of a student who was exiled, his teacher is exiled to the city of refuge with him, so that the student can continue studying Torah with him there, as it is stated: “And he shall flee to one of these cities and *live*” (Makkot 10a).

Supportive relationships are a crucial component of learning how to live after unintentionally causing death. Secure social connection, alongside therapeutic and psychiatric support, can reduce cycles of harm and suffering that such experiences create—allowing space for honesty, compassion, and healing. Although cities of refuge are not typically part of modern societies, this need for compassionate peer support in the aftermath of causing death is still crucial. One non-profit doing this sacred work is the [Hyacinth Fellowship](#), the only organization worldwide providing peer support to those who have unintentionally killed or seriously injured other people.

Parshat Masei calls upon us to foster relationships that can be a source of support in the most complicated of human experiences. In the spirit of the cities of refuge, may we become a source of



1 Av 5785 | July 26, 2025

shelter to those learning how to live after unintentionally causing death—and in doing so, may we do our part to reduce the cycles of psychological harm that occur in the aftermath of tragedy.

Ariel Vogel received her MA in Jewish Education from Hebrew College and is a graduate of the Pardes Educators Program. She taught Jewish studies at the Hillel Day School of Metropolitan Detroit and guided new teachers in reflective teaching practices as a mentor for the Pardes Jewish Studies Teacher training program. Ariel currently serves as the Youth Director for Skokie Valley Agudath Jacob and Kol Sasson congregations in Skokie, IL. Having revived the youth program, she now provides multiple pathways for the community to connect meaningfully to Torah and Jewish life as Skokie Valley's Director of Experiential Learning and Rabbinic Intern.