



# THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

4 – 5 Aug, 2005

29 TAMMUZ, 5765

Parashat Masei  
(Numbers 33:1–33:13)

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## D'var Torah by Rabbi Joseph Goldman

### JOURNEYS OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

Cultural challenge and cultural change are at times brilliantly illustrated by the Torah. For example, the mindset of that age requires that God have the people remove any vestige of idol worship or cultic practice from the Promised Land. However, for the reader who would deplore the practice of ethnic cleansing and the explosions of violence, this same parasha gives focus to an option that will change how an accidental death caused by a neighbor, or perhaps a kinsman, is punished.

God tells Moses that he must instruct the Israelites to create six “cities of refuge,” when they arrive in the Promised Land so that a manslayer may not die until he has stood trial before the assembly.” “The cities of refuge will serve both the Israelites and the resident aliens...so that anyone who kills a person unintentionally may flee there” to insure a fair trial.

Unintentional manslaughter is then defined with considerable clarity. The text refines the rules of evidence— a death sentence may not be rendered on the testimony of a single person, two witnesses are required. One guilty of a capital crime must be put to death. In the case of an unintentional manslaughter, the person so charged is not free after his trial. He will not face a death penalty, but he must go to one of the cities of refuge and remain there until the death of the High Priest who serves at that time. Should he leave the refuge city, and the “blood avenger” kill him, the blood avenger is not charged with the crime.

Rabbi Gunther Plaut, the author of much of the commentary in the Reform movement’s Chumash, suggests, “...that the institutionalization of asylum may be the earliest of its kind.” He believes that it “...arose out of the need to end family feuds by placing the law enforcement under the control of the community, and out of the hands of the individual. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century intellectual giant of what became the Modern Orthodoxy, did not look upon the asylum cities as places merely for containment. He taught that the purpose of the *arei miklat*, the cities of refuge, was to provide “forgiveness and rebirth.” for those of those who were responsible for an unintentional homicide.

Of course, we are uncertain why the death of the High Priest permitted the accidental manslayer to be able to return to his home in safety after the death of the High Priest. What are your thoughts about this?

Shabbat Shalom  
28 Tammuz 5765

4<sup>th</sup> August, 2005