

**Shoftim: Sometimes Recovery is Possible:
Ir Miklat as a Blueprint for Healing
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Parshat Shoftim lies in the heart of the fifth book of the Torah, Devarim. Devarim is a retelling of the Jewish people's story through the eyes and mouth of Moshe Rabbeinu on the precipice of their entrance into the Land of Israel without him. Through a lens of what we can only imagine to have been some combination of grief, relief, and a sense of accomplishment, Moshe reveals a blueprint of life beyond him from stories from the road.

Amidst the lists of rules and commandments between *adam l'chaveiro* (persons to their peer) and *adam l'makom* (people to God) is mention of the concept of an *ir miklat* (a city of refuge).

In Devarim 19:3, Moshe says:

You shall survey the distances, and divide into three parts the territory of the country that your God YKVK has allotted to you, so that any [man] who has killed someone may have a place to flee to. Now this is the case of the killer who may flee there and live: one who has slain another unwittingly, without having been an enemy in the past. For instance, a man goes with another fellow into a grove to cut wood; as his hand swings the ax to cut down a tree, the ax-head flies off the handle and strikes the other so that he dies. That man shall flee to one of these cities and live. Otherwise, when the distance is great, the blood-avenger, pursuing the killer in hot anger, may overtake him and strike him down; yet he did not incur the death penalty, since he had never been the other's enemy.

The essential question that is implied here is: How do we heal from situations that feel irreparable?

The *parsha* proposes a path toward healing through the concept of the *ir miklat*. This biblical mandate established six cities—three on each side of the Jordan River—designated as sanctuaries for individuals who committed accidental manslaughter. These cities were governed by the Levitical priests, who played a crucial role in overseeing the refuge and ensuring justice. The *ir miklat* was more than just a geographical location; it represented a space of both physical protection and spiritual renewal. By providing a safe haven from avengers, these cities offered individuals a chance to avoid retribution and start afresh. Simultaneously, they facilitated spiritual healing by allowing those who had committed unintended harm to reflect, seek forgiveness, and eventually reintegrate into society.

The Talmud picks up on this sentiment—not only must there be a place for unintentional murderers to go, but they also need partnership and guidance in a supportive mentor:

And the court **would provide** the unintentional murderers fleeing to a city of refuge with **two Torah scholars**, due to the concern that perhaps the blood redeemer, i.e., a relative of the murder victim seeking to avenge his death, **will seek to kill him in transit**, and in that case **they**, the scholars, **will talk to** the blood redeemer and dissuade him from killing the unintentional murderer (BT Makkot 10b).

The healing process is not always intuitive and can be very lonely. Sometimes you need people to support you in your journey toward healing. Those people can also act to protect you from anything that might prevent you from seeing your recovery through. The Torah scholars are responsible for protecting the person from the family of the person they killed. The Torah could have called them “bodyguards,” but instead specifically mentions they should be scholars of Torah, as if implying that the spiritual support is as important to the process as their physical presence. Similarly, those who support people through healing—rabbis, therapists, sponsors—offer crucial spiritual support and presence.

The Gemara highlights what happens when the family of the deceased confronts the accidental murderer. Instead of running from the encounter or repeating past behaviors, the rabbis elevate this as a moment of change:

And they will speak to him about matters appropriate to him. They say to the blood redeemer: **Do not accord him treatment** appropriate for **murderers**, as it was **unintentionally** that **he came to be involved in the incident. Rabbi Meir says:** The unintentional murderer too **speaks [medabber] on his own behalf** to dissuade the blood redeemer, **as it is stated: “And this is the matter [devar] of the murderer**, who shall flee there and live” (Deuteronomy 19:4), indicating that the murderer himself apologizes and speaks to the blood redeemer. The Sages **said to** Rabbi Meir: **Many matters are performed** more effectively through **agency** (Makkot 10b).

Healing actually takes place at these crossroad moments—often the darkest, ugliest, and messiest. The core of this work, made possible by the spaces and people that enable it, is the deep inner work that leads to having agency. This work requires patience, the ability to make difficult decisions, and the willingness to iterate—to try and try again until healing begins. This work requires the guidance of people who have come before us, the spaces to do the healing, and the willingness to grow.

Sometimes we break the rules accidentally, but these unintended actions can still have far-reaching consequences. This is evident in the concept of the *ir miklat* for accidental murderers. Though the act was unintentional, the emotional and societal fallout remains significant. In God’s own framework of laws, there are provisions for how to address such unintentional breaches. This underscores a broader lesson: our actions, even when not deliberate, can still impact others

profoundly. Whether it's an accident or a struggle with addiction, the responsibility lies in acknowledging the harm caused and finding a path to recovery. The *ir miklat* symbolizes the necessity of taking responsibility and making amends, highlighting that while we may not always control the consequences, we are responsible for seeking a way to mend what has been broken.

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