

Raising Cain

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In describing the Torah's laws of setting aside cities of refuge, Hashem tells Moshe the following (Shemot 21:13, JPS 1985 translation):

"If he did not do it by design, but it came about [אנה] by an act of God, I will assign you [לך] a place to which he can flee" [שמה].

Some commentaries question the switch of subjects in this verse. The verse opens focusing on the killer ("if **he** did not"), but switches to seemingly be speaking to Moshe by stating "I will assign **you** a place". Wouldn't it be more consistent to continue "and I will assign **him** [לו] a place"? [For a different answer to our question, see Makkot 12b.]

The Arizal (Sha'ar Hapesukim to Shemot 21) offers a very interesting read of the introduction of the laws of the cities of refuge.

As an introduction, he explains that Moshe was a reincarnation of Hevel, and that the Egyptian man [איש מצרי] who was beating the Jewish man (back in Shemot 2:11) was a reincarnation of Cain. Based on the Zohar (Ra'ayah Mehemna Mishpatim, cited by Arizal there), he explains that when the Torah says "one who strikes a man [איש], and they die, will be put to death" (Shemot 21:12), it refers to Moshe's killing of the Egyptian man [מצריאיש], and had it been done intentionally, Moshe would have been put to death. However, since Moshe did it with the correct intentions (to correct Cain's sin; albeit at the wrong time, according to the Ra'aya Mehemna), it was only considered an accidental murder. Therefore, when G-d discusses the laws of accidental murder in the next verse (cited above), he refers to Moshe directly, who was fleeing from Samael, the blood avenger of the Egyptian/Cain.

Rabbi Shmuel Vital (glosses to Sha'ar Hapesukim there) adds that the letters shin-mem-hei [שמה], which conclude that verse, are the same letters as Moshe's name, meaning that Moshe should flee to the city of refuge.

However, there is another Kabbalistic interpretation (also found in Sha'ar Hapesukim) of the same verse. Earlier in 21:13 the word "came about" [אנה] is spelled aleph-nun-hei, which is an acronym for "the soul of the convert" [et nefesh haGer, ת נפש הגר]. As explained there, the verse would then be interpreted as telling the story of another reincarnation of Cain, Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law (Zohar Bereishit 286, based on Shoftim 4:11). After Moshe had to flee from the blood avenger of the Egyptian (Pharaoh, who had chased him away), he arrived to a place of refuge, Midyan. This verse, rather than referring to killing Yitro/Cain once again by pronouncing G-d's holy name, instead discusses how Moshe **converted** him (as described by various commentaries to Shemot 18). This too, it seems, served as a form of rectification for Cain's soul.

These two approaches stand to guide us in our interactions with others who have wronged us in the past. While no one would practically advise murdering our enemies with G-d's ineffable name, there are some times when we seek to eradicate them, or at the very least, cut them off from our lives. While there are times where that may be appropriate (for example, some of the traditional approaches to the destruction of Amalek, a nation of evil), there are other times which seem to call for another, softer approach. In many circumstances, the better way to repair our relationships with others is not by further distancing ourselves, but by seeking to bring them closer, as Moshe/Hevel did to Yitro/Cain.

By fixing our relationships with others in this manner, we will hopefully repair our once-broken brotherly bond, leading to the ultimate redemption, speedily in our days.

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