

Sermon 8.18.18

In this week's Torah reading, Shoftim, there is a chapter about cities of refuge. "If someone commits murder...but he did not do it by design," "ve-Ha-Elohim inah le-yado vesamti lecha makom," ...God will be by your side, and I will assign you a place [of refuge]."

Let's say, for example, that Joe was walking under a ladder, and Sam, who was standing atop the ladder, dropped his hammer, accidentally killing Joe.

Now Joe's family member wants to avenge his death. So Sam runs away to a city of refuge. It also helped people to be safe while they were awaiting trial.

Maimonides, the Rambam, explained that there were 6 cities of refuge in Israel. The roads leading to them were marked by sign-posts at the crossroads, with the inscription "Miklat" (Refuge) — so you knew how to get there; the roads had to be made very broad . . . smooth and level, in order that the fugitive might not be hindered . . ."

God was trying to limit revenge with this idea of sanctuary by creating a safe place.

There is a Hasidic teaching that the month of Elul is a sanctuary in time — a safe time to explore our deeds, our actions, perhaps done by accident in the past year. A safe time because we won't face punishment if we regret and repent.

This teaching comes from our verse in the Torah about "ir miklat" the city of refuge.

The verse is: "If he did not do it by design," "inah le-yado vesamti lecha makom," ...I will assign you a place." The first letters of the words inah le-yado, vesamti lecha are an acronym for Elul.

Hasidic teachers extended the idea of a city of refuge to a time of refuge, saying that Elul offers safety to all who are willing to be vulnerable enough to see themselves honestly.

They were saying that we all need refuge in our lives, from the noise, from stress, from the business of life. I mentioned this week that for me and for a lot of us, music is a refuge — a way to leave this world for a few moments and get caught up in lyrics, the groove, the emotion.

And for many of us — Aretha Franklin did that for us both because her voice brought us to a different place, but also because the songs she chose had words that made us want to demand respect, or want to say a little prayer. Songs of human dignity...

I explained to my kids that one of the places we need as sanctuary is the home. It is a sanctuary in this crazy world that is worth preserving — it is also easy to make the

home not a sanctuary with bickering or mean behavior. I tell my kids, take care to protect the sanctuary of the home it's worth it.

This Temple is a sanctuary. For finding both escape from the outside world — or a pause from the outside world, so that we can find ways to engage with it in a healthy way.

I'm sure you have ideas of your own about what are sanctuaries in your life; if not, think about creating your safe places.

The Torah starts off the discussion by saying you're going to need *irey miklat*, cities of refuge. Today, I want to end by having you imagine a society that makes the roads to these sanctuaries broad and well kept. With signposts at all the crossroads saying, this way for refuge. This way for safety.

Shabbat Shalom.