



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## BAMIDBAR > Massei

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July 26, 2014

Massei

**Bomb Shelters and  
Places of Refuge**



# Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”

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## ABSTRACT

This is a tale of two cultures. A culture that shields its people, and a culture that uses its people as shields. A culture that puts life ahead of everything, and a culture that glorifies death. A culture that considers life to be God’s gift, and a culture that considers a martyr’s death to be what God desires.

With Israel now at war with Hamas in Gaza, as soldiers die in the field, as terror continues to rain on Israeli cities, as innocents perish in the conflict, let us talk about life and death – specifically about the preciousness of life and the glorification of death, and what the Torah has to say about it.

In Hebrew, a bomb shelter is called a *miklat* – literally meaning a “refuge.” This week, the Torah speaks of the first *arei miklat*, “cities of refuge,” where those who accidentally took a life could find shelter.

What can we learn from these “cities of refuge” about life and death, about good and evil, about protecting what is pure and holy, and about destroying terrorism and a culture of murder?

We can learn everything. All we have to do is open the book and read God’s words:

*And you shall not corrupt the land in which you live, for the blood corrupts the land, and the blood which is shed in the land cannot be atoned for except through the blood of the one who shed it. And you shall not defile the land where you reside, in which I dwell, for I am the Lord who dwells among the Children of Israel.*

It is *Shabbat Chazak*. And we shall fight mightily for life. The alternative is not an option.

## BOMB SHELTERS AND PLACES OF REFUGE

### 1. Total Destruction (Joke)

In the Arab world, weapons of *mass* destruction are referred to as weapons of *total* destruction. That's how the phrase translates from Arabic, "total" instead of "mass."

With that said, I would like to share with you a joke that is circulating throughout the Middle East.

During his administration, President George W. Bush of the United States of America sent a delegation to search for weapons of mass destruction all over the Middle East, which would clearly justify the US intervention in the region. President Bush authorized the delegation to search everywhere and leave no stone unturned.

The delegation roamed around for a whole year and did not find what they were looking for.

The delegation returned to Washington, came to the White House, and said to Bush: "We checked every place in the whole Middle East, searched under every camel and within every cave, round every falafel ball and beneath every *keffiyeh*, and we didn't find a single weapon of total destruction."

The incredulous President asked them: "If you didn't find weapons of total destruction, then what did you find?"

"We found," said the members of the delegation as they looked gravely at their President, "total destruction."

Get it? The point is that the Middle East does not need "weapons of total destruction," since even without them the area is in total ruins.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from <http://mordechaikedar.com/total-destruction>.

## 2. Life and Death

If everything in *life* had a sticker attached to it with its price, what would be the most valuable thing?

I think we can all agree that life itself is the most valuable thing a person can possess, more valuable than money, more valuable than fame, even more valuable than any principles.

*Pikuach nefesh*, saving a life, overrides the entire Torah!<sup>2</sup> For example: If there may be a risk to a life, you must violate Shabbat or even Yom Kippur, to ensure that the life is preserved.

The only thing more valuable than your life is the threat to the very *idea* of life itself. If, God forbid, someone tried to make you commit murder, then you would have to give your own life to prevent such evil. If, God forbid, someone tried to undermine life by perpetuating pure evil, then you would have to give your very own life to prevent this evil entity and preserve the sanctity of life for the entire world.

But in almost every other respect, life trumps death.

Death is destruction. The Middle East, from east to west, north to south, is a place of much destruction. We aren't talking about ten, twenty, a hundred, or a thousand murders; we are talking hundreds of thousands of human beings butchered, slaughtered, destroyed in bloodbaths of unfathomable proportions. Shiites vs. Sunnis. Turks vs. Kurds. Iranians vs. Iraqis. Syrians vs. Lebanese. And now Al Qaeda vs. ISIS.

Standing alone, amidst all this destruction, is one tiny nation with a mighty heart – Israel. In a sea of cultures that glorify death, Israel is a country that glorifies life. And I'll give you just one example of many:

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<sup>2</sup> See Yuma 82a and Ketubot 19a.

### 3. Shelter from the Storm

Over the past few weeks, thousands of rockets have poured into Israel from the Gaza Strip. Unfortunately, Israel is no stranger to such neighborly greetings, and it has developed a system for countering these barrages of evil.

Because that's what Jews do – when faced with a problem, they seek ways to solve it.

As the famous anecdote goes: When word came to the people of earth that the world would be completely flooded in three days, the Christians gathered in their churches to pray, the Muslims gathered in their mosques to pray, and the Jews gathered in their synagogues and said, “Okay, we have a full three days to figure out how to live under water.”

We Jews have dealt with many a challenge in our lifetime. When rockets drop on Israel, an air raid siren blares throughout the region. In a city like Ashkelon, which is less than ten miles from Gaza, the people have about thirty seconds to get to a bomb shelter, and this is how they live their lives. Gaza shoots a rocket, siren sounds, the people run to safety in a fortified shelter.

But running to shelters is not a solution; it is merely survival. Thus, to uproot the evil that is the fabric of Gaza, Israel has precision-bombed Hamas rocket-launch sites, weapons caches, homes and headquarters of its murderous leaders, and hit some of the terrorists themselves. Now Israeli ground troops are in Gaza to finish the job. And it is costing us dearly – in the past week, 18 Israeli soldiers have died, 13 of them in one day.<sup>3</sup>

Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas on the face of the earth. Literally. There are close to 2 million people living within 141 square miles. This makes it very difficult to demolish terrorist targets without hurting innocents and without coming to harm.

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<sup>3</sup> Numbers current as of Sunday, July 20, 2014. See <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4547088,00.html>

So, what has Israel done? It has dropped warning leaflets, made automated phone calls, and sent text messages to the people living within the area of the intended strike, urging them to leave so that it can uproot the terror that also holds them hostage.

And what has the leadership in Gaza done in response? Did it sound air raid sirens and instruct its citizens to protect themselves from Israeli bombs? No! The leadership in Gaza has done the exact opposite. It has instructed its own people, its own women, its own children, to run to the rooftops, to embrace the Israeli strikes with open arms, to act as “human shields” for the rocket launchers.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Hamas leaders stay safely out of Gaza – lounging around palatial homes in Qatar and elsewhere – or hiding in fortified bunkers.<sup>5</sup>

You see what’s going on here? Do you get the difference?

The difference is life and death.

One culture *shields* its people; while the other uses its people as shields. One culture teaches that *life* is everything; the other preaches that *death* is everything. One people believe that *life* is God’s gift; the other believes that a martyr’s *death* is what God desires.

But it’s even worse. The Hamas leadership doesn’t just glorify death. It glorifies the death of others. For its leaders don’t stand on rooftops; they hide in bunkers and place their rocket-launchers in hospitals, mosques, and schools.<sup>6</sup>

How can this be?

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this subject see: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/charles-krauthammer-moral-clarity-in-gaza/2014/07/17/0adabe0c-0de4-11e4-8c9a-923ecc0c7d23\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/charles-krauthammer-moral-clarity-in-gaza/2014/07/17/0adabe0c-0de4-11e4-8c9a-923ecc0c7d23_story.html)

<sup>5</sup> For more on this subject see: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VtENBF\\_yjo&feature=em-share\\_video\\_user](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VtENBF_yjo&feature=em-share_video_user)

<sup>6</sup> For example see: [http://www.timesofisrael.com/20-missiles-found-in-un-run-school-in-gaza/?utm\\_source=The+Times+of+Israel+Daily+Edition&utm\\_campaign=42bba7d9be-2014\\_07\\_18&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_adb46cec92-42bba7d9be-5442965](http://www.timesofisrael.com/20-missiles-found-in-un-run-school-in-gaza/?utm_source=The+Times+of+Israel+Daily+Edition&utm_campaign=42bba7d9be-2014_07_18&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_adb46cec92-42bba7d9be-5442965)

## 4. The Torah on Life and Death

As a Jew and a rabbi I am no expert in the Koran, and I do not know what it states about desirability of death or the preciousness of life. But as a Jew and a rabbi I do know the Torah, which even the two largest religions of the world – Islam and Christianity – claim is sacred to them. So, why don't we look in the Torah to see if and how the Torah values life, and if and how the Torah abhors death?

And, as it happens, the Torah addresses this very issue in this week's reading – *Parshat Matot* – which speaks of “cities of refuge,” or *arei miklat* in Hebrew.

This word *miklat* might sound familiar. In every building in Israel, and within every community, there is a room or structure called a *miklat*. *Miklat* is the Hebrew word for “bomb shelter,” the one people run to as soon as the siren goes off. For people in America, Canada, or other parts of the Diaspora this is an unheard of concept. For Israelis, the *miklat* is part of reality.

This word *miklat*, meaning “shelter/refuge” first appears in the following Torah passage:

*The Lord spoke to Moses saying: “Speak to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘When you cross the Jordan to the land of Canaan, you shall designate cities for yourselves; they shall be cities of refuge (arei miklat) for you, and a killer who took a person life’s unintentionally shall flee there.’”<sup>7</sup>*

Today, a shelter is meant to protect the people from killers, but in the biblical times, the cities of shelter were meant to protect killers from the people.

A strange idea?

Well, by understanding the meaning of the *arei miklat*, the “cities of refuge,” perhaps we will come to understand the value of life, the toxicity that is death, and the idea of shelter and refuge.

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<sup>7</sup> Numbers 35:9-11.

## 5. Why the Cities of Refuge?

Why were the cities of refuge established?

The Torah states: *so that a killer who took a person life's unintentionally shall flee there.*

A city of refuge would protect the unintentional killer from vengeance by the deceased person's family. Although exiled from his home and community, he could dwell there in safety until such time as the High Priest passed away, when he would be allowed to return.

This is an interesting law. What is the connection between the High Priest and the killer?

The great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, explains:

The High Priest causes the Divine Presence to rest upon Israel and thus prolong their lives, whereas the killer causes the Divine Presence to withdraw from Israel and thus shorten their lives. Thus, he is not worthy of standing before the High Priest.<sup>8</sup>

If a man kills another – even unintentionally! – *he is not worthy of standing before the High Priest*, who is dedicated to prolonging life and loving all aspects of life.<sup>9</sup> Therefore he must remain in exile in the city of refuge, removed from his community, and may not leave until the High Priest has passed away.<sup>10</sup>

The Torah makes it clear that it abhors even *unintentional* killing<sup>11</sup> – and it seeks to prevent more taking of life in revenge. The abhorrence God has for death is stated with an exclamation point at the conclusion of the Torah's chapter on the cities of refuge:

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<sup>8</sup> Rashi on Numbers 35:25, from the Sifri.

<sup>9</sup> See Avot 1:12; Tanya ch. 32.

<sup>10</sup> See Likkutei Sichot vol. 33, p. 210-211.

<sup>11</sup> Obviously this does not apply to a defensive war waged to protect lives.



*And you shall not corrupt the land in which you live, for the blood corrupts the land, and the blood which is shed in the land cannot be atoned for except through the blood of the one who shed it. And you shall not defile the land where you reside, in which I dwell, for I am the Lord who dwells among the Children of Israel.<sup>12</sup>*

This answers an obvious question: Why does God abhor death so much? Says God: “I am among you, dwelling within you, and I am Life. When you deprive others of life, you oppose Me!”

## 6. God is Great!

*Allah-u-Akbar* means, “God is Great!” And truer words were never spoken. God is great. But who is this great God? God, by definition, is Life and He grants life to His creation.

God being great is exemplified in, and only in, life. The opposite of life is death, which is evil, which is darkness.

And because God dwells among us, with us, within us, we must abhor death and love life; we must uproot every perpetrator of death, of evil, of darkness.

This is why we Jews abhor death – precisely because God is among us, and bloodshed is the opposite of God.

Now imagine, just imagine, if Hamas actually read the Torah and learned that God abhors death and bloodshed. Why don't they? Because believing that God desires bloodshed allows them to murder and to even use their own babies and wives and grandmothers as shields to protect their evil ideas.

Israel is the frontline against such evil. And the world should be praying for Israel's success.

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<sup>12</sup> Numbers 35:33-34.

## 7. Practically, What Can We Do?

We are in the midst of the saddest period in the Jewish year, the Three Weeks that span the fast days of the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av, when both the first and second Temples in Jerusalem were destroyed. The first, after standing for 410 years, was destroyed by the Babylonians, and the Jews were sent into Babylonian exile. The second, after standing for 420, was destroyed by the Romans, and we Jews were sent into the exile in which we still live.

The Talmud<sup>13</sup> gives several reasons for the destruction of the Holy Temples and the concealment of the Divine Presence from Israel. One of the reasons given is the sin of *shfichat damim*, spilling of blood – that is, murder. And the Talmud brings scriptural proof from our Torah reading – the very verses which we just quoted: *And you shall not corrupt ... you shall not defile the land where you reside, in which I dwell*. Concludes the Talmud: “O, but if you defile it, you shall not settle therein, and I shall not dwell within it.”

Indeed one of the greatest Jewish leaders of all time, King David himself, could not build the Temple, because he was a warrior who fought many wars and had blood on his hands – even though he fought wars of self-preservation!<sup>14</sup> The Temple is a gateway to God, who is life, while war is death, and a person who has brought death into the world (no matter how good the reason) cannot build a house of life.

This, of course, in no way, shape or form, suggests that Israel today should not fight for its life. We must fight for our lives and for the lives of every Jew, and for innocent Arabs and Muslims as well. As a matter of fact, this makes it all the more important to fight the evil and uproot it, for if we do not, the bloodshed will only get worse. But even as we fight, we must remember what we are fighting for – we are fighting *for* life and to obliterate death.

<sup>13</sup> Shabbat 33a.

<sup>14</sup> *But the word of God came to me, saying: “You have shed much blood, and you have waged great wars; you shall not build a house in My Name because you have shed much blood on the ground before Me. Behold, a son will be born to you. He will be a man of peace, and I shall give him peace from all his enemies around about... He shall build a House in My Name.”* (I Chronicles 22:8-10).

If death, the spilling of blood, is one of the reasons that the Holy Temple was destroyed and one of the very reasons why God is today concealed from us, then the logical rectification of this situation would be life – breathing life and teaching life.

There is a beautiful passage in the Talmud<sup>15</sup> that describes the Torah itself as a “city of refuge,” a “sheltering island.” For the Torah is *Torat Chaim*, the Living Torah, *Etz Chaim*, the Tree of Life, and it is how we can best combat the death and bloodshed of the world.

And it isn’t a miraculous, supernatural thing that, if you study Torah, God will protect you. It is very logical. Just imagine if every terrorist in the world knew and studied from birth, through preschool, kindergarten, elementary school, high school, into adulthood that *blood corrupts the land, and the blood which is shed in the land cannot be atoned for except through the blood of the one who shed it. And [that] you shall not defile the land where you reside, in which I [God] dwell...*

The world would be a very different place if the abhorrence of death and the love of life would be preached from every mosque, church and pulpit.

We must be leaders in this regard. For we are the People of the Book, we are the light unto the nations.

We must enter the *miklat* of Torah – if not for our own selves than for the world. We must teach the world what God truly wants, what it means to love good and uproot evil. It is literally an issue of life and death.

## 8. Conclusion: God Is With Us

After becoming an optimist, Ari was asked by his friends why he was such a depressed grouch. To which Ari replied: “What, you think it’s easy being an optimist?”

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<sup>15</sup> Makot 10a. See also Likkutei Sichot vol. 38, p 131.

This Shabbat is called *Shabbat Chazak*, a “Shabbat of Strength,” when we read the final portion of the Book of Numbers, *Sefer Bamidbar*. And I would like to leave you by quoting the conclusion of the Sifri to *Sefer Bamidbar*:

Said Rabbi Natan: Precious are the Jewish People, for wherever they are exiled, the Divine Presence is with them:

When exiled in Egypt, the Divine Presence was with them, as it states,<sup>16</sup> *Did I [not] appear to the house of your father, when they were in Egypt, enslaved to the house of Pharaoh?* When exiled in Babylon, the Divine Presence was with them, as it states,<sup>17</sup> *Your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel I sent you to Babylon because of you.* When exiled in Elam, the Divine Presence was with them, as it states,<sup>18</sup> *And I will place My throne in Elam and I will destroy from there a king and princes.* When exiled in Rome, the Divine Presence was with them, as it states,<sup>19</sup> *Who is this coming from Edom [meaning Rome] in crimson garments ... it is I [God].* And when they returned, the Divine Presence was with them, as it states,<sup>20</sup> *Then, the Lord, your God, will bring back your exiles, and He will have mercy upon you. ...*

Rebbi said: To what is this analogous? To a king who told his servant, “If you seek me, I am with my child. Whenever you seek me, I am with my child.” As it states:<sup>21</sup> *[God] who dwells with them amidst their defilements.* And it states,<sup>22</sup> *If they defile My Sanctuary while I am in their midst.* And it states,<sup>23</sup> *And they not defile their camps, in which I dwell among them.* And it states: *And you shall not defile the land where you reside, in which I dwell, for I am the Lord who dwells among the Children of Israel.*

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<sup>16</sup> I Samuel 2:27.

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 43:14.

<sup>18</sup> Jeremiah 49:38.

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 63:1.

<sup>20</sup> Deuteronomy 30:3.

<sup>21</sup> Leviticus 16:16.

<sup>22</sup> Leviticus 15:31.

<sup>23</sup> Numbers 5:3.

No matter where we are, God is with us. And we are warned not to defile our purity with bloodshed. This is what the Torah teaches. And if we all felt this way, the world would be at complete peace.

For thousands of years, we Jews have celebrated and continue to celebrate life, while most of the world has tried to annihilate us. It is an unfathomable chutzpah for the world, to suggest that we – a nation who cherishes and has introduced to the world the importance of peace, love and virtue – desires death and bloodshed...

We are here to be High Priests, people who love life, (all life, from mineral, to vegetable, to animal, to human, Jew or non-Jew) and desire life!

And we will do anything and everything to ensure that life prevails, and death is stamped out forever and ever. We pray for the day when all bomb shelters and cities of refuge will be turned into places we run to – not because we need to flee from bombs and death – but because we want to find there Torah and light.

May it happen today.

*Chazak, Chazak, Chazak, v'Nitchazek* – We shall be strong, and we shall be strengthened!

Shabbat Shalom!