



תכין לך הדרך יט:ג

Prepare for yourself the road

There are times when a person knows that he needs to change. He looks back at the past year and sees the things he could have done better, the opportunities he missed, the habits he allowed to take hold. He knows that something has to be different. But knowing that we need to change is one thing. Knowing how to change is something else entirely.

In Parshas Shoftim, the Torah introduces us to the concept of the *arei miklat*. A person who accidentally killed someone is commanded to flee to a city of refuge, where he will be protected from the *go'el hadam*. The possuk says: “תכין לך” - “*Prepare for yourself the road*.” The Torah doesn't simply command us to establish the city. The road leading to the city must also be prepared. Chazal tell us that signs were placed at the crossroads pointing toward the *ir miklat*, and the roads were kept clear so that the person fleeing could reach the city quickly. Why is the Torah so concerned with this road?

Perhaps the answer is connected to the famous remez for Elul that the seforim hakedoshim bring from the possuk: **וְאִשֶּׁר לֹא צִדָּה וְהָאֱלֹקִים אָנָּה לִידּוֹ וְשִׁמְתִּי לָךְ מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יָנוּס שְׂמָה** - *But if he did not lie in wait [to ambush him] but Hashem brought it to his hand, then I will designate for you a place, to which he can flee [and find refuge]* (Shemos 21:13). The *roshei teivos* of “אָנָּה לִידּוֹ וְשִׁמְתִּי לָךְ” spell אלול. But what is the connection?

The *ir miklat* is a place where a person leaves his previous reality and is given the opportunity to begin again. As Chazal teach, “גלות מכפרת”. The *galus* itself brings *kapparah*. The month of Elul is our own personal *ir miklat*. We spend eleven months living our lives, and then Elul arrives and gives us an opportunity to step back, leave the habits that have brought us to where we are, and establish ourselves in a new seder.

But there is an obvious question. The words “אָנָּה לִידּוֹ וְשִׁמְתִּי לָךְ” come from Parshas Mishpatim, not Parshas Shoftim. The detailed discussion of the *arei miklat* is later on in our parsha. Why, then, does the remez for Elul come specifically from Mishpatim?

The seforim are teaching us something really deep. “וְהָאֱלֹקִים” - “אָנָּה לִידּוֹ.” The person who accidentally killed someone finds himself in a place he never intended to be. He never planned for his life to end up here. And perhaps this is the first question a person has to ask when he looks back at his own life: How did I get here? How did I develop these habits? How did I allow myself to become so distant from where I know I should be?

The possuk continues: “וְשִׁמְתִּי לָךְ מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יָנוּס שְׂמָה.” Hashem tells him that there is a place for him to run to. We may not always understand how we got here, but we don't have to

remain here. There is a place to run. There is a way back. And that is the message of Elul.

But our parsha adds another layer. Parshas Mishpatim teaches us that Hashem provides a place to run. Parshas Shoftim teaches us that the road to that place must be prepared. “תכין לך הדרך.” Prepare the road. Because it is one thing to know that there is an *ir miklat*. It is another thing to know how to get there.

And perhaps that is one of the greatest challenges of teshuva. A person can sincerely want to become better and still have no idea how to get there. He can make beautiful *hachlotos* and *kabalas* (resolutions) and genuinely desire to change, but without a *derech*, he may most likely find himself back in the same place the following year.

The Gemara in Makkos says, “בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך מוליכין אותו.” *In the direction a person wants to go, he is led.* And the Gemara brings this from the pasuk, “טוב וישר ה' על כן יורה.” *Hashem is good and upright; therefore, He teaches sinners the way.* The possuk doesn't say that Hashem teaches sinners teshuva, but rather, “*Hashem teaches sinners the road*”. When one desires to return to Hashem, it is not about inspiration and more kabalos. No that's not the answer. The possuk tells us the secret... it is about “the road”.

Chazal tell us something else about the *ir miklat*: “תלמיד שגלה” - “מגלין רבו עמו.” When a student is exiled to an *ir miklat*, his rebbe goes with him. He isn't told, “Figure it out yourself.” He is given a rebbe, Torah, a new environment and a new seder.

Similarly, Hashem doesn't merely tell us, “Do teshuva.” He prepares the road. We don't have to figure out our entire lives, but we do need to find the next turn. The road may begin with tefillah, or with more learning or with *shmiras halashon* or becoming more patient with the people closest to him. For each person, the road is different. תכין לך הדרך - prepare for “yourself” (singular) the road.

The person running to the *ir miklat* doesn't need to see the entire journey. He needs to see the sign: מקלט - Turn here. The lists of items to correct before the Yomim Noraim may be long, but perhaps, instead we should ask: What road am I going to prepare? What is one change I can make that will actually bring me closer to Hashem?

The seforim teach us that Elul is the *ir miklat* and it is available to each of us. In this new reality, one can begin to repair what was not repaired throughout the year. Eventually, through teshuva me'ahavah, זדונות נעשות לו - even the zedonos can become zechuyos. Those very things that once separated him from Hashem can become part of the story of his return.

This Elul, instead of us getting overwhelmed when looking how far we need to go, let's look for the sign. Let's find the road and make that turn.

Once we do that: “בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך מוליכין אותו.” Hashem takes him from there. “יורה חטאים בדרך.” Hashem teaches even the sinner the way.

The road back is there. It has been prepared. We just have to begin walking. **Good Shabbos, מרדכי אפפל**