

פרשת מסעי

OVERVIEW

Following the text's rapid review of the numerous stages of Israel's wandering through the desert, Moshe outlines the boundaries of the holy land. – G-d designates responsible men who were to assist the high priest Elazar and Joshua to supervise the division of the land and the final settlement of the tribes. Every tribe is to set aside four cities for the support of the Levites, which were also to serve as cities of refuge for persons who committed accidental murders. This institution is supplemented by the law of "the avenger of blood".

Finally, Moshe stipulates, that those women who were eligible to inherit land from their father should marry a member of their own tribe in order to preserve the tribe's own full inheritance and to prevent the formation of an enclave of one tribe in the territory of another (through marriage to a member of another tribe).

COMMENTARY

The Boundaries

It is difficult to trace the exact demarcation of the boundaries in accordance with the geographic data of the biblical text. Many names of the given places are no longer in use and their location cannot always be determined with certainty. The importance of these designations lies in the provision that all laws which are applicable only in the land (the Shemitta year, Yovel year, the corner of the field

for the poor, a. o.) are only valid within these boundaries. No subsequent conquest could bestow a similar character on the newly added land.

Cities of Refuge

One must differentiate between the six main cities of refuge and the forty-two auxiliary towns. The six cities – three in Canaan and three in Transjordan – automatically protected anyone who fled there. The forty-two towns only provided protection when the fugitive specifically requested it. An entire network of roads was devised to facilitate access to the cities by way of shortcuts and road signs. The cities of refuge were administered autonomously. Every tribe had to contribute four towns as settlement for the tribe of Levi which lacked landed property. These towns were encircled by precincts which were two thousand ells* in diameter to serve the needs of the population. (This measure has been preserved in the application of the Sabbath law that prohibits walking beyond a range of two thousand ells measured from the outermost house of the town).

The "Avengers of the Blood"

It almost appears as if this Torah law was to lead us directly to the infamous "vendetta". The true spirit of this law will become clear if one takes the trouble to go a little deeper into the matter. A murderer who is careful in covering his tracks may not find it too difficult to evade the long arm of the law. It is this risk that this law is meant to minimize. By authorizing the close

relatives of the victim to apprehend and kill the murderer on their own, this law accomplishes what no police force achieves: to persuade the murderer to seek the protection of the law by giving himself up. Thus, whether it was a premeditated murder or an accidental act, the murderer will avoid being avenged by the family and voluntarily surrender in order to gain the protection of the city of refuge.

* Editor's Note: The author uses the word "El" for the hebrew "אמה". Here is The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language's definition of the word: "An English linear measure equal to 45 inches (114 centimeters). [Middle English, from Old English eln, the length from the elbow to the middle finger's tip, ell. See el- in Indo-European Roots.]

Today, "אמה" is generally translated as "cubit". Here is the definition from the same source as above: "An ancient unit of linear measure, originally equal to the length of the forearm from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow, or about 17 to 22 inches (43 to 56 centimeters). [Middle English cubite, from Latin cubitum, cubit, elbow.] cubit \Cu"bit\ (k[=u]"b[i^]t), n. [L. cubitum, cubitus; elbow, ell, cubit, fr. (because the elbow serves for leaning upon) cubare to lie

down, recline; cf. Gr. ky`biton elbow, ky`ptein to bend, stoop, kyfo`s bent, stooping, humpbacked. Cf. Incumbent, Covey.] 1. (Anat.) The forearm; the ulna, a bone of the arm extending from elbow to wrist. [Obs.] 2. A measure of length, being the distance from the elbow to the extremity of the middle finger. Note: The cubit varies in length in different countries, the Roman cubit being 17,47 inches, the Greek 18,20, the Hebrew somewhat longer, and the English 18 inches."

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