



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Masei 5774

By Rabbi Dorothy A. Richman

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*Parashat Masei*, the portion of journeys, begins with a recounting of the Israelites' travels from slavery in Egypt to the borders of Israel. Yet within this re-telling of the Israelites' trek comes a different journey: the path of a manslayer into exile.

An entire chapter of the *parashah* addresses the process by which an unintentional murderer is sent out of the community for his own protection. A person convicted of accidentally taking a life is sent to one of six cities of refuge. He lives there, guarded from his victim's avenging relatives, until the natural death of the high priest.<sup>1</sup> If an exiled murderer wants to return home, his only recourse is to pray for the High Priest's death.

Why the connection between a powerful priest and an accidental killer? Strikingly, the Mishnah tells us that the high priest's mother is also connected to the exiled manslaughterers.

...Therefore, the mothers<sup>2</sup> of the high priests supply [the unintentional murderers] with food and clothing, in order that they won't pray that their sons die.<sup>3</sup>

The image of the High Priest's mother distributing food and clothing to exiled murderers is unexpected—and incomplete. The text does not fully capture the enormity of her project. Think of the logistics: one woman providing basic necessities for exiled murderers in six different cities. Did she have helpers? It seems that the High Priest's mother ran the equivalent of a relief organization.

The Mishnah presents the mother's role in a self-serving manner: she cares for the exiles because she knows it is necessary for the safety of her son. Yet could the High Priest's mother have another motivation for dedicating her life of social prestige and privilege to those forced to flee their homes?

This story is reminiscent of one we've heard before. When baby Moses was endangered by Pharaoh's decree to kill all first-born Israelite boys, it was an Egyptian princess, the daughter of Pharaoh, who sheltered and nurtured him. Both the mother of the High Priest and the daughter of Pharaoh were women of status who protected the lives of the vulnerable.

In the case of baby Moses, the Israelites were targets of direct oppression. They were taught that their lives were disposable in Egyptian society. In the case of the accidental murderers, the exiled are products of an imperfect legal system: the only means to protect their safety was exclusion. Pharaoh's daughter and the mother of the High Priest challenged these political and social indignities, preventing the vulnerable from feeling like society's refuse.

<sup>1</sup> Bamidbar 35.

<sup>2</sup> The Mishnah, which refers to "mothers" (plural), indicates that the mother of the high priest could refer to more than one woman, due to the possibility of the appointment and subsequent replacement of a temporary High Priest. (See Pinchas Kehati's commentary to Mishnah Makkot 2:6.)

<sup>3</sup> Mishnah, Makkot 2:6

These women have something to teach us.

Around the world, millions of people are taught, purposefully and implicitly, by violence and poverty, by being denied access to education, health care and fair labor, that they are disposable.

Pharaoh's daughter's action toward baby Moses was in contradiction to the harsh and violent oppression of Egypt toward the Israelites. Through her aid, the mother of the High Priest brought dignity to the exiled and recognized the injustice of the social system that enforced his exclusion.

This week, the Israelites recount their passage from a place of slavery to a land of promise. Embedded inside is another narrative, the story of a woman embodying care and responsibility for the banished. She models for us the true journey of our people: creating a sustainable freedom with dignity for all.



Rabbi **Dorothy A. Richman** teaches Torah in the Bay Area and is Rabbi of Makor Or: Jewish Meditation Center. Her first job out of rabbinical school was with an AJWS trip to Honduras and Israel, and she has been a strong supporter of the organization ever since. Dorothy can be reached at [do737@yahoo.com](mailto:do737@yahoo.com).

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • [t 212.792.2900](tel:212.792.2900) • [f 212.792.2930](tel:212.792.2930) • [e ajws@ajws.org](mailto:ajws@ajws.org) • [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)