

Deuteronomy 19:4-7

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Moses explained the purpose of setting aside the three cities of refuge in the Promised Land by providing a case in which one man goes into the forest with his friend to cut wood and accidentally kills him.

Having instructed the Israelites to set aside three cities of refuge in the Promised Land, Moses proceeded to give an illustration to explain why such cities were needed, and how the *manslayer* statute is to be applied. The illustration involved *the case of the manslayer who may flee there and live* (v. 4). The word translated *case* (Heb. “dābār”) can be translated as “provision” since it indicates what must be done. In [Deuteronomy 15:2](#), it is translated “manner.” According to [Numbers 35](#), a *manslayer* is defined as someone who commits an accidental act of killing ([Numbers 35:22-24](#)).

Therefore, Moses told the Israelites that the only condition allowing someone to seek refuge in one of these cities was if he killed *his friend unintentionally, not hating him previously*. The statement *not hating him previously* is added to further distinguish a *manslayer* from a murderer. In other words, someone committing an unintentional killing is a *manslayer* but someone committing a premeditated killing is a murderer ([Numbers 35:16-24](#)).

Moses then provided an illustration of a circumstance that might explain an accidental and unintentional killing. He described it as *when a man goes into the forest with his friend to cut wood, and his hand swings the axe to cut down the tree, and the iron head slips off the handle and strikes his friend so that he dies* (v. 5). The *iron head* refers to the heavy metal blade mounted across the handle of the axe.

So, Moses told Israel that when a man cut down trees in a forest with his friend, it was possible that the *iron head* of his *axe* might fly off and strike his friend and kill him. If this were to happen, the killing would not be intentional because the friends had no contention and there was no malice or hatred involved. Further, the axe was not aimed at the *friend*, the axe head just flew off accidentally. However, there are apparently only two people involved, so there would not be a witness to confirm that the death was accidental. In such a situation, the *manslayer* might *flee to one of these cities and live*. The key facts in applying this law seem to be that **a)** there was no motive, the man who

died was a *friend*, someone he had *not hated previously* and **b**) there were no witnesses, therefore the manslayer had the option of fleeing to a city of refuge.

Fleeing to one of these cities was necessary because *the avenger of blood might pursue him*. The *avenger of blood* (Heb. “gō’ēl haddām”) is literally “the redeemer of blood.” The concept likely refers to a close relative who was responsible to punish the guilty in a way that would fit the crime. That person, Moses said, *might pursue the manslayer in the heat of his anger and overtake him, because the way is long*. In other words, if there were only one city of refuge, it might be that the person who wants to avenge his slain relative has enough time to catch the *manslayer*. But with three of such cities, the possibility is considerably reduced. The *manslayer* would have enough time to flee to one of these cities in order to be protected from the *avenger of blood* desiring to *take his life, though he was not deserving of death, since he had not hated his friend previously*.

Therefore, in order to save the life of the *manslayer*, Moses commanded the Israelites to *set aside three cities for yourself* (v. 7). These cities would provide asylum only for *manslayers*, meaning those who had killed another person accidentally and without hatred or premeditation. This possibly would also preserve the life of the *avenger* because if he killed the *manslayer* (being guilty of accidental killing), it would be unjustified, because the killing was not from hatred or malice. An avenging relative could only lawfully kill someone guilty of murder ([Numbers 35:21](#)).

Biblical Text:

⁴Now this is the case of the manslayer who may flee there and live: when he kills his friend unintentionally, not hating him previously—⁵ as when a man goes into the forest with his friend to cut wood, and his hand swings the axe to cut down the tree, and the iron head slips off the handle and strikes his friend so that he dies—he may flee to one of these cities and live; ⁶ otherwise the avenger of blood might pursue the manslayer in the heat of his anger, and overtake him, because the way is long, and take his life, though he was not deserving of death, since he had not hated him previously. ⁷ Therefore, I command you, saying, ‘You shall set aside three cities for yourself.’