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The Way to Pray

For the Children of Israel and the proselyte and resident among them shall these six cities be a refuge, for anyone who kills a person unintentionally to flee there. (Num. 35:15)

When someone takes a life unintentionally but with some degree of carelessness, the perpetrator is exiled to a city of refuge. He remains there until the death of the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest. Once the Kohen Gadol dies he is permitted to leave.

The Mishnah states that the mother of each Kohen Gadol used to hand out food to the murderers confined in the cities of refuge, in the hope of preventing them from praying for her son's speedy death. The question is: why would God listen to the prayers of a murderer and kill the Kohen Gadol - one of the leaders of the generation?!

The power of prayer is not necessarily dependent on who you are but rather on your appreciation of who God is and your realization of Divine Providence. There is no one who has greater clarity in this than the man who killed unintentionally. He walks into the forest planning to chop wood and not intending to hurt anyone. He swings his axe. The axe head flies off the handle and kills an innocent bystander. He sees clearly how God has life and death completely in His hands. When he prays with such clarity in the knowledge that God is in control of everything, his prayer carries such an enormous weight that even the Kohen Gadol could die!

The Maharsha writes that when a person prays sincerely, any benefit derived from prayer, no matter how extraordinary it appears, can be considered natural, since prayer has been an innate part of existence since the time of creation. When one prays with absolute clarity that everything is in God's hands, anything can happen.