

D'var Torah: Parashat Shoftim

by Benjamin Gee - Tuesday, September 03, 2019

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Where is there a mitzvah to wash your hands of something?

It appears at the end of parashat Shoftim, and it's a disturbing scenario: A corpse is out in the open and it's obvious that this person has been murdered. But the identity of the victim is not known and nobody has a clue what happened. So the Torah tells us that the elders and the judges come out - and they measure the distance from the corpse to each of the settlements in that area. Once they have determined which is the closest town or city to the corpse, then the elders of that place must then take the life of a heifer - hence the process is called 'eglah arufah' (a decapitated calf). Then the Torah tells us that they must wash their hands over the deceased. This is the Biblical origin of the saying, to wash one's hands of something. And then they declare "yadeinu lo shafchu et hadam hazeh" - our hands have not spilled this blood. They are washing their hands of it - they are saying 'we are guiltless.'

However, they are engaged in the process as an act of atonement. The message here is that this person probably walked through their town on the previous evening. Nobody noticed this person. Nobody brought them into their homes. Nobody showed them kindness - and now this person is dead.

Rav Aaron Lichtenstein zt"l gave a beautiful insight on the passage of 'eglah arufah'. He pointed out that the passage immediately preceding it in parashat Shoftim is about going out to war, and the passage immediately after is 'ki tizei la'milchama'. It's the beginning of the following sedrah - when you go out to war! 'Eglah arufah' is sandwiched between them. And the message is that, when you go out to fight a battle in order to save your country or to save the lives of your people, you might be forced to take the lives of many enemies, and there is a danger that the value of life could become diminished in your eyes. That must never affect your overall outlook on life. From 'eglah arufah' we learn that every single life is precious. Even the life of somebody you've never met - a total stranger. Even if you don't know how that person passed away - you need to feel culpable - somehow or other you should have been there for the sake of that person.

And if we need to relate to total strangers in that way, then how much more so should we reach out with love and care - and value the life of members of our families, members of our communities and our society. Certainly from parashat Shoftim we learn, that when it comes to all human life, that is not something to wash your hands of.

Shabbat Shalom