

PARASHAS SHOFTIM

Life Is Not Cheap

On the highway, in the middle of nowhere, a body is found, an apparent homicide victim. The police cordon off the crime scene and painstakingly collect whatever forensic evidence remains on the scene of the crime. They question passersby, travelers who may have seen someone or something that would shed some light on the identity of the killer, but they are no closer to finding the killer than when they began. This death will have to remain a mystery. They file it away among their other unsolved crimes.

So what is to be done now? Is this the end? Having exhausted all avenues of investigation, does the case become forgotten?

Not so, says the Torah. There is still a need for atonement. Exact measurements are taken from the spot in which the body was found to the surrounding towns and villages. The responsibility for atonement falls on the one closest to the scene of the crime. Their elders must bring a calf and perform the ritual of the *eglah arufah*, and they must say, "Our hands have not spilled this blood."

Where in the Torah do these laws appear? It wedges between two chapters that discuss the laws and ethics of waging war.

The commentators explain that this placement is very telling. In war, there is a tendency to devalue human life. People see the dead and the dying wherever they turn, they are surrounded by slaughter and bloodshed, and life becomes cheap. Therefore, the Torah interrupts its instruction regarding warfare and draws our attention to the ritual of the *eglah arufah*.

We see the town elders declare that they did not shed this blood, when no one really suspects them of murder. At most, they may have allowed the stranger to pass through their town without offering him proper hospitality. Still, the entire town needs atonement for the unexplained death of an unidentified traveler. Clearly, all life is precious beyond measure. And just when we are studying the rules of engagement in war, we must bear in mind that we cannot allow ourselves to be brutalized and desensitized. We cannot allow ourselves to forget the infinite value of a single life.

A young woman standing in a doorway saw a little boy fall off a low ledge. The child lay on the ground writhing in pain and screaming at the top of his lungs. Even from the distance, the woman could see that the child was badly injured and that his legs were smeared with blood.

Screaming and crying desperately. The woman ran through the streets toward the fallen child. An old sage was also moving toward the scene of the accident, but at a much slower pace. He stepped aside and leaned on his cane to let the screaming woman pass, and then he continued on.

A few moments later, he saw the woman coming back, wiping tears from her eyes with the edge of her apron. When she saw the sage, she stopped respectfully.

“What happened?” asked the sage. “A moment ago you were beside yourself, and now you are so calm.”

“Oh yes,” said the woman. “I am truly so relieved. I thought that my little boy had fallen and hurt himself badly, and I was beside myself with worry and fear. But I came there and saw it was not my son but someone else. Now I can breathe again.”

“This other little boy?” asked the sage. “Is he badly hurt?”

“I’m afraid he is,” said the woman.

“Then how can you feel so calm and relieved? Aren’t you upset you that an innocent young human being is enduring so much pain and suffering?”

In our own lives, we need to find it within ourselves to care for all people, not only those in our immediate circle of family and friends. We are all brothers and sisters, all part of the Jewish people. Every Jewish life, every human life, should be infinitely precious to us. When other people suffer, we should feel their pain. When other people die, even if they are not connected to us, we should feel a sense of terrible loss. We must remember that if we value other people then we ourselves have value as well.