

OPEN YOUR EYES

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

When a corpse is discovered between cities and the murderer is not found, the Torah prescribes the Rite of the Axed Heifer be performed by the Sages of the nearest city. Following the axing, the Sages recite, "Our hands have not spilled this blood and our eyes did not see. Atone for Your people Israel that You have redeemed, G-d; do not place innocent blood in the midst of your people Israel." (Devarim/Deuteronomy 21:7-8). What is this statement saying? Why do these Sages need to profess their innocence? Are they genuinely suspected to have perpetrated the act? And what did they not see? Obviously if the Sages could identify the criminal they would; what does this statement add?

Chasam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Sofer of Pressburg, 1762-1839, acknowledged leader of Hungarian Jewry of the time) explains that the very fact the deceased is discovered in close proximity to a city indicates the presence of sin in that city, for such ill fortune could not befall a community devoid of sin. Our High Holyday liturgy is replete with references to the challenges we face as a Divine tool to encourage repentance and recalibrate our focus toward G-d and fulfillment of the mitzvos (Divine commands) as an instrument to bring us closer to Him. Such a tragedy is indicative of a severe spiritual shortfall of the communal populace.

Thus, the Sages recognize that "our hands have not spilled this blood" - no one from our city perpetrated this gruesome crime. So how could such an atrocity occur in our province? Because we, the spiritual leadership of the local population, have not fulfilled our mission to our people. "Our eyes did not see" the weakened spiritual state of our congregation, but we are obligated to "see" this deterioration. Because of our lack of attentiveness the people sinned, thus causing such calamity to occur in our locale.

As we look at the events in the world around us, we see that the timeless Torah concepts related by Rabbi Sofer two centuries ago are no less true today. We are bombarded with news of death and destruction - in our communities, in our country, around the world - and we feel there is nothing we can do. We see no connection between ourselves and events in far off places. Yet now, as we start the month of Elul, with daily morning shofar blasts reminding us that the High Holydays are imminent, we look for inspiration to draw us closer to G-d. True, we have not spilled the blood. But we must open our eyes to see our weaknesses. We must hear the Divine call to return. And we - like the Sages of old - must respond.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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Kol HaKollel is a publication of the Milwaukee Kollel Center for Jewish Studies 5007 West Keefe Avenue; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; 414-447-7999