

# THE JUDGES AND THE 'EGLAH ARUFAH

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

לע"נ אמי מורתי מרים בת יצחק ורבקה הכ"מ

I

## THE CEREMONY

At the end of this week's Parashah, we are instructed regarding a rather odd ceremony:

If, in the land that Hashem your God is giving you to possess, a body is found lying in open country, and it is not known who struck the person down, then your elders and your judges shall come out to measure the distances to the towns that are near the body. The elders of the town nearest the body shall take a heifer that has never been worked, one that has not pulled in the yoke; the elders of that town shall bring the heifer down to a wadi with running water, which is neither plowed nor sown, and shall break the heifer's neck there in the wadi. Then the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come forward, for Hashem your God has chosen them to minister to him and to pronounce blessings in the name of Hashem, and by their decision all cases of dispute and assault shall be settled. All the elders of that town nearest the body shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the wadi, and they shall declare: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor were we witnesses to it. Absolve your people Israel, whom you redeemed, Hashem; do not let the guilt of innocent blood remain in the midst of your people Israel." Then they will be absolved of bloodguilt. So you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, because you must do what is right in the sight of Hashem. (D'varim 21:1-9)

In the case of a "found victim" of a homicide, the elders (=judges) of the nearest town are charged with the responsibility of declaring their own innocence - what a strange demand! Would we have thought that these sage and saintly leaders are common murderers? What is the gist of their declaration?

I would like to share two unrelated insights regarding the Eglah Arufah and then combine them to (hopefully) deepen our understanding of this declaration.

II

## THE GEMARA'S EXPLANATION

The Gemara (Sotah 38b) explains:

R. Yehoshua' ben Levi says: the 'Eglah 'Arufah only comes on account of inhospitality, as it says: "they shall declare: 'Our hands did not shed this blood...' " - would we have thought that the elders of the court are murderers [that they need to declare their innocence]? Rather, [what they are saying is]: "He did not come to us that we left him without food, he did not come to us for us to leave him without escort." (See the Sifri, where only "escorting" is mentioned).

In other words, the elders of the court are declaring that they did whatever they could to treat this poor victim correctly while passing through their town (or that they really weren't aware of his presence - both the Gemara and the Sifri could be read both ways).

Rabbi Yoel Sperka (who taught and inspired many of us here in Los Angeles during our high school years) asked an insightful question about this explanation:

What does hospitality have to do with homicide? Why would a declaration stating that "We did not kill this man" imply anything about the way the elders (or townspeople) treated him?

III

## A PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHT

Rabbi Sperka gave an insightful psychologically-driven explanation, as follows:

An individual who passes through a town is an outsider, a stranger. He is out of his element and, as such, is subject to a great deal of isolation - social isolation which can easily lead to existential isolation.

If someone comes through town and is virtually ignored by the townspeople - he comes to "Mincha/Ma'ariv" at shul and no one greets him, asks him home for a meal etc. - his sense of isolation is increased. Along with this, his sense of self-worth and self-esteem are threatened; he simply doesn't "make a difference" here.

If, at the end of this disappointing visit, he isn't even "escorted" out of town (this "escort" could come in the form of a ride to the edge of town, a request that he grace the presence of his hosts one more day, etc.) he leaves with a lowered sense of self and of his own significance.

Someone in this state of mind who is set upon by a highway robber has much less "fight" in him with which to defend himself. He is easily overpowered by the thug who jumps him outside of city limits.

Take, on the other hand, someone who has the opposite experience. He comes to town and is immediately the subject of a fight between families who are vying for the opportunity to host him, to

wine and dine him. When he must take his leave, his hosts beg him to stay one more day and, when he finally does leave, they escort him to the edge of the town and a few steps further, just to delay their parting.

Someone who has had this type of experience sets out on his inter-village journey with a stout heart and an increased (and, we hope, realistic) sense of his own worth and importance. Someone like this who is "jumped" outside of town has a real "fighting chance" (pun intended) to defend himself.

If we found such a person to be the victim of this type of crime, we can be assured that the attacker was, indeed, too strong for him - nothing that was in our power to do, short of staying with him the whole time, could have prevented this crime.

This is what the elders are declaring: If we saw this man, we did everything possible to enhance and maintain his sense of self-worth, such that any chance he had of defending himself was enhanced by his visit through our town.

(If, as the second half of the declaration implies, they did not see him, then they certainly did as much as they could...)

Thus far, Rabbi Sperka's explanation.

I would like to ask a question about this wonderful insight - in that something seems to be missing here.

Hospitality is generally understood to be a subset of the command: Love your fellow as yourself (see MT Evel 14:1). This is a Mitzvah which is incumbent on everyone, not just the court. Why is the court making this declaration - shouldn't every resident of the town state: "Our hands did not shed this blood..."?

(One could argue that the court is acting on behalf of the town; but if that were the case, the declaration should be "The hands..." not "our hands".)

Before addressing this question, here is a second observation about the "Eglah 'Arufah".

IV

#### YOSEF, YA'AKOV AND THE "AGALOT"

Subsequent to the dramatic and tense moment when Yoseph revealed his identity to his brothers, he sent them back to K'na'an to bring father Ya'akov down to Egypt. The Torah relates Ya'akov's reaction to the news of Yoseph's survival and position as follows:

So [Yoseph] sent his brothers away, and they departed; and he said to them, "See that you fall not out by the way." And they went up from Egypt, and came to the land of K'na'an to Ya'akov their

father, And told him, saying, "Yoseph is yet alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt." And Ya'akov's heart fainted, for he believed them not. And they told him all the words of Yoseph, which he had said to them; and when he saw the wagons (\*Agalot\*) which Yoseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Ya'akov their father revived; And Yisra'el said, "It is enough; Yoseph my son is yet alive; I will go and see him before I die." (B'resheet 45:24-28)

Hazal were bothered by a seeming incongruity of the report here. When the brothers told Ya'akov that Yoseph was still alive - indeed, very much alive - he did not believe them. Yet, when he saw the \*Agalot\* which accompanied the brothers, his spirit was revived and he affirmed that Yoseph was alive. If he didn't believe the brothers' announcement about Yoseph, what was there about the wagons that was more convincing? After all, if the brothers were trying to deceive him (yet again! - see B'resheet 37:31-33), couldn't they have also brought some wagons to bolster their story?

The Midrash (B'resheet Rabbah 94:3) explains as follows: R. Levi said in the name of R. Yohanan b. Sha'ul: [Yoseph] said to [his brothers]: If [Ya'akov] believes you, fine; if not, tell him as follows: "When I departed from you, were we not engaged in the parashah of \*Egla Arufah\*? - hence it says: "when he saw the wagons... the spirit of Ya'akov their father revived".

The play on words is obvious: Even though \*Agalah\* (wagon) and \*Eglah\* (calf) have the same root, they are unrelated words. Nevertheless, the close morphological association creates the possibility of a Midrashic connection. The wagons which Yoseph sent served as a secret communiqué; only Yoseph and Ya'akov knew what area of Halakhah they had last discussed, as they took leave from each other near Hevron, twenty-two years earlier.

This Midrash is accomplishing more than merely making a "stretched" word-play. If that were the entire purpose of this exegesis, R. Yohanan b. Sha'ul could have associated Ya'akov's revival with Korbanot (the bringing of an \*Egel\*, e.g. at the dedication of the Mishkan) or, better yet, with the wagons which the tribes dedicated to the Mishkan (Bamidbar 7). Why did the Midrash pick up on the \*Eglah Arufah\* ceremony as the clue which verified the brothers' report?

V

## THE ROLE OF THE JUDGES

In order to solve both of our questions, we need to take a look at the overall theme of the Parashah.

Parashat Shoftim is essentially about the various components of national leadership. It begins with the Mitzvah to appoint judges and officers and then details some of their duties. After that, we are introduced to the Melekh (king) and his restrictions/obligations. At the beginning of Chapter 18, the Torah teaches us a special Halakhah regarding the "tribe of leadership" (Levi) - and then we are (re)introduced to the office of "Navi" (prophet) and his tasks.

Within each privileged position, the Torah stakes out very clear limitations which are designed to maintain the leader's association and identification with the nation. The king is commanded to write a Sefer Torah and read it every day in order that "his heart should not become haughty relative to his fellows"; both the Kohanim and the Navi have similarly-g geared Halakhot, unique to their offices.

In much the same way, the Torah simultaneously elevates the Shoftim (judges) to an almost divine-like position of power (note that we are obligated by Torah law to follow their dictates - see BT Shabbat 23 in re: the blessing over Hanukkah lights) while instituting this ritual which insures that they will maintain a close relationship with the people they are meant to lead.

When the judges declare that they have not spilled this blood (= guarantee that this victim was treated hospitably), they are owning up to more than the treatment of this poor victim. They can only make this declaration if they are fully doing their job - leading the people of their city beyond the legal dimension of Torah - to the fully enhanced ethic of lovingkindness and concern for a fellow's welfare. Their declaration admits of a great responsibility not only towards visitors - but, ultimately, towards their townsfolk. The level of hospitality and kindness which is the norm in their town rests on their shoulders - if they can make this declaration, then they are indeed fulfilling their job. This means that the power invested in them by Torah law has not separated them from their "constituents" (as so often happens in any power position); rather, they have maintained a close relationship with the people and continue to keep their finger on the pulse of their community, which they are leading towards a full commitment to the ideals embodied in Torah.

With this approach in hand, we can now reevaluate the \*Agalot\* - \*Eglah Arufah\* connection made by the Midrash. When the brothers told Ya'akov that Yoseph was now the governor of Egypt, he didn't believe them. What didn't he believe? That Yoseph was alive - or that Yoseph was indeed the leader of Egypt? Consider this: What motivation would the brothers have to lie about such a matter? If Yoseph really was dead, what did they stand to gain by generating a rumor about his being alive?

Perhaps what Ya'akov didn't believe was - that "Yoseph" ruled in Egypt. In other words, Ya'akov may have been willing to grant that his son had somehow survived whatever terrors the past twenty-two years held for him - and had, through his brilliance, insight and charm, risen to a position of power in Egypt. As hard as this may have been to accept, it paled in significance next to the incredulous report that this governor of Egypt was still "Yoseph". Who ever heard of the vizier of a major world-power maintaining his youthful idealism and tender righteousness?

When the brothers reported: "Yoseph is yet alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt", Ya'akov did not believe them. When he saw the wagons, those \*Agalot\* which were a reminder of their last Halakhic discussion, he realized that Yoseph had never relinquished the values taught by his father. Leadership carries with it the burden of responsibility for all members of the nation - their physical welfare as well as their moral growth and ethical conscience. This is the lesson of the \*Eglah Arufah\* - a lesson Yoseph had never forgotten.

Text Copyright © 2014 by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom and **Torah.org**. The author is Educational Coordinator of the Jewish Studies Institute of the Yeshiva of Los Angeles.