

# THE UNDERLYING MOTIVATION

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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## Analyzing The Underlying Motivation of an Action

Parshas Shoftim contains the *Eglah Arufah* [Decapitated Calf]. If a dead body is found on the road outside the town, the *Beis Din* must determine the closest city and the Elders of that city must bring a *kaparah* [atonement]. It is actually a strange kind of atonement. They take a calf and chop off its head and carry out the procedure as described in this parsha and in Tractate Sotah. The Elders of the city must proclaim "Our hands did not spill this blood and our eyes did not see." In other words, we have no blood on our hands. It is not as though this person came to us and let us know he was travelling and that we let him go without any escort or provisions. We were unaware of this is a person and unfortunately, he was killed. But nevertheless, the nearest city needs to bring a *kaparah*. This is the essence of the parsha of *Eglah Arufah*.

There is a very strange Talmudic passage [Yoma 23]. This is an incredible Gemara and if one can get over the shock of the story told therein, there is a very important lesson to learn from it.

The *Beis HaMikdash* utilized a system known as "*Payis*" [lottery] to determine which Kohen would do which *Avodah* [Temple Service] each day. The "*Payis*" method for distribution of "honors" in the *Bais Hamikdash* [Temple] was actually a later development. The way it was done originally is that the first Kohen who reached the *Mizbayach* [Altar] is the one who got to do the *Avodah*. This created a running competition. Every Kohen wanted to do the *Avodah* so they said "On your mark, get set, go" and the Kohanim sprinted across the *Bais Hamikdash* courtyard and ran up the ramp leading to the *Mizbayach* to try to be the first ones to reach the top of the *Mizbayach*. That stopped after the incident mentioned in Yoma 23. The following is the incident mentioned there which triggered the implementation of the "*Payis*" system:

Two Kohanim were running up the ramp leading to the *Mizbayach*. They got within 4 *amos* [cubits] of one another. The Kohen who was losing the race took out a knife and stabbed the other Kohen in the heart! [This story is not to be confused with similar case in the Mishneh in Yoma which says that one Kohen pushed the other Kohen off the ramp and caused him to break a leg. This is a case the

Gemara brings in a Braisa -- also an early Tanaitic teaching -- which was much worse.] This by itself is amazing, but the story gets more incredible than that!

The Braisa continues that Rav Tzadok got up in the *Beis HaMikdash* and said "Our brethren, the Children of Israel, listen to me. Scripture says 'If a corpse will be found on the land that Hashem, your G-d gives you to possess it, fallen in the field, it was not known who smote him...Atone for Your people Israel that You have redeemed, Hashem, Do not place innocent blood in the midst of Your people Israel...' [Devorim 21:1-9] A city near a dead body must bring atonement. Here a murder occurred in the Beis HaMikdash. Who has to bring the Eglah Arufah for us? The City of Jerusalem? The Courtyard?"

The Talmud states that the people heard this arousing plea of Rav Tzadok and were inspired. All those who were assembled there broke down and started crying. The Gemara continues that the father of this Kohen who was stabbed approached his son who was literally bleeding to death and proclaimed "Let him be an atonement for *Klal Yisrael*. But you should know, my son is not dead yet and therefore the knife with which he was stabbed has not yet acquired *Tumah* [an impure status]..." The Braisa concludes **"This shows you that the impurity of the *Bais Hamikdash*'s utensils concerned them more than the spilling of human blood."**

The Gemara analyzes this Braisa. One of the things the Gemara asks is why was Rav Tzadok speculating on who needs to bring an *Eglah Arufah*? We know that one of the ten unique *halachos* that apply to the City of Jerusalem is that the Elders of the city do not bring an *Eglah Arufah*! The Gemara answers, that he was not asking a serious halachic question. He asked the question rhetorically to arouse the people to tears.

How should we view this Gemara? Here a father sees his son stabbed and dying. What does he say? Number one he says "This is a *Kaparah*." Number two he says "Don't worry, the knife is not yet *tameh*!" Is this a normal reaction? How would you react to such a situation?

Apparently, the Gemara is trying to say that what this father did is a super-human noble act. Usually when people witness such horrible personal tragedies they are consumed only with themselves, their own feelings and their own grief. However, this father was able to elevate himself above and beyond and say "No. I am worried about the *Kaparah* of *Klal Yisrael* and I am worried that the *Bais Hamikdash* utensils not become defiled." This seems to be an act of *Gevurah* – a superhuman manifestation of character nobility by this father.

This story reminds me of a story the Rosh Yeshiva, *zt"l*, always used to say over. The Alter of Slabodka had a son who was very dear to him who either died on Yom Tov or died on *Chol HaMoed Succos*. The *halacha* is that there is no *Aveilus* [mourning] allowed on Yom Tov. This is emotionally a very difficult *halacha* to observe. Rav Ruderman used to say over that on that Simchas Torah, the Alter of Slabodka danced and observed *Simchas Torah* as though nothing had happened. *Motzai Simchas Torah*, the Alter of Slabodka made *Havdalah*. He recited the blessing *Baruch Ata Hashem*

*haMavdil bein Kodesh l'Chol* (Blessed are You, Hashem, who separates between holy and profane) and then he fainted.

The Rosh Yeshiva used to say this shows the amazing character of the Alter of Slabodka. He was in such control of his emotions. When *Aveilus* is not allowed on Yom Tov, there can be no mourning on the Festival. But this is not because he had a heart of stone or he was unemotional or *chas v'Shalom* he did not care that he lost a son. But the *halacha* says "You shall rejoice on your Holiday", you cannot mourn on Yom Tov – so he rejoiced. The minute Yom Tov was over, he was consumed with such grief that he fainted.

We could say that this incident related in Yoma is a forerunner of the story with the Alter. Here is a person who sees his son stabbed in the *Beis HaMikdash*, but what does he do? He tells the assembled "My friends, don't worry – the knife is not yet *tameh*!" Great Gemara! Incredible Gemara!

However, look at the next line of that Gemara: "A question was posed: Was the spilling of blood exceptionally cheap in their eyes, but the observance of purity of vessels was observed at the proper level of observance or perhaps the spilling of blood had the appropriate impact for them, but they were exceedingly stringent regarding the purity of *keylim* [vessels]?" In other words, the Gemara is asking whether in the time of the Second *Bais Hamikdash* bloodshed was so rampant, that the father was immune to the personal tragedy that struck his family. Perhaps rather than speaking to the extremely pious level of the father, it speaks to the low level of the generation that murder was such a frequent event that people no longer were shocked by it. The other possibility the Gemara considers is that murder then was a tragic and chilling occurrence as always. Life was precious, bloodshed was not rampant, and the father was devastated by his son's murder. However, what was unique then, was that the purity of the *Bais Hamikdash's keylim* was so important to them that the father had the capacity to say "Okay, I lost my son, but at least the *Bais Hamikdash* vessels can be saved from *Tumah*."

One has to wonder – why on earth does the Gemara pose such a question? Who cares? What happened happened. There are no halachic ramifications for the present or the future, regardless of the reason for this incident. Since when does the Talmud pose sociological questions about the nature of society during the period of the Second Commonwealth? The Gemara seems to be concerned whether this rare occurrence was an act of nobility or an act of depravity. Why that concern? What does it teach us?

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz says this Gemara teaches a crucial lesson: We always need to ask ourselves – why did this happen? A person always needs to analyze his actions and be suspicious of his own motives, even when he is acting in an ostensibly "religious" manner. This means we can do things which are noble acts, things for which we can "pat ourselves on the back" and can say "Gee. I am a *Tzadik*." However, we cannot be satisfied with that. We must stop and ask ourselves: Is that what really happened over here? Is this an act of nobility and selflessness? Or maybe there is some other

motivation.

That is why the Gemara asks this question. The Gemara is telling us that sometimes people can do things and, on the surface, it looks like an incredible act of super human effort. But maybe not... It is a question that must be raised.

I will give another example of this. Rabbi Yakov Luban told me that he was in Yerushalayim this past summer. On Friday night, he was in Meah Shearim and he decided to go to a *Rebbe's Tisch*. He is walking down to the place where he believes the Rebbe usually holds his *Tisch* and nobody is there. He sees a classic *Yerushalmi Yid* [Jerusalem Jew] in his Sabbath finery on the street and asks him "Where is the *Rebbe's Tisch*?" He was told that the Rebbe didn't conduct the Tisch in this location he held it in another location. Then this *Yerushalmi Yid* engages Rabbi Luban in a conversation.

He asked, "Where are you from? Where is your father from? Where is your family from? What do you do?" It was a ten-minute conversation all about Rabbi Luban and his family history. Rabbi Luban is thinking to himself "Ah, what a fine Jewish person. He is a sweet *Yerushalmi Yid* who takes such an interest in a stranger he just met." He could have responded curtly "The Rebbe is not here" and been on his way. No. He stopped to engage me in conversation. He wants to know all about me and my family. Beautiful.

After the conversation came to an end, the *Yerushalmi Yid* says to Rabbi Luban "*Shabbos nit ge'ret* (a phrase one uses when introducing a topic on Shabbos which is not really appropriate to speak about on the Sabbath) are you interested in antiques?" All of a sudden, this beautiful *Yerushalmi Yid* that is so interested in Rabbi Luban and his father and his Zeida and his background -- it is all because he wants to determine if this guy was a wealthy American to whom he can make a sale so he closes the conversation with "*Shabbos nit ge'ret*, but are you interested in antiques?"

This is what the Gemara means when it says "Let's ask a question about the motivation..."

The truth of the matter is that we are not supposed to scrutinize other people's activities. We should always give them the benefit of the doubt. But we should ask the question about motivation of our own actions! Why did I do this? What is behind this?

This story in the Gemara at first glance and at second glance and at third glance seems to be an act of super-human *Gevurah* [strength of character]. But, not so quick! Human beings are complex. There are multiple layers to a person. We are like onions – it is possible to peel away layer after layer after layer before the true inner core becomes revealed. We need to be suspect – not so much of other people (although that *too* can sometimes be helpful) – but we certainly have to be suspect of ourselves. Why are we doing things and what motivates us?

This is the art of introspection and this is a large part of what the *mussar* movement was about -- To examine ourselves and to judge ourselves. The *Baalei Drush* [Masters of Homiletics] interpret "Judges and police shall you make for yourselves..." [Devorim 16:18]. The person who needs the

judge and the policeman is oneself. This is an example thereof. We must always ask ourselves "Why did I do this?" Was it *lishma* [altruistic]? Was it purely *lishma*... or was there some other factor going on? If a person holds himself to those standards, if he asks all those questions, then he usually has done the right thing. When we delude ourselves and say "Ah, look what a *Tzadik* I am" that is when we get into trouble.

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