

יְדִינוּ לֹא שָׁפְכוּ אֶת הַדָּם הַזֶּה

'Our Hands Did Not Shed this Blood': Leadership at a Time of Community Crisis

Facilitator Guide

Who is responsible for accidental death? What is the responsibility of leaders at a time of community crisis?

The Case of the *Egla Arufa*: The Calf of the Broken Neck

In Deuteronomy chapter 21, verses 1-9, we read of a tragic event and the atonement ritual to be performed thereafter. The Torah describes how a community finds a corpse of someone who has been killed and yet there are no leads as to the identity of the perpetrator/s of this crime.

The elders of the town conduct a ceremony of atonement (killing a calf) in which the elders come forward and declare:

“Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. Absolve Your people Israel whom You redeemed, and do not let guilt for the blood of the innocent remain among Your people Israel.”

Deuteronomy, 21:7-8

- As you read this text, what sense of responsibility do you feel comes out of it?
- Who are the figures expected to relate to the event?

The Talmudic sages were shocked at this biblical text:

Did it enter our hearts to think that the Elders of the court are murderers???. Why is it necessary for them to publicize that they did not kill him? Rather, they must declare: It is not so that this victim came to us and we dismissed him, and it is not so that we saw him and left him. In other words, he did not come to us and we in turn dismissed him without food, and we did not see him and then leave him without an escort. It is miserly people who do not provide others with food and cause them to travel to places where they might be murdered.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sotah, 45a

- *At first glance, what seems to be the Talmudic Rabbis' motivation in their questions?*
- *As we read through this teaching we discover that the rabbis, while decrying a bizarre insinuation that the elders are killers, indeed leave a fair amount of responsibility upon the elders. Describe this type of responsibility as opposed to the initial question in this text.*
- *In the case of the current hostages in Gaza, what might be some elements of responsibility that can be demanded of the leaders, even if they may not be able to get the hostages home immediately?*

Commentators throughout the ages have held a lengthy debate as to the goal of this ceremony. Is it a sacrifice in order to attain Divine atonement? Is it perhaps a ceremony to raise awareness in the community and have people conduct searches to find the murderer?

Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzatto (19th century, Italy) provides a striking approach to the question of responsibility for these events:

The essence of this mitzvah is that God intended for the entirety of the Jewish people to learn to act with mutual responsibility (kol yisrael areivin zeh la-zeh). Not for each individual to act independently, but rather that we must take responsibility for others and their actions, as one sin could leave a deep stain on the entire nation... and in the same manner as we have sacrifices of atonement for ones who acted by mistake so that they will not backslide so too we must atone for this innocent blood so that the entire community should see this ceremony, not backslide and from here forward will stand up to prevent the killing of innocent people in Israel.

- *According to Luzzato, who is supposed to learn about responsibility through this ceremony?*
- *According to Luzzatto, who should be responsible and whom are they responsible for?*

If you wish to explore the ceremony of the *Egla Arufa* further, [this is a great source sheet](#).