

"Our hands have not spilled this blood." (21:7)

Chazal question how anyone could imagine that the elders of *Klal Yisrael* could be murderers. When they say, "*Our hands have not spilled this blood*," they disclaim responsibility for not addressing the needs of the victim as he was leaving town. The *Torah* demands that leadership respond to the needs of every Jew.

How far does this responsibility extend? At what point are the elders not held culpable for their lack of "sensitivity"? The *Yerushalmi* in the *Talmud Sotah* makes an interpretation of this pasuk which carries with it remarkable ramifications. They posit that "this blood" is a reference to the killer himself! The *Yerushalmi* is speaking of a unique situation in which a man who is completely alone and in abject poverty could stoop to the level that he attacks another Jew out of desperation. The elders of that city must declare that in their city they would never permit one to remain in such poverty that he would resort to perform a criminal act.

The words of *Chazal* are absolutely mind-boggling! They express a demand for the concern of our fellow man that goes beyond the code of any civilized religion. We are, after all, not just any religion. We are *Klal Yisrael*, and our standard for *chesed*, kindness, is on a unique plateau. Imagine that someone in our community lacks the fortitude or self-esteem so that he would resort to a life of crime simply because he has no legitimate means of earning a livelihood. If this is the case, it is the collective fault of the entire Jewish community if he capitulates and gives in to his weakness. This should be a lesson for every Jew. Let us look around our communities; are there Jews in dire economic need? Are there people who have become so seriously depressed that they might resort to anything? If we do not heed this lesson, the onus of guilt for this unfortunate individual's actions will be on our heads.

We must endeavor to understand the rationale behind the *eglah arufah* ritual. The *Torah* demands that the elders take a heifer with which no work had been done, who had not pulled a yoke, and axe the back of its neck. This procedure is not consistent with the majority of *korbanos* we were accustomed to offer.

It also does not follow the usual patterns for atonement offerings. Furthermore, what is signified by brining an animal that has never worked or had a yoke put on it? Chopping off the heifer's head is a procedure which is uncommonly rare; what is its significance in this situation?

Horav Elchanan Sorotzkin, zl, addresses these questions and offers an insightful response. The ritual of the *eglah arufah* acknowledges the problem of a lack of sensitivity on the part of communal leadership to the plight of the individual Jew. Whether as a result of indifference or indolence, the elders failed to share in the "yoke" with the Jew who was down and out -- or simply all alone. They did not use their heads to recognize the problem. Because of their lack of interest, a man lays dead. Had they not been impervious to the needs of a fellow Jew, another Jew might still be alive.

Everyone concerns himself with himself, his family and his immediate friends. Had the people been more sympathetic, this Jew might well be alive. They must, therefore, take a heifer which never carried a yoke and axe its head. The head that did not think about another Jew, the head that did not carry together in the heavy yoke of anxiety that rested upon the shoulders of his fellow man. The elders must step forward and declare that they are not responsible for this man's death. They were concerned about every Jew. They thought about ways to help the Jew in need. Such elders have the privilege of declaring, "*Our hands have not spilled this blood.*"