

If a corpse will be found on the land. (21:1)

The Torah relates the *halachah* of *eglah arufah*, the axed heifer, which is used to atone for the murder of a Jew whose death came about possibly due to communal neglect or indifference. A public ritual is performed, during which the elders of the community closest to where the corpse is discovered declare their innocence and non-culpability in this incident. They then pray for forgiveness for the Jewish People. *Baal HaTurim* notes that the laws of *eglah arufah* are placed between “two wars”, the *parsha* of going out to war which is in *Parashas Shoftim*; and the war at the beginning of *Parashas Ki Seitzei*.

Horav Elchanan Sorotzkin, zl, offers a practical reason for this placement. During times of strife and war, the lone individual does not play an eminent role. Under normal circumstances, the concerns of the communal leadership are focused on the collective community. The fellow who is all alone, who has personal issues with which he is dealing, does not make it to the top of their wish list. It is not that they do not care; it is just that there are more important and greater issues to address. The little guy, the lonely fellow, the kid at risk, the family at risk, just get lost in the shuffle for the greater good.

The Torah teaches us that despite the many casualties of war, we are exhorted not to forget the individual. His death is of equal importance – even though he was not a soldier. If we could somehow have prevented his death – and we did not – then we are culpable.

Hashem is unlike a mortal king of flesh and blood. As *Rashi* states (commentary to *Shemos* 15:3), *Hashem ish milchamah, Hashem Shemo*, “Hashem is Master of war – His Name is Hashem.” This is unlike a king of flesh and blood whose primary concern during a time of war is the battlefield. The individual citizen plays no role when the king is otherwise occupied with the war effort. Hashem, however, is Master of war, but He is also Hashem, the Name reserved for the Attribute of Mercy. He still “makes time” for His creations, to feed and nurture them.

Much has been written about the perils of indifference. It is a lack of emotion whereby the individual demonstrates neither hate nor anger, but simply a lack of caring, a lack of acknowledgment. When one is indifferent to another’s plight he is implying, “your suffering is not even worth my consideration. You are nothing to me.” With this in mind, imagine a poor fellow, down and out, no friends, a mind filled with troubles (some self-induced; others, the result of hard luck) comes to town, and everyone ignores him. They look right through him. It is only after a tragedy occurs that we wake up that “he” was the fellow that was sitting in the back of *shul*, to whom no one gave the time of day – not because they did not like him, but rather, because they did not care.

We see signs along the side streets, “Drive as if your children live here.” I am sure it serves as a speeding deterrent the first time one notices it. After that? Indifference. In a conversation with the superintendent at a state correctional facility, where some of the guards and staff act in a denigrating, almost hateful manner to those interned under their care, I suggested placing a sign at

the entrance to the guards locker room stating: "Make believe it was your own son or daughter that was incarcerated here." The response was incredulity and mirth. Nobody cares.

We are different. *Klal Yisrael* cares about the individual. Regardless of how much is on our plate, we always make room to help someone in need. This is what *eglah arufah* teaches us. The following story is special, because it demonstrates the empathy manifest by a young girl for a friend. While some might have been indifferent, out of fear of the unknown, something which they could not understand, this girl considered the feelings of her friend and took action.

A family decided to switch to a totally vegan diet. It all went well until the mother began to experiment with the many recipes that she had obtained. One day, she prepared a dish made from broccoli. Everyone ate, except for their twelve-year-old daughter, who absolutely refused to touch it. The mother attempted to convince her – to no avail. She would not eat.

Suddenly, the girl said, "I will do what you ask of me – on one condition: that you allow me to do something that I want to do." The parents figured, what could a young girl want anyway? So, we will allow her the one thing that she asks, and, in return, she will listen to us. The parents agreed – until they heard her request. "I want to shave the hair off my head!" she declared. The reader can very well imagine what went through the parents' minds. "You have such beautiful hair. Why would you do this to yourself?" they asked. She was adamant, unwilling to change her mind. This is what she wanted. The parents realized that if they refused her request, she would lose her trust in them. Reluctantly, they deferred to her request and allowed her to have her head shaved.

The next morning was a school day, and the young girl put on a cap to cover her bald head. Her father took one look and said, "I will accompany you to school today." He knew that his daughter would be subject to stares and possibly, ridicule. He wanted to be there for her. As they pulled up to the school, another young girl, obviously a child who had gone through a round of chemotherapy, pulled up at the school and entered the building accompanied by her father. The man looked at the father of the first girl and said, "Your daughter is a *tzadeikes*, righteous. She has been visiting my daughter every day since she was diagnosed. She brings her homework from school and works with her. Now that, *Baruch Hashem*, the treatment has ended, my daughter was ready to return to school, but ashamed because of her bald head. Your daughter offered to have her hair shorn, so that my daughter should not be the only one in school who looked different."

This young girl was prepared to suffer personal humiliation, so that she could in some way ease the pain that her friend was experiencing. This action, which bespeaks the meaning of *nosei b'ol im chaveiro*, carrying the yoke together with one's friend, stands in contrast to the indifference of those who turn their collective heads away, so that they should not be compelled to see the misery of their fellow – and impugn their sensibilities.