

## WE ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE

By Rabbi David Algaze

*“If a corpse will be found in the land...fallen in the field, it was not known who killed him, your elders and judges shall go out and measure toward the cities that are around the corpse...(and) the elders will say “Our hands have not spilled this blood and our eyes did not see...” (Devarim 21:1-9)*

This entire passage arouses our curiosity. What is this all about? Why this fuss? If a corpse is found and no one knows who killed him, the judges of the Highest Court, the Sanhedrin, have to come all the way from Jerusalem and proceed with this ceremony of the “Egla Arufa” (The axed heifer). The corpse could not be buried until this procedure took place. It first involved the calling of the judges from Jerusalem, a trip that could take several hours or even days. As they approached the corpse, the judges themselves—not their surrogates—had to engage in the process of measuring the distance from the corpse to the closest city. This step involved many difficulties, for example, the judges had to climb hills and descend to the valleys in an effort to arrive at the correct measurement. Sometimes even an inch could make the difference as to which city was nearest and thus the measurement had to be very accurate.

We must assume that a throng of people from all the surrounding towns must have gathered to follow the activities of the judges and awaited the outcome as to the city that had to proceed with the ceremony. Meanwhile we must presume that all activity had come to a standstill. The message here was that a death is no small matter, something to be dismissed as something that happens. This entire procedure sensitized the people to the sanctity of human life. A murder is a big deal, and we dare not treat it with indifference or apathy!

The entire ritual made a very profound impression on people by shaking off their indifference to the loss of life and lack of concern for others. Furthermore, the ceremonial procedure made them aware of the tragedy of a life that ends before its time, a life that ends without giving fruits. That is the reason why the heifer has to be one that never worked and the valley a place that cannot be sown, to symbolize the tragedy of this loss—a man who died before he was able to produce fruits!

Once it was determined which was the nearest city to the corpse, the elders of that city had to bring a heifer to a valley that was never sown and axe the back of its neck. Then the elders shall wash their hands over the heifer and say, “Our hands have not spilled this blood and our eyes did not see”. This declaration by the elders is by far the most intriguing and incomprehensible part of this service. Who could have suspected that these honorable judges were guilty of murder? the Talmud asks. Rather, the meaning of this declaration is that “He did not come to us and we dismissed him without providing food for him and without accompanying him a little on his way.” (Sota 47) From here we may learn that murder is not only the act of killing someone with our hands, but that the lack of involvement and the omission of certain acts of kindness towards others makes us responsible for the demise and loss of these poor individuals. It does not matter who actually killed him. In some way, we all are somehow responsible for allowing this person to be in the situation in which he was murdered. When we fail to see what other people need and we do not act with the proper sensitivity and response, we are indeed responsible. As it has been said, “We may not be all guilty, but we are all responsible.” The burden of accountability falls upon all of us, especially those in the city from which he probably just came. Those who ignored him, those who failed to see that he needed some help, those who shrugged their shoulders and averted their eyes—they too are “murderers.”

In this beautiful rite of the “axed heifer”, we find a fundamental concept that our society has lost. The sacredness of human life and the crime of indifference to other people’s suffering are the main lessons of this passage. The Rabbis sensitized us further to see in the profound details of the ceremony some essential applications to our daily life and the health of our society.

We all need to avoid the apathy and lack of concern that plagues us in these busy times. We are always preoccupied by something and we are often blinded to others’ suffering. This is a lesson to lift us away from the malignant indifference that threatens our society. We need to attend to the needs of those around us. Lastly, we need to share the pain of our people in Eretz Israel, and especially those who are sacrificing themselves to settle in the land. The anguish of the people uprooted from Gush Katif should gnaw at us and make us feel their pain. Indifference and lack of sympathy denotes a coldness that destroys what is most precious about being human.