



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM
SHOFTIM • שופטים / TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

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PARSHA:

SHOFTIM / שופטים

SERMON TITLE:

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY!

PLEASE NOTE:

The English translation of this week's sermon (Parshas Shoftim) and that of the previous week (Parshas Re'eh) are suggestions of two different translation styles, compared to the first three weeks D'vorim thru Eikev).

Please let us know your feedback as to your preference (Parshas Reeh, Parshas Shoftim, or Parshas D'vorim thru Eikev).



**PARSHAS SHOFTIM:
TAKE RESPONSIBILITY!**

Is each individual solely responsible for his or her own wellbeing? Or, does some obligation fall on society to protect the welfare of its citizens, particularly those who are unable to care for themselves?

Perhaps it seems strange, but the Jewish perspective on this question begins by examining the well-known custom of washing ones hands after attending a funeral, before entering a home.

The most common explanation is that one is obliged to wash hands to remove the impure spirit contracted by being in the presence of, or having contact with, a corpse. Therefore, we wash our hands, so that no spirit of impurity enters the house along with us.

Yet, we find another reason for the custom toward the end of this week's Parsha known as the "Eglah Arufah," literally, "the Calf of the Broken Neck." What is this the section of "Eglah Arufah" about?

"If someone slain is found lying in the open and the identity of the slayer is not known," the Torah says. Then what are we to do? And the Torah instructs us, "your elders and officials shall go out," that is, five elders from the great Bais Din in Yerushalayim travel to the field where the corpse had been found and measure its distance between the two nearest cities, identifying the one that is



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closer. Immediately thereafter, they bury the corpse precisely where it lay and finally return to Yerushalayim. Then the Bais Din of the city closer to the corpse brings a calf to a strongly flowing river, where it's killed.

When the Torah insists that "all the elders of the city" attend the Eglah Arufah ceremony, it means that literally all the elders of the city, even if there were a hundred, must appear at the river. There they all wash their hands while reciting "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done, inferring, as the Rambam puts it, that "just as our hands have been made clean by this water, so our hands are clean from the murder of this corpse."

The Ramban observes that the Eglah Arufah ceremony is the origin of washing ones hands upon leaving the cemetery, meaning, "I share no guilt for this person's death." This, of course, is precisely the same as the common expression "I wash my hands of his blood," meaning "I have no responsibility toward his death."

Yet, the Talmud raises the perceptive question, "Why would we in any way assume that a Bais Din would spill blood? Could we imagine that elder rabbis, trembling with age, would be obliged to announce that their hands had not shed innocent blood, that they, too, had been suspect?"



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No, the implication was not that they literally committed the murder, but even more so as the Talmud says, "he didn't come to us and we let him depart the city without provisions for the road, nor did we see him and let him leave without a proper escort."

From all this we clearly derive that the concept of murder is exceptionally broad. Responsibility for murder does not fall merely upon the one who literally spills the blood. Should the deed occur in the open field, the entire community, and particularly its elders, judges and leaders, bear the responsibility for the murder.

The Yerushalmi adds a stronger point, the elders announce: we did not have the criminal in custody and then let him go free, thus enabling this murder to occur.

Thus, the Torah teaches us the level of responsibility that a leadership in each community should take –making sure to care for the well being of the public so that they too could in clear conscience say such words. But if they did not provide such basic provisions for the travelers, then the entire community shares the guilt and cannot say, "Our hands did not spill this blood."

What, then, does this section of today's Parsha particularly teach us? What does this mean in Avodas Hashem – on a spiritual plane?



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Thousands of children are lost to the Jewish people each day because their parents provide them with an excellent secular education, but provide them with no Jewish education whatsoever.

A child who receives an excellent secular education but not a Jewish one, the Rebbe says, is like a fish in an aquarium. Such a fish may appear beautiful and well-tended, but it is not in its natural habitat.

Similarly, a Jewish child's natural habitat is in the living waters, the great ocean that are the true source of life which is the Torah.

The fish in an aquarium requires the special care of feeding, changing of water and other forms of special care. Without these, it will die. However, when the fish lives in its natural surroundings, its living water, one need not care about its feeding and welfare. Why? Because it's in its proper place, it's natural habitat.

Our responsibility is to identify Jewish children who live in the aquarium and immerse them into their truthful, natural habitat. We cannot say that this is the parents' sole responsibility. Rather, the responsibility is upon all of us, for we are obliged to do everything we can to look toward the day that we might say, "Look at the great generation that we have raised!"