



# GROWTH

## At The SHABBAT TABLE

### PARSHAT SHOFTIM

#### Battling Indifference

A comedian once joked about the curious culture of New Yorkers, pointing out the mix of humor and quiet shame in their tendency to remain detached from those around them. In a city defined by constant movement and crowded spaces, people often retreat into themselves, avoiding small talk or even the briefest acknowledgment of others. Whether on the bustling sidewalks, in a crowded subway car, or sharing the close quarters of an elevator, the unspoken rule seems to be one of silence and distance. This tendency, while amusing to outsiders, speaks to the unique rhythm of city life where personal space and anonymity are guarded just as fiercely as time and efficiency.

The end of this week's parsha (Deut. 21:1-9) discusses the ritual of the *Egla Arufa*, when a murdered person was found in the field and the killer was unknown. The judges would measure which city was closest, and the elders of that city took responsibility. They brought a young heifer that had never been worked to a barren, uncultivated valley, where its neck was broken from behind. The elders then washed their hands over the calf and declared, "Our hands did not spill this blood, nor did our eyes see it," affirming that they had not neglected their duty to protect or provide for the victim. Finally, the kohanim prayed for atonement, asking G-d to remove the bloodguilt from Israel.

While we don't see this exact ritual carried out too often today, its message reverberates with practical significance. This stranger who had been found dead in the field may have fallen prey to tragedy as a result of improper hospitality from the city's residents. Perhaps no one cared to help, protect, feed, encourage, or even acknowledge this individual as he wandered alone and helpless. Our Sages teach (Sotah 45b-46a) that the elders' declaration wasn't so much literal denial as it was a symbolic statement. "We did not see him and ignore him," they stated.

The call to action couldn't be louder. We mustn't wait to make such declarations after tragedy strikes. While we still have the ability to be there for others – in whatever capacity – let us strengthen our resolve to uplift and give to those around us, ensuring that no one in our watch slips through the cracks.

I believe that this theme offers yet another key insight. As a

nation that has been in exile for way too long, we are no strangers to calamity and devastation. We've practically lost count of the amount of terror attacks, shootings, and bombings. The amount of precious lives lost to illnesses and conflicts over the years. The hostages. The soldiers. The tragic natural disasters and accidents. We have collectively experienced more than the human brain can imagine. And even aside from the deaths and murders, how much other pain can be found in the Jewish nation? The ill, the financially struggling, the singles waiting years to find the right one, the couples struggling to have children, those with children that have lost their path... Suffering almost became so secondhand that many might find themselves somewhat numb. How often do we see notifications on YWN, for instance, of some terrible tragedy – and we mindlessly just scroll along our phones! No heartbreak, no emotion, no donation, no prayer – just another post to read and clear our messages...

To prevent our society from becoming numb to violence and grief, the Torah prescribes this *Egla Arufa* ritual as both justice and therapy. Our parsha stresses the pricelessness of every soul in G-d's eyes, imploring us to adopt the same view. No life is anonymous before Hashem, so much so that even a single unnamed traveler receives a national ritual. In fact, the Midrash suggests that the heifer's broken neck symbolizes and atones for a life cut short before its potential was fulfilled. Others may react by shrugging their shoulders and avoiding blame; the Chosen Nation is urged to follow a higher standard of communal introspection and action.

May G-d hasten the redemption and no more tragedy should strike our People. If, however, we still receive unfortunate news, let us take this message to heart and not remain indifferent. Let us take a moment – even *half* a moment of our busy and hectic day – to really try and feel the emotion. If we can donate, if we can show solidarity, and most of all – if we can pray for the victims and their families, we can show Hashem and the world that against all odds and despite all the collective trauma, the Jewish Nation still has a heart that's very much alive.

*"If you must look back, do so forgivingly. If you will  
look forward, do so prayerfully. But the wisest course  
would be to be present in the present gratefully."*

#### **Refuah Sheleimah, b'toch she'ar cholei Yisrael:**

Ariel Ben Frida	Rahamim Ben Shifra	Yitzhak Ben Naama	Miriam Chava Chana Devora Bat Shaindel Chaya Rivka
Frida Bat Yaffa	Yisrael Ben Miriam	Ehud Ben Miriam	Shlomo Zalman Ben Miriam
Yitzhak Tzvi Ben Raizel Miriam	Dovid Aryeh Ben Sarah Chana	Binyamin Mordechai Ben Yael	Yafia Bat
Motaram	Yitzhak Eizik Ben Sara	Rachel Hinda Bat Chaya Yona	Chaya Bat Tzipora
			Yosef Yitzhak Ben Baila