

Torah Portion: **Shoftim**
Book of Deuteronomy

Common everyday occurrence: A parent comes home to her two children and finds food spilled on the floor. “Who is going to clean this up?” Each child offers the same denial, “I didn’t do it! Why should I clean it up?” The parent listens and then says, “You’ll both clean it up.” In the end, no one’s happy, or, from the “mouth of babes”: ‘It’s not fair!’

On a more serious level, the Book of Deuteronomy (chapter 21ff) deals with a murder victim discovered lying in the field between two towns. The authorities determine the distance between towns and then require all the inhabitants of the closest town to perform a detailed ritual of absolution and swear an oath that they were not responsible for this death.

Rabbi Brad Artson asks an important question regarding the above account: “If they are innocent, why did they need to make any declaration at all? If they are innocent, what is the guilt that requires absolution?” His question finds its answer in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel who teaches, “in a free society, only some are guilty, but all are responsible.”

Living in a democracy is not about living without restraint but assuming responsibility. We may not be guilty of the violence that occurred in Charlottesville, VA, but we do bear responsibility for the precipitating conditions. Rabbi Artson goes on to write, “We are responsible for the fact that our world has not created a level playing field on which racial identity is irrelevant for predicting social standing, income levels, educational advancement, or death expectancy rates. . . . We are responsible for the fact that our nation consumes such a disproportionate amount of the world’s natural resources.” With regard to the murder victim found in a field on the outskirts of town, the medieval biblical scholar Ibn Ezra writes, “the entire nation requires absolution because it neglected to keep the roads safe.”

The Jewish opportunity to take stock of oneself (*Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur*) is soon upon us. We can ill afford to remain indifferent to the steady drip of willful hatred, racism, and anti-Semitism. Nor can we turn a blind eye to melting ice caps, rising oceans, and global warming. For the American Jew, caring for life’s conditions is the incumbent responsibility for living in a democracy; the obligation for calling oneself a Jew.

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