

## Parashat Shoftim, Rabbi James Proops

We have in this week's parasha the intriguing *mitzvah* of the *Egla Arufa* which commands, should an unknown corpse be found beyond the walls of a city, that the Elders of the nearest city take a calf, which has never been put to work, to a 'rocky valley' which cannot be used for planting and break the calf's neck (Devarim 21:1-9). Upon reading these *pesukim* we are left with an array of questions as to the seemingly bizarre and brutal instructions. Why must they bring specifically a calf that has not yet performed any work? Furthermore, why bring it to a place which has no potential to be worked? And finally, why do they break its neck, an act which seems futile and serves no obvious purpose.

We can suggest an answer to these questions by analyzing another *mitzvah* recorded in this week's parasha which features in the immediately preceding verses. The Torah states,

“כִּי־תִצֹר אֶל־עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְשׁוֹתָהּ לֹא־תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצָהּ לְנֹדַח עָלָיו גְּרֹזֵן כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכֵל וְאֵתוּ לֹא תִכְרֹת...”

"When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, do not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them, for from it you will eat and you shall not cut it down..."

These *pesukim* serve as the source for the obligation of *Bal Tashchit*, forbidding wasteful destruction. The Kli Yakar (d.1619) explains that regarding this prohibition, the Torah is not merely concerned about the loss of fruits which are currently growing on the tree. Rather, the Torah cares about all of the future fruit that this tree could potentially produce. Besides the apples themselves, each fruit contains seeds which carry the potential to engender yet more trees and untold numbers of fruits in the future. To cut down such a tree systematically obliterates all of that incredible untold potential, with the mere stroke of an ax. Therefore the Torah forbids cutting it down as Hashem abhors wasted potential.

Based on this explanation and the juxtaposition of the *mitzvot* of *Bal Tashichit* and *Egla Arufa* we can now suggest a deeper understanding of what the calf in the valley represents. If we must do all we can to protect the potential offered by a fruit tree, then how much more tragic is the loss of potential from a human life.

The case of the *Egla Arufa* is regarding the death of a person, in the prime of life, cut down, destroyed, possible future achievements wiped out, potential for accomplishments nullified. A true tragedy.

With this in mind, we can understand the symbolism of bringing a calf which has not done any work, to a place where no work can be done. Rashi explains, citing the gemmara in *Sota* "Says HaKadosh Boruch Hu, bring a one-year-old calf who hasn't produced any fruit, and break her neck in a place which can produce no fruit, to atone for the killing of this person, who was not allowed to produce fruit." The *Egla Arufa* is the quintessential symbol for wasted potential.

The Torah's reaction to one who died and was thereby stripped of his potential, is that the loss must be atoned for to such a degree, we can only imagine how Hakadosh Baruch Hu perceives a person who is physically alive yet neglects the opportunity to utilize their capabilities and promise. The message of the *Egla Arufa* is that we must all realize that each individual is a unique source of untold potential, just like a tree which bears fruit. The Maharal explains that man is named *Adam*, after the earth (*Adama*), which possesses endless capacity for sprouting forth and growth.

As we begin the new month of Elul and Rosh Hashana 5781 is on the horizon, we have the opportunity to ponder our unique potential and our capacity for growth and spiritual achievement. The next step will be to actualize our potential and make it count. The coming year affords us new opportunities and new beginnings. Instead of striving for mediocrity, we will begin a clean slate and aspire to excellence.