

In his book, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, Rabbi Alan Lew of blessed memory, says that this week's Parasha, Shoftim, is one in a series that exhorts us to "wake up" as we approach the High Holidays.

I get the sense, reading the Parshiyot of Dvarim, the last book of the Torah that we read during these months, that Moshe must also have felt this urgency, this need to try one last time to get everything right. He discussed many mitzvot in Parashat Shoftim, some as repetition and some new ones. Callie Chadowitz will cover a fair sampling of them in his bar mitzvah dvar tomorrow, but tonight I want to focus on a commandment that Callie won't be touching, perhaps because it is so completely puzzling.

Parashat Shoftim ends with Deuteronomy 21: verses 1-9. This episode is known in commentators' shorthand as the "eglah ha'arufah" – the calf with its neck broken. I'll describe it in shorthand: If some stranger is found dead outside of any city limits, the elders from the town nearest to where the person was found must take a year old heifer to wadi and break its neck there. Those elders must wash their hands over the heifer, and proclaim, "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. Absolve, Oh God, whom you redeemed, and do not let guilt for the blood of the innocent remain among your people Israel." And they will so be absolved.

Now, you may be saying, "*what?*" Kill an innocent cow to absolve the death of a stranger?! But I have to confess, this is one of my favorite passages in Torah, because I just *love* what the centuries of interpretation have done with it.

The mefarshim, the commentators wanted to know why the elders of the city should be held responsible for the death of a stranger outside of the city. Rashi, in 11th century France, offered that the phrase: “Our hands have not spilled this blood, our eyes did not see,” signifies not only the obvious fact that the elders didn’t commit or witness the murder, but that they didn’t know this person was passing through the area – for if they had known they would have provided him with food and escort.

The clear implication here is that if they *had* known a stranger was in the area, if they had knowingly *failed* to provide food and escort, they would not be able, as the text so literally allows, to “wash their hands” of the guilt over this person’s death. According to Rashi’s understanding, there was a clear obligation for the townspeople to provide food and safe passage to any stranger passing through.

Food and accompaniment: what is so essential about these two things? Food is clear: wanderers and strangers have no land holdings, no access to growing their own crops. Lack of food is often what causes people to become migrants; whether is the environmental refugees from Africa drowning in the Mediterranean, or the migrants in California, sending money for food home to family in Central and South America. This is why the Torah exhorts us repeatedly to feed and share our produce with the stranger.

The issue of the escort touches on another type of nourishment. It is not just that case that solo travelers have always been vulnerable, though that is certainly true. There is also a truth that to be a stranger in a strange place is to be *lonely*, to feel alienated, unseen, unacknowledged. And so Rashi's assumption is that our obligation to the unknown stranger includes not just physical nourishment, but escort - *company*.

How could this understanding play out in our lives today?

I have heard Rabbi Steve Greenberg, a gay Orthodox rabbi and outspoken activist for gays and lesbians in the Orthodox world, apply this Torah portion to LGBTQ allyship. It is not enough, he says, for teacher to be friendly to a gay or lesbian student in their classroom, or for a kid to be fine with his or her friend being gay when the two of them hang out together. True allyship requires accompaniment: making sure that the child who might be bullied has company walking the hallways of the school.

Let us consider how we could take this obligation upon ourselves: the obligation to make sure that all who passed through our domain were properly fed and unharmed. The obligation to have a safe and welcoming community, not only when people approach us directly, but when they pass through our orbits.

I have been part of many conversations lately about how TBI could become a more welcoming community. I have heard from many folks about how intimidating it was to walk into this space for the first time. This parasha brings me back to the questions. I think of all of the kinds of company that we could be making sure to offer: It could be accompanying someone who is new to the

community on their way through the prayerbook, sticking near them and showing them where we are. It could be about making sure that people who need rides to and from services are receiving offers. It could be simply going up to someone who seems disoriented at kiddush, and accompanying them through the room, helping them find their place in this community.

This is not something that any one committee or the professional staff of TBI can accomplish. To be a welcoming community requires everyone to take the mitzvah of welcoming upon themselves. This is why, in Shoftim, the elders of the entire town are the ones who must do the ritual that will absolve the town: because all are responsible.

Shoftim is almost always the first parashah in the month of Elul. The fact that it ends with this episode pushes me to ask: Have I done my part of the collective obligation to make the public domain safe and welcoming? What can I do going forward to make sure that any space over which I have even the slightest bit of ownership is as safe and welcoming as possible?

May we each be blessed to know how much power we have to create culture. And like the elders in Shoftim, may we always be able to proclaim that we have done everything we could create a safe and welcoming community.