Jewish Tribune – Shoftim

**The Message of the Unsolved Murder**

Our Parsha deals with the topic of war. But the enigmatic episode of eglah arufah - the procedure to be followed in the event of an unsolved murder - appears in the middle of all this. Why? What is the connection?

Let us consider the matter of war that our parsha and next week’s parsha deal with. The Torah sets out three areas of warfare.

The first is the meshuach milchama – the kohen who addresses the troops prior to battle, admonishing them not to fear the enemy and lists the various individuals who are exempt from military duty. A man who has just married or built a new home or vineyard or one who is afraid and soft-hearted.

We then have the prohibition of cutting down a fruit tree when laying siege and the parsha closes with eglah arugah – dealing with an unsolved murder.

Next week’s parsha begings with the yefas to’ar, the female captive of war and the conditions under which a soldier may marry her.

So three topics of war: meshuach milchama, destroying fruit trees, yefas to’ar and eglah arufah sneaked in the middle.

Let us now consider the exemptions from battle. Our parsha lists four: a man who has just married or built a new home or vineyard or one who is afraid and soft-hearted.

Why are these exemptions? I can understand someone who is timid and scared. He is a liability on the battlefield. But the other exemptions seem tenuous. Try getting off jury service by saying you just build a new vineyard!

The answer I once heard is that when discussing battle, we run the risk of losing the value of human life. War is tragic and is an aberration from normal life. It is sad that even today, we are witnessing continued atrocity in Ukraine and other parts of the world. And of course, there is ongoing tension and conflict in Eretz Yisroel. War has many fallouts and debasing the value of human life is one.

The episode of eglah arufah teaches us the value of human life. The Beis din closest to the corpse and then the Sanhedrin itself get involved.

The Abarbanel explains that the eglah arufah ceremony was meant to shock the people living in the surrounding cities surrounding the murder site. By gathering everyone together and decapitating the calf, the zekeinim, the leaders of the city itself force the interruption of everyday life in order to force the onlookers to stop, think and take responsibility. Perhaps they did not commit the murder, but at some level, they lived in a society which created the conditions which enabled a man to be murdered. When someone is killed, life cannot just carry on as usual.

This explains the three curious exemptions. Before we go to war, and risk devaluing our sensitivity to human life, we remind ourselves that Yiddishkeit values building over destroying. We value people over and their manifold contributions even though we recognise the sad and occasional need for war. We remind ourselves of the joy and primacy of marriage, of building a home and of working Hashem’s world.

Perhaps the take home from this week’s parsha and the above idea, is to pay a little more attention to value of human life. What could this mean here in sunny Golders Green, or indeed far beyond?

Mark Twain once joked that man was created just a little bit below the angels, and just a little bit above the Frenchman.  The Alter of Slabodka (Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel zt”l) would have disagreed. Both are above the angels.

Man is greater than the angels in that he has freedom of choice, bechirah – something that the angels do not possess.  In this, man reflects the HKBH Himself.

I try hard to look at each student in school as a whole world. After all, think of all the years of effort it took to raise this child until now, think of all the relationships this child has. Parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins, friends, acquaintances. What are the dreams and fears of this child? There is so much that makes up the student you see in from of you. And that is true of every human being. Certainly someone who has walked this planet longer than the teenagers that I am privileged to teach.

Every person is really a whole world and has a tzelem Elokim which means the world was created and continues to be renewed just for this person.

And even beyond our own community we can pay a little more attention to the value of human life. Simply saying good morning or thank you to a colleague or to the postman or the person delivering the latest Amazon delivery. Or even the workman who is fixing the pavement on your street. You will be benefitting from his work much more than he will.

Aside from the kiddush Hashem generated, it helps us learn the lesson from this week’s parsha, that war leads to the debasement of human life and eglah arufah serves to elevate it.

**Rabbi Golker is the Menahel of Hasmonean High School. To listen to his shiurim, go to TorahAnytime.com or JewishPodcasts.Org**