



The final section of Parashat Shoftim introduces the ritual known as *egla arufa*, which a community is required to perform upon the discovery of a murder victim. The leadership of the city nearest to the site of the unsolved crime must break the neck of a calf in an undeveloped area in the city and wash their hands over the carcass. They then make a formal declaration disavowing any responsibility for the crime, and the *kohanim* attending the ceremony utter a prayer appealing to God for atonement on behalf of *Am Yisrael*.

Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:40), offers the following explanation for the reason behind this ritual:

The beneficial character of the law concerning "the breaking of the neck of a heifer" is evident. For it is the city that is nearest to the slain person that brings the heifer, and in most cases the murderer comes from that place. The elders of the place call upon God as their witness, according to the interpretation of our Sages, that they have always kept the roads in good condition, have protected them, and have directed every one that asked his way; that the person has not been killed because they were careless in these general provisions, and they do not know who has slain him. As a rule the investigation, the procession of the elders, the measuring, and the taking of the heifer, make people talk about it, and by making the event public, the murderer may be found out, and he who knows of him, or has heard of him, or has discovered him by any clue, will now name the person that is the murderer... It is well known that it is considered great wickedness and guilt on the part of a person who knows the murderer, and is silent about him whilst the elders call upon God as witness that they know nothing about the murderer...

According to Maimonides, the purpose behind the *egla arufa* procedure is to find the culprit. Since the elders declare before God that they – as representatives of the city – bear no responsibility for the crime, anybody with information would certainly come forward and share it with the authorities before they issue such a declaration. And in general, the entire procedure generates interest and conversation, which increases the chances of cracking the case.

Nachmanides, in his Torah commentary, cites and disputes this explanation of Maimonides. He argues that this purpose – to find the criminal – does not account for the "atonement" achieved through the process, as the Torah explicitly writes, "the blood shall be atoned for them" (21:8). In fact, Maimonides himself concludes his description of the *egla arufa* procedure (in *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhoh Rotzei'ach 9:3) by commenting, "The Almighty then atones for the [spilt] blood." Seemingly, then, this ritual is intended not merely for the pragmatic purpose of assisting the authorities investigating the crime, but

also for the spiritual purpose of earning atonement. Since the murderer has not been captured and punished for his crime, some other means of expiation is necessary, and for this reason, it would appear, the Torah required conducting this ritual.

Maimonides perhaps held that it is precisely the effort undertaken to find the killer that earns atonement on behalf of the people. In cases such as this, when the victim was found in uninhabited territory, it is easy for the nearby townspeople to absolve themselves of the responsibility to find the killer. In order for *Am Yisrael* to achieve atonement for this heinous crime, a community in the area must assume responsibility and make a concerted effort to solve the mystery. The Torah therefore established the *egla arufa* procedure, in order to ensure that a nearby community shoulders the responsibility and take steps towards finding the criminal. In Maimonides' view, the *egla arufa* ritual achieves atonement not through some intrinsic, spiritual power, but rather through its serving as an important means towards rooting out the evil that plagues the nation.

This is perhaps an important lesson for us to bear in mind as we begin preparing for the coming High Holiday season. We earn atonement for our wrongdoing not simply by petitioning God, through tearful, heartfelt prayers and pangs of remorse, but also – and perhaps primarily – by making a concerted effort to correct our spiritual ills, and taking concrete steps towards improving our conduct and ourselves, towards finding and eliminating the "criminal" inside us.