

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Shoftim

The summer is winding its way to its end. Travelers are slowly returning home. Vacationers are returning to work. This year has seen an unprecedented number of visitors to Northern California. People have come from all over the world to enjoy the beautiful weather and the breathtaking nature that abounds in the area. Beyond the mitzvah of *Hachnassat Orchim*, or hosting guests, the Torah, in this week's parsha hints at an important lesson that is essential to any good host.

The Torah explains the circumstances of an "Unsolved Murder" and details the particular process the elders of the closest city must put into motion.

"If a corpse [of a traveler] will be found on the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you to possess it, fallen in the field, it was not known who smote him, your elders and judges shall go out and measure toward the cities that are around the corpse. It shall be that the city nearest the corpse, the elders of that city shall take a heifer ... bring it down to a harsh valley ... and they shall axe the back of its neck in the valley. All the leaders of that city shall wash their hands over the heifer that was axed in the valley. They shall speak up and say, "Our hands have not spoiled this blood, and our eyes did not see. Atone for Your people Israel that you have redeemed, O Hashem: Do not place innocent blood in the midst of Your people Israel! Then the blood shall be atoned for them."

[Deuteronomy 21:1-8]

"Our hands have not spilled this blood." The elders' declaration seems unnecessary and puzzling, to say the least. Rashi asks the obvious question. Are the elders really suspects in the murder? The Torah implies that the elders bear a certain amount of guilt for the death of the victim! Rashi explains that the statement of the elders is that they were unaware of the guest's visit to their city, and thus did not escort him on his way out of the city; nor did they provide him with a care package that would help him along the way.

Maimonides [Laws of mourning, Ch. 14] elaborates on the teaching of the Talmud. He explains, based upon various rabbinical sources, that there is a rabbinical positive commandment to: "visit the ill; comfort the mourners; escort a dead body at a funeral; help brides get married; and escort guests out the door..." In the second law of the chapter, Maimonides posits that the reward for escorting one's guests out of one's home is greater than the reward for any of the other aforementioned acts of kindness. He adds that Abraham is the first one in recorded history to have practice this sort of kindness. Finally, he concludes, "The Sages said, 'Anyone who does not escort his guests, it is as if he has killed them.'"

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These are strong words. In what way does a host contribute to a guest's death? What exactly is the initial thought/assumption to which the elders respond, "Our hands have not spilled this blood?" The fact that they were unaware of the guests visit implies that had they been aware of the visit, they would have been unable to absolve themselves from an element of guilt and level of responsibility.

According to what our Sages have taught us, escorting a guest out of one's home is more than a social nicety. It seems to play an integral role in the psychological makeup of the guest, to the extent that it fortifies him or her with the power to travel unmolested. Mahral takes this idea to a deeper level and explains the concept from a metaphysical perspective. Being escorted grants the guest the power of the hosts. He is not alone. He has the power, the strength and the good wishes of the people who escorted him. However, one who is not escorted is at risk for the dangers of the road. Traveling weakens a person physically; and, from a spiritual perspective as well, the traveler is at risk for being harmed by spiritual forces. These negative forces are willing to challenge an individual in a manner they would have avoided had this person been part of a group.

The murder would not have happened had the victim been escorted from the city he was visiting. The sense of solidarity that is shared by the host and the guest would have joined them together in a spiritual manner that would have lent protection to the traveler.

Our Shabbat tables have been full of visitors and guests from all walks of life and all parts of the country these past few months. The lesson the Talmud and Maimonides glean from the incident of the unsolved murder is that guests are meant to be escorted out of one's home. While we are not required to escort them all the way to their next destination, nevertheless, escorting them out the door makes them feel much better about being welcome in your home. Perhaps we can even ensure that the travelers arrive at their destinations safely, by providing advice on the safest route of travel, means of attaining provisions along the way, as well as any other possible concern. This sense of security, both psychological as well as spiritual, guarantees their safe passage.

Shabbat Shalom!

