

The Eglah Arufah Provides Yisrael who Are Compared to a Eglah with Atonement for Separating Themselves from HKB”H Their Head

In this week’s parsha, parshas Shoftim, we learn about the “eglah arufah.” As the Rambam teaches us, this is one of the “taryag mitzvos” (Sefer HaMitzvos 181): **“מצוה קב”א היא שצונו לערוף: העגלה, כשנמצא בדרך הרגו ולא נודע מי הרגו”** mitzvah #181 states that He commanded us to behead a calf at the neck when a person is found murdered on the road, and it is not known who killed him. The tremendous importance of this mitzvah can be appreciated in light of what we have learned in parshas Vayigash. When the shevatim returned to Yaakov, after discovering that Yosef was alive in Mitzrayim, it is written (Bereishis 45, 26): **“ויגידו לו לאמר עוד יוסף: חי וכי הוא מושל בכל ארץ מצרים, ויפג לבו כי לא האמין להם, וידברו אליו את כל דברי יוסף אשר דיבר אליהם, וירא את העגלות אשר שלח יוסף לשאת אותו ותחי רוח יעקב אביהם.”** They told him that Yosef was still alive and was the ruler of all Egypt; his heart rejected the notion; he did not believe them. They repeated to him Yosef’s message. He saw the wagons/calves that Yosef had sent for him and his spirits rose. Note Rashi’s comment: **“סימן מוסר להם במה היה עוסק כשפירש ממנו בפרשת עגלה ערופה, זהו שנאמר וירא את העגלות אשר שלח יוסף. ותחי רוח יעקב, שרתה עליו שכינה שפירשה ממנו—Yosef sent him a sign related to the Torah topic they were learning together before he went missing; they were studying about the “eglah arufah.”** Thus, when he saw the “Agalos” (which can be interpreted as either calves or wagons), his spirit was revived. Additionally, the Shechinah which had left him now returned.

It seems impossible for any author to adequately describe that divine scene. Yaakov Avinu, the elite of the Avos, accompanying Yosef HaTzaddik, his favorite child, as Yosef set out to fulfill his father’s request (Bereishis 37, 13): **“ויאמר ישראל אל יוסף הלוא אחיך רועים בשכם, לכה ואשלחך אליהם ויאמר לו הנני, ויאמר לו לך נא ראה את שלום יוסף—and Yisrael said to Yosef, “Your brothers are herding sheep in Shechem. Come, I will send you to them.” He replied, “Here I am!”**

The ways of Hashem are wondrous! This is the very same Yaakov that reveals in his berachos to the shevatim before he passes away that he envisions through “ruach hakodesh” all that is destined to befall his children until the coming of the mashiach. At

this instant, too, his “ruach hakodesh” informs him that he is meant to send Yosef to check on the welfare of his brothers. Nevertheless, it was not revealed to him from above that this hike together in fact heralded the beginning of a long, twenty-two year separation from his beloved son. It constituted the preparation for the execution of the decree sending Yisrael into galut in Mitzrayim.

Yosef HaTzaddik decided to fulfill the mitzvah of “kibud av” without any hesitation or reservation—even though he knew that his brothers hated him. They could not even speak to him civilly and he was well aware that he might pay a heavy price for fulfilling his father’s request. He set out on this journey accompanied by his father, Yaakov. Thus, these two angelic figures walked together. Suddenly, Yaakov was struck by “ruach hakodesh” to study with Yosef the parsha of “eglah arufah.” He revealed to his son all of the intricacies concerning this mitzvah that he learned in the Beis Midrash of Shem and Ever.

It is worth our while to investigate why it was heavenly arranged for Yaakov and Yosef to engage in the study of this particular topic—“eglah arufah”—specifically when Yosef set out to check on his brothers’ welfare. As a result of this mission, he was ultimately sold as a slave to the Egyptians and rose within the Egyptian ranks to the lofty position of second in command to the king. Furthermore, why did the sign from Yosef—informing Yaakov that they had last learned the sugya of the “eglah arufah” together—fill him with such joy, resulting in the return of the Shechinah to him, as expressed by the passuk: **“ותחי רוח יעקב”—Yaakov’s spirit was revived?**

Let us proceed by introducing some of the pesukim in the Torah from the passage of the “eglah arufah.” They will serve to illuminate for us the exalted lesson we are meant to derive from this particular mitzvah (Devarim 21, 1):

“כי ימצא חלל באדמה אשר ה’ אלקיך נתן לך לרשתה נופל בשדה לא נודע מי הכהו, ויצאו זקניך ושופטיך ומדדו אל הערים אשר סביבות החלל, והיה העיר הקרובה אל החלל ולקחו זקני העיר ההוא עגלת בקר... וערפו שם את העגלה בנחל... ונגשו הכהנים בני לוי... וכל זקני העיר ההוא הקרובים אל החלל ירחצו את ידיהם על העגלה הערופה בנחל, וענו ואמרו ידינו לא שפכה את הדם הזה ועינינו לא ראו, כפר לעמך ישראל אשר פדית ה’, ואל תתן דם נקי בקרב עמך ישראל ונכפר להם הדם.”

If a corpse 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 . . . and they shall axe the back of the heifer's neck in the valley . . . the kohanim, the sons of Levi, shall approach . . . all the elders of that city, who are nearest the corpse, shall wash their hands over the heifer that was axed in the valley. They shall speak up and say, "Our hands have not spilled this blood, and our eyes did not see. Atone for Your people Yisrael that You have redeemed, Hashem. Do not place innocent blood in the midst of Your people Yisrael." Then the blood shall be atoned for them.

Now, the Derech Pikudecha teaches us that any mitzvah which cannot actually be performed in these times must be studied and scrutinized. By ascertaining the rationales underlying the mitzvah, we can at least fulfill the mitzvah in thought. It will be considered as if we actually performed the deed fulfilling the mitzvah. So, why did HKB"H command to behead the calf at the neck in order to atone for the corpse found in the field—having been killed by an unknown assailant?

Closeness to Hashem Insures Our Protection

We shall begin our journey by presenting a vital principle introduced by the Toldos Yaakov Yosef (Bereishis) in the name of his teacher and Rebbe, the holy Baal Shem Tov, zy"a. So long as a Jew believes wholeheartedly that HKB"H is with him—even during times of extreme concealment, "hester panim"—it is impossible for anything bad to befall him. Clearly, the source for this idea comes from the powerful words of the Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim (Part 3, Chapter 51), where he discusses the manner in which HKB"H supervises mankind—"hashgachah." The Rambam writes: "והנה נגלה אלי עיון נפלא מאד, יסורו בו ספקות ויתגלו בו סודות אלוהיות"—a wonderful insight has been revealed to me; it will remove doubts and uncertainties and will help reveal divine secrets.

The gist of his lesson is that HKB"H's supervision and protection, "hashgachah," of a human being from any ill occurrences depends to a great degree on a person's intellectual belief in Hashem's direct supervision. If a person always has Hashem in mind, Hashem will never stop overseeing his life and his actions. Should we see that a tragedy befell a person, it is because he was not connected to Hashem in his thoughts. Here is what the Rambam writes:

"והנה נגלה אלי עיון נפלא מאד, יסורו בו ספקות ויתגלו בו סודות אלוהיות, והוא שאנחנו כבר בארנו בפרקי ההשגחה, כי כפי שיעור שכל [של] כל בעל שכל תהיה ההשגחה בו, והאיש השלם בהשגתו אשר לא יסור שכלו מהאלוה תמיד, תהיה ההשגחה בו תמיד. והאיש שלם ההשגה אשר תפנה מחשבתו מהאלוה קצת עתים, תהיה ההשגחה

בו בעת חשבו באלוה לבד, ותסור ההשגחה ממנו בעת עסקו [בשאר ענינים כאשר אינו זוכר את ה'], ולא תסור ממנו [ההשגחה לגמרי] אז כסורה [כמו שהיא סרה] ממני שלא ישכיל כלל, [שהרי הוא מאמין בהשגחת ה'], אבל תמעט ההשגחה ההיא, אחר שאין לאיש ההוא השלם בהשגתו בעת עסקו [בעניני העולם הזה] שכל בפועל".

The complete person will always have Hashem in mind; as a result, he will always be supervised from above. When he is engrossed in other matters and forgets of Hashem, Hashem's supervision will be absent temporarily. It will not be entirely absent as it would be from someone who does not believe in or comprehend Hashem's supervision at all; for, this person does believe in Hashem's "hashgachah." His divine supervision at that moment will only be diminished.

Someone who does not recognize the presence of G-d and his supervision at all resembles a person living in darkness who has never seen light. Conversely, someone who does appreciate Hashem's "hashgachah" resembles a person standing in the bright light of the sun. Thus, he who is aware of Hashem's "hashgachah," but has a momentary lapse of focus while engaged in worldly matters, can be compared to a person on a cloudy day—where the cloud temporarily blocks him from the sun.

Next, the Rambam adds an astounding and somewhat frightening thought. He states that anyone who experiences a negative occurrence, be he a prophet or a very devout person, that occurrence was due to a momentary disregard of Hashem's "hashgachah":

"ומפני זה יראה לי, כי כל מי שתמצאהו רעה מרעות העולם, מן הנביאים או מן החסידים השלמים, לא מצאוהו הרע ההוא רק בעת השכחה ההיא, ולפי אורך השכחה ההיא או פחיתות הענין אשר התעסק בו יהיה עוצם הרעה... ותהיה השגחת האלוה יתברך מתמדת במי שהגיע לו השפע ההוא, המזומן לכל מי שישתדל להגיע אליו.

He states that the magnitude of the negative event is directly related to the length of time and the degree to which he forgot Hashem's "hashgachah." In summary, it all boils down to one's ability to remain constantly connected with HKB"H. That connection prevents mishaps; lack of connection opens one up to the possibility of misfortune and disaster.

Upon careful reflection, it appears that the Rambam's concept is stated explicitly in the Torah (Devarim 4, 4): 'ואתם הדבקים בה'—**and you are attached to Hashem, your G-d, you are all alive today.** Here we are promised, in no uncertain terms, that so long as a Jew is connected to Hashem: "חיים כולכם"—"no ill or harm will befall him. In the words of David Melech Yisrael (Tehillim 23, 4): "גם כי אלך בגיא צלמות לא אירא רע כי אתה עמדי"—**although I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear evil, because You are with me.**

Yaakov's Victory Over the "Samech-Mem" Was Attributable to the Magnitude of His Closeness to Hashem

Now, let us see how this idea sheds light for us on the message conveyed by the following pesukim in parshas Vayishlach. Regarding the cosmic wrestling match that transpired between the "samech-mem," Eisav's ministering angel, and Yaakov Avinu, it states (Bereishis 32, 25):

“ויותר יעקב לבדו ויאבק איש עמו עד עלות השחר, וירא כי לא יכול לו ויגע בכף ירכו ותקע כף ירך יעקב בהאבקו עמו, ויאמר שלחני כי עלה השחר, ויאמר לא אשלחך כי אם ברכתני, ויאמר אליו מה שמך, ויאמר יעקב, ויאמר לא יעקב יאמר עוד שמך כי אם ישראל, כי שרית עם אלהים ועם אנשים ותוכל.”

Yaakov was left alone and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he perceived that he could not overcome him, he struck the socket of his hip; so Yaakov's hip-socket was dislocated as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn has broken." And he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." He said to him, "What is your name?" He replied, "Yaakov." He said, "No longer will it be said that your name is Yaakov, but Yisrael, for you have striven with the Divine and with man and have prevailed."

The commentaries expend much effort explaining why the malach only gives Yaakov the name Yisrael after Yaakov defeats him. In truth, the simple reading of the text provides us with an answer to this question: **“כי שרית עם אלהים ועם אנשים ותוכל”--for you have striven with the Divine and with man and have prevailed.** Yet, if this is the sole reason, he could just as easily have given him the name “שרית” rather than “ישראל”. It is essential that we comprehend this matter. For, we are his holy descendants and are named after him—“Yisrael.” Thus, it behooves us to comprehend the significance of this sacred name.

After giving the matter much thought and consideration, I would like to propose an explanation based on our holy sources. In Shaar HaPesukim, the Arizal points out that the name ישראל can be rearranged to spell ל"י רא"ש. This allusion can be explained based on what we have learned from the Rambam concerning Hashem's method of “hashgachah” over mankind. First, let us introduce the Midrash's statement that HKB”H represents the head of Yisrael. Concerning the passuk (Shemos 30, 12), the Pesikta Rabbati (Ki Tisa 10) states: **“כי תשא את ראש בני ישראל, כי תשא בני ישראל אין כתיב כאן אלא את ראש, ואין ראשם של ישראל אלא הקב”ה, שנאמר (מיכה ב-יג) ויעבר מלכם אל אלהים ואלהים יגדלם”**—the passuk specifically mentions the head of Bnei Yisrael; there is no head of Yisrael other than HKB”H; the passuk from Michah (2, 13) is cited as corroboration.

It should be clear and obvious to us that Yisrael's life-source is their close attachment to HKB”H: **“ראש בני ישראל”**—He is the head atop the body that is Bnei Yisrael. This is the meaning of the passuk: **“ואתם הדבקים בה' אלקיכם חיים כולכם היום”**—**and you who are closely attached to Hashem, your G-d, you are all alive today.** This is analogous to the human body. As long as it is attached to the brain in the head, it lives and thrives. Yet, if Yisrael is no longer connected to its head—HKB”H—chas v'shalom, this is what the Gemara terms so vividly (Shabbas 75a): **“בסיק רישא ולא ימות”**—the body must surely die, for it is not feasible for a body without a head to live.

We can now appreciate the tremendous significance of the name ישראל, which rearranged spells ל"י רא"ש. It reflects the extremely close and constant attachment that exists between a Jew and Hashem. It is as if he is constantly announcing to the world: **“I have a head”**--ל"י רא"ש. I am never detached from my head, HKB”H--**“בסיק רישא”**. Every moment of my existence on this earth, I am connected to Him in thought. David HaMelech expressed this situation as follows (Tehillim 121, 4): **“הנה לא ינום ולא ישן שומר”**—**Yisrael's Guardian neither slumbers nor sleeps.** A Jew who epitomizes the name ישראל, one who clings constantly to his attachment with Hashem—announcing to the world ל"י רא"ש—receives special protection.

This illuminates for us the pesukim portraying the struggle between Eisav's ministering angel and Yaakov: **“ויותר יעקב לבדו”**. As Rashi explains, he remained alone to collect the small containers that he forgot. Therefore, when the “samech-mem” saw that he was occupied saving his possessions, he made a miscalculation. He erroneously figured that Yaakov was not thinking of Hashem at that moment—that he was temporarily detached. Seeing as night had fallen—the domain of the external forces, the “chitzonim”—it was a propitious time to battle Yaakov and to defeat him: **“ויאבק איש עמו עד עלות השחר”**. Thus, he fought with him until the break of day.

The passuk, however, attests: **“וירא כי לא יכול לו”**--**he perceived that he could not overcome him**—because Yaakov was already on such a high spiritual level; in his thoughts, he was constantly connected with Hashem. So, even while he was occupied with the retrieval of the small vessels, he had in mind not to derive any benefit from stolen goods; his focus was “l'shem shamayim.” Upon perceiving this incredible phenomenon, the “samech-mem” submitted to Yaakov's superiority and proclaimed: **“לא יעקב יאמר”**—**No longer will it be said that your name is Yaakov, but Yisrael**—you have defeated me in the merit of your tremendous attachment to Hashem.

A Close Attachment to HKB”H Resembles the Body’s Attachment to Its Head

Continuing upward and onward along this exalted path, let us address the matter of the atonement provided by the “eglah arufah.” We have learned in the Gemara (Shabbas 106a): **“אחד מבני חבורה שמת – תדאג כל החבורה כולה”**—if a member of the community dies, the entire community should be concerned. This teaches us that if a personal tragedy befalls a member of the community, the others should not assign the fault for the transgression to him alone. It is crucial that they realize that the punishment is for the entire group that transgressed. Consequently, each and every member must perform teshuvah and make amends for his own part.

Thus, we can deduce that if a dead body is found in the field and the murderer is unknown, this is a sign that a significant, terrible defect existed concerning this person’s relationship with HKB”H. For, had he been closely attached to Hashem, this tragedy could never have occurred. Since we have established that the entire community need be concerned in this situation, each and every member of the neighboring community must examine his own culpability in the matter. Perhaps they were not adequately connected with HKB”H, at least in their thoughts.

Now, the Ramban’s point of view (Vayikra 1, 9) concerning the purpose of a korban is well-known. This point of view is shared by Rabeinu Bachayei, the Recanati and most of the Rishonim. A person should imagine that what is being done to the korban, should have been done deservedly to him—pouring his blood and burning his body. Yet, HKB”H had mercy on him and accepted the korban in his stead. Due to this constructive thought, HKB”H combines the thought with the deed, and considers it as if the person had actually sacrificed his own life to Hashem.

We can now appreciate why HKB”H commanded the bringing of a heifer to be beheaded at the neck in order to atone for the entire city. For, according to the Midrash Zuta (Shir HaShirim 1), Yisrael are referred to as a heifer: **“שבעים שמות קרא לישראל ואלו הן... נקראו עגלה שנאמר (הושע י-יא) אפרים עגלה מלומדה”**—one of the seventy appellations used for Yisrael is **עגלה**—a heifer. Seeing as they were not sufficiently close and attached to HKB”H—representing their head—they resembled an “eglah arufah”—the body of the heifer that no longer receives any communication or sustenance from its head.

Therefore, in order to make amends for this serious flaw, HKB”H commanded them to bring a heifer and to remove its head at the

neck. This symbolic act should cause them to reflect on the fact that they had become disconnected from their own head, HKB”H. Nevertheless, HKB”H in his infinite mercy and kindness transferred their punishment to a surrogate—the “eglah arufah.” This coincides very nicely with the formula recited by the elders of the Beis Din beseeching HKB”H: **“כפר לעמך ישראל”**—provide atonement for your people; for, they are named **ישראל**, because they want to maintain their relationship with You—**ל”י רא”ש**. They were temporarily detached from their head; therefore, they require atonement.

Yosef Cleverly Sent Yaakov a Sign Related to the “Eglah Arufah”

This reveals for us the depth of Yosef HaTzaddik’s wisdom. He sent a sign to his father Yaakov hinting to the fact that they were learning about the “eglah arufah” when they parted company from one another. When Yaakov Avinu sent Yosef to inquire after his brothers’ welfare, he divined that Yosef HaTzaddik was embarking on a perilous journey; and he would require special protection, both physical and spiritual. He wisely taught his son the parsha concerning the “eglah arufah.” He wanted him to understand its powerful lesson; it is vital for a Jew to always remain closely connected with HKB”H. Failing to maintain this close relationship renders one like an “eglah arufah.” His situation is categorized as a **“פסיק רישא”**—death is inevitable.

Yosef wisely foresaw Yaakov’s reaction to the news that his precious son had been living for twenty-two years in Mitzrayim, a place epitomizing immorality. He knew that his father would be overwhelmed with fear and trepidation that his son had not been able to maintain his level of kedushah. By sending the wagons or heifers with his brothers, he provided the remedy before the shocking blow. As Rashi explains: **סימן מסר להם במה היה עוסק כשפירש – ממונו בפרשת עגלה ערופה**—he provided them with a telltale sign indicating that he was learning the parsha of “eglah arufah” with his father when they parted company. He was informing Yaakov that throughout the twenty-two year sojourn, he never forgot the crucial lesson learned from the “eglah arufah.”

This then is the vital lesson that we must learn from the mitzvah of the “eglah arufah.” We must constantly stay connected and cling to HKB”H, the Master of the Universe. This will insure that the promise of the passuk will be realized: **ויתם הדבקים בה’ אלקיכם חיים – כולכם חיים – and you who remain closely attached to Hashem, your G-d, you are all alive today!**

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