

I'd like to talk with you today about the beginning and end of Parashat Shoftim and of these 40 days we have for self reflection and tshuvah that started w rosh hodesh elul and end with Yom Kippur. I also want to weave in information about the Netivot Shalom Community Action Working Group's new project, and how it relates to this parasha and to this time of year. To shorten this drash slightly, I will refer to the Community Action Working Group by it's acronym CAWG.

Parashat Shoftim opens with the commandment to build an infrastructure of justice and with the well-known exhortation to pursue justice: tzedek tzedek tirdof צדק צדק תרדוף,

The parasha ends with the less-known description of a ritual that must be done if the body of a murder victim is found in a field, a public area, and it is not known who the killer was. This situation is a failure of justice, and the associated mitzvah is called the mitzvah of eglarufah, sadly, the decapitated calf, because of the middle part of the ritual which involves decapitating a calf over flowing waters, a quasi-sacrificial act that is shocking and repugnant. Some commentators say it highlights to the community the shocking and repugnant nature of a murder. The Rambam in the *Guide to the Perplexed* says that by making the ritual public and noteworthy, people will talk about it, which can help in apprehending the murderer. Eglarufah is often classified as אקלרופה, a type of commandment that is not readily understood.

Though less dramatic and opaque, let's focus on the first and last parts of the ritual.

The first part of the ritual requires the elders and judges, שופטים, to measure the distance between the corpse and the towns nearby. The town that is closest **has the responsibility** for performing the ritual of expiation whose last part involves its elders reciting "our hands did not spill this blood, and our eyes did not see," we did not do this, we were not aware of this. Yet the community is in some way

responsible for this harm, this iniquity. The recitation goes on to ask for atonement כפר לעמך ישראל forgive your people Israel - that such a thing happened in their community, and perhaps also that they did NOT see, did not know or notice the injustice in their community..

So the parasha teaches us that we are to pursue justice, that there will be failures of justice, and that we are responsible for harm that occurs to others in our vicinity.

This idea of trying to address wrongs, iniquities, in or near one's community, dovetails with one of CAWG's goals: recognizing needs and inequities in our own Berkeley community. We are also working to develop relationships across racial and religious differences, לשמם, for their own sake. These relationships also give us a window on others in our broader community, so that our eyes can better SEE.

Another goal is to work **together** as a shul community to participate in making things better. We know that many CNS members volunteer, contribute, and even lead organizations that serve others and promote justice. CAWG is trying to offer opportunities for action together as a Netivot Shalom community, in our Berkeley community.

Our first project involved preparing welcome baskets and notes for the 39 residents moving in across the street into Step Up supported housing, and coordinating with the organization serving this project, BOSS, Building Opportunities for Self Sufficiency. More than 30 CNS members made this project possible, by volunteering time to purchase items, pack, write notes, and deliver the baskets and equally important, by contributing funds to Netivot Shalom's newly established Housing and Food Security Community Action Fund.

CAWG's next project is to help educate our community about the McGee Ave Church food program, and to support it with funds and volunteering. The McGee

Ave Church food program has provided three cooked meals a week to the hungry for over **40** years. This Black church is about a mile away from CNS, down McGee Ave. The food program anticipates increasing need in the coming months and years, and hopes to grow to providing five meals a week. Their newer sister organization, Center for Food Faith and Justice, cultivates two urban plots next to the church, and supplies the food program with fresh vegetables, and in other ways pursues justice - by leveraging urban farming to teach the community about healthy eating and chronic disease, train unhoused and formerly incarcerated people for employment, and prevent violence by engaging youth and providing psychological and spiritual support.

One of the things that I love about the McGee Ave food program and the CFFJ is that they open their doors to vulnerable people in our community, and try to open and widen possibilities. This is also true for Step Up housing and BOSS.

[Before continuing the drash, let me just first ask those who have helped with CAWG, by volunteering or donating, to stand so others can ask you about these community action projects at kiddush or later. Those standing represent the many different ways people can be involved. Thank you. ]

Returning now to the end of our parasha, and to the third part of the ritual - the words of expiation - כפר לעמך ישראל Absolve/forgive your people Israel. Forgive not just the leaders, but all the people, for this failure of justice. These words highlight the **responsibility** of the people as a whole for **justice** in their community.

And perhaps you've noticed the word כפר **absolve, forgive**, We are in the first week of Elul, time to start focusing on our process of tshuva that will culminate in Yom **KIPPUR**.

The haftara of Yom **Kippur** in Isaiah chs. 57-58 is powerful and has an important message on this day when more Jews come to synagogue than any other day of the year. Isaiah rejects the importance of worship, sacrifices, fasting, and focuses on **justice** and **responsibility** [58:6-8]:

No, this is the fast I desire:

To unlock the fetters of wickedness...

And let the oppressed go free;

To break off every yoke.

**To share your bread with the hungry,**

And to take the downtrodden into your home;

When you see the naked, to clothe them,

And from your kin, do not look away

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn

And your healing quickly spring forth