

A FEW EXTRA STEPS

What the Eglu Arufa teaches us about the strength a person draws from being seen

This week's parashah gives us one of the most unusual mitzvos in the Torah, and it arrives wrapped in a tragedy. A man is found murdered in a field, and no one knows who did it. The elders of the city nearest to where the body was discovered must perform the procedure known as *Eglu Arufa* — and afterward they make a declaration that has puzzled readers of the Torah for three thousand years.

OUR HANDS DID NOT SPILL THIS BLOOD

The elders proclaim: *Yadeinu lo shafchu es hadam bazei* — our hands did not spill this blood. On its face the statement is bewildering. Nobody suspected the elders of the city of murder. Why would the most respected men of the community need to declare their innocence of a crime no one accused them of?

Chazal explain that their declaration means something entirely different. The elders are not denying that they killed him. They are saying: we did not know of this man and allow him to leave our city without food, and without accompaniment.

FOOD WE UNDERSTAND

The food we can understand. If a traveler is hungry and we neglect to feed him, we can understand why the Torah would treat that as a serious failure. A man sent out onto the road with nothing in his hands is a man we have endangered.

But accompaniment? Suppose they fed him regularly and properly. Suppose they gave him everything he needed. But when the time came for him to leave, nobody walked him out. Nobody went with him even a short distance down the road. How could that possibly be connected to what happened to him afterward?

WHAT WALKING GIVES A PERSON

Rav Chanoch Leibowitz, the Rosh Yeshiva of Chaim Berlin, gives a remarkable explanation. When you accompany somebody as he leaves your home, you may not be giving him anything physical at all. You have not shortened the road. You have not removed a single danger waiting for him along the way. But you have given him something else — you have shown him that he matters.

By walking with him, even for a few steps, you are telling him: *you matter to me, and I care about what happens to you after you walk through my door.* And Rav Chanoch teaches that this kind of moral and emotional support can give a person the courage and the inner strength to face whatever is waiting for him on the road ahead.

Consider what the Torah is teaching us. If the elders knew a traveler needed food and let him leave hungry, the Torah treats that failure with extraordinary severity. And on the other side, simply walking with that traveler a short distance — showing him warmth, treating him with human dignity — can give him the strength he needs to continue his journey.

*A person does not live on food alone.
Sometimes he needs to know that somebody noticed him.*

Often we cannot change the road another person has to travel. But with a little warmth and concern, we can change the way he travels it. And quite often we do not realize that there are people directly in our path who need exactly that.

A SEUDAH IN HUKOK

Rav Ariel Kai is a barber who lives in Elad. He spends his mornings learning in kollel and his afternoons in his barber shop. He related the following story.

On the fourteenth of Iyar, the yahrzeit of Rabbi Meir Baal HaNes, a group of mispallelim from the K'hal B'nei Torah shul traveled to the kevarim of several tzaddikim. Ariel and his brother-in-law, Rav Raanan, joined them. They davened first in Teveria at the kever of Rabbi Meir Baal HaNes, and from there continued to the village of Hukok, to the kever of Chavakuk HaNavi. At the kever there was a Yid who maintained the site — he spent his days there, helping visitors light candles and seeing to whatever anyone needed.

On the way out, Rav Raanan suggested that they sit in a shady area nearby and eat lunch. But several of the others had a different idea: Meron was only twenty-five minutes away, so why not continue to the kever of Rashbi and eat there? They packed everything up and left.

They arrived in Meron and the skies opened. Not merely rain — a *mabbul*, a downpour, with hailstones the size of golf balls. They could not sit outside and eat, and they certainly did not want to sit and eat inside the kever of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

So somebody suggested: why not drive back to Hukok and eat in that shady spot near Chavakuk HaNavi? There were plenty of other places they could have stopped, but for whatever reason everybody was maskim. They turned the cars around and drove back.

When they arrived in Hukok they discovered something remarkable. The Yid who maintained the kever told them that not a single drop of rain had fallen there. They unpacked their food and set out a beautiful, lavish seudah — lamb, grilled chicken, everything they had brought with them. And this time they invited the Yid who maintained the kever to sit down and join them. They ate together, they shared divrei Torah, they sang zemiros. It turned into a magnificent seudah.

Finally, when they were ready to bentch, the Yid stood up and said, “I want to apologize to all of you.” The lead fellow looked at him: apologize for what? And he explained:

“I had not eaten anything the entire morning. I arrived here around noon, and when I heard all of you discussing having lunch here, I was so excited, because I was famished. I thought, frankly, that you would invite me to join you. But then I watched you leave, and I was devastated. So I walked into the holy kever of Chavakuk HaNavi and I asked the Borei Olam, from the bottom of my heart, to somehow bring you back for lunch.”

And then he looked around the table — the lamb, the chicken, the rice, and the men who had driven twenty-five minutes away only to be met by a torrential hailstorm, and who then decided, out of all the places they could have gone, to come back to this very spot. They were there because sitting back in Hukok was one starving Yid waiting for them to return.

“I THOUGHT YOU WOULD INVITE ME”

Perhaps this is where the story meets the words of Rav Chanoch Leibowitz. That Yid at the kever was hungry; he certainly needed food. But listen carefully to what he said. He did not say, *I saw that you had food*. He said, *I thought you would invite me to join you*.

There is a world of difference between the two. A person can be handed a piece of chicken and still feel completely alone. But when you pull out a chair, when you make room at your table, when you say to somebody, *come, sit with us* — you have given him far more than a meal. You have said to him: I see you, you matter, and you belong here with us.



THE ROAD AND THE ONE WHO WALKS IT

We never really know what another Jew is carrying, or how much fortitude can be generated by a single invitation, a short phone call, one warm word — or simply walking beside someone for a few extra steps.

The elders of the city could not have known what waited for that traveler on the road, and neither can we. What the Torah asks is not that we clear the road, but that we walk the first part of it alongside him — so that he does not feel he is traveling it alone.



Mi K'amcha Yisrael · Parashas Shoftim