

Parshat Shoftim
Homecoming and Wholeness
Talia Weisberg - Class of 2024

Parshat Shoftim ends with the curious commandment of the *eglah arufah* ritual: if a dead body is found in no-man's land, the elders of the nearest town must take a heifer (*eglah*) and break its neck (*arufah*) to atone for the murder. Rashi explains (Deut. 21:7-9) that even though the elders of the town clearly did not kill the decedent, someone must take responsibility for the sin of murder until they find the culprit, so they proclaim their innocence and participate in the process of atonement.

This is the first and only time we read about the *eglah arufah* in the Torah, but Rashi brings down a *midrash* about the *eglah arufah* on Parshat Vayigash. After Yosef's emotional reunion with his brothers, they return to their father Yaakov in Canaan and share with him the good news that his long-lost son is still alive. Gen. 45:26-7 says:

וַיִּגְדּוּ לוֹ לֵאמֹר עוֹד יוֹסֵף חַי וְכִי-הוּא מִשָּׁל בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּפֶּגַע לְבָבוֹ כִּי לֹא-הֶאֱמִין לָהֶם: וַיְדַבְּרוּ
אֵלָיו אֶת כָּל-דִּבְרֵי יוֹסֵף אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵהֶם וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הָעֵגְלוֹת אֲשֶׁר-שָׁלַח יוֹסֵף לְשֵׂאת אֹתוֹ וַתְּחִי רוּחַ
יַעֲקֹב אֲבִיהֶם:

And they told him, 'Yosef is still alive; yes, he is ruler over the whole land of Egypt.' [Yaakov's] heart went numb, for he did not believe them. But when they recounted all that Yosef had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Yosef had sent to transport him, the spirit of their father Yaakov revived.

Rashi, citing Bereishit Rabbah, explains in Gen. 45:27 that Yosef very intentionally sent wagons along with his brothers. He wanted to ensure that his father would believe the brothers when they reported that Yosef was alive, so he sent a coded pun to confirm his identity. Wagons in Hebrew are *agalot*, which is from the same root as *eglah*, heifer. Rashi, operating on the principle that the *avot* and *imahot* had access to Torah, posits that *eglah arufah* had been the last topic that Yosef and Yaakov learned together before he was sold by his brothers. Thus, he sent the *agalot* as a reference to the *eglah* that they had learned about, hoping that Yaakov would understand their meaning and know that he was truly alive.



It is significant that this was the final subject that Yaakov and Yosef learned, as it foreshadows what will befall Yosef at several points in his life. If we take the *midrash* at face value, the timeline is such that after Yaakov and Yosef learn about the *eglah arufah*, Yaakov tells Yosef in Parshat Vayeshev, “Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring, and bring me back word” (Gen. 37:14). Yosef dutifully follows his brothers’ tracks and finds them pasturing their sheep in a field, where they throw him into a pit, conspire to kill him, and eventually sell him into slavery instead. To hide their actions, they slaughter a goat and soak Yosef’s signature tunic with its blood, leading Yaakov to infer that his beloved son was killed by a wild animal.

Considering the incident of Yosef’s sale through the lens of the *eglah arufah*, Yosef can be understood as the individual at the center of the ritual. Obviously there is no corpse because his death was faked; rather, his tunic is the entity that is “found.” Instead of a heifer that is sacrificed to atone for the murder, a goat is killed to create a plausible cover story. The verse specifies that the *eglah arufah* applies to a body found in a field (Deut. 21:1), and Yosef’s kidnapping and sale also happens in a field (Gen. 37:15). Yaakov mourns his son deeply; Radak (Gen. 37:34) understands this to be in part because he blames himself for inadvertently sending Yosef to his death, much like the town elders who take responsibility for the murder in the *eglah arufah*.

The foreshadowing of learning about (and metaphorically being part of) the *eglah arufah* does not only apply to Yosef’s descent into slavery, as his later ascent to wealth and success also begins with cows. At the beginning of Parshat Miketz, Pharaoh dreams his famous dream of the seven gaunt cows who eat the seven plump cows, and Yosef is summoned from jail to analyze its meaning for him. His interpretation impresses Pharaoh, who immediately appoints him to a position of political leadership and sets him up to be one of the greatest men of Egypt. It is of note that in Pharaoh’s dream, the cows stand on the bank of the Nile, and in the *eglah arufah*, the heifer is sacrificed in a wadi.

Yosef’s destiny is tied up with cows, as they connect him to one of his worst moments and also to one of his best. Given that he sends the *agalot*, wagons, to Yaakov, he seems self-aware of the unusual status that cows have had in his life trajectory. When father and son finally reunite in Egypt, the verse says that one or the other of them began “embracing him around the neck, he wept on his neck a good while” (Gen. 46:29). (Commentators are split as to whether it is Yaakov who cries on Yosef’s neck or vice versa.) This is the final reminder of the *eglah arufah*, whose neck is broken in



atonement for the murder. Whether it is Yaakov or Yosef's neck that is cried on, the metaphorical *eglah arufah* ritual is now complete; atonement has been achieved, and a once-broken family is made whole. This, after all, is the point of the *eglah arufah*: to give the community closure after a traumatic situation, and to allow the body—and agitated spirits—to finally rest.



Talia Weisberg is a connector, passionate about facilitating rich Jewish experiences and introducing people to resources that will help them make informed Jewish decisions. She is currently serving as the Orthodox Educator at MIT Hillel and was a student chaplain at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. She is the founder and director of Shalom Camberville, a project that welcomes newcomers to the Jewish community of Cambridge and Somerville, MA. She has volunteered for several years as the Ritual Chair on the board of the Orthodox Minyan at Harvard Hillel, a minyan that caters to students, young professionals, and young families. Previously, she was the Director of Academic Affairs at the Consulate General of Israel to New England. She earned her Bachelor of Arts at Harvard University and wrote a senior honors thesis about the Bais Yaakov girls' school movement, of which she is an alumna, and its role in the evolution of Orthodox women's formal religious

education. She has learned Torah at Drisha and the Center for Modern Torah Leadership and participated in fellowships and courses offered by the iCenter, Clal, and JOIN for Justice. In 2013, she was named as one of the Jewish Week's "36 Under 36" young visionaries reshaping and broadening the Jewish community.