

בס"ד

# THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

# Parshas Shoftim

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Compiled from the works of  
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**An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi  
Parshas Shoftim**

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**Rashi in His Own Words**

**דברים כ"א, ד':** והורדו זקני העיר ההוא את־העגלה אל־גמל איתן אשר לא־יעבד בו ולא יגרע וצִרְפו־שָׁם אֶת־הָעֵגְלָה בְּגֵםֶל: **רש"י וערפו:** קוצץ ערפה בקופיץ. אמר הקב"ה תבא עגלה בת שנתה שלא עשתה פירות ותערף במקום שאינו עושה פירות, לכפר על הריגתו של זה שלא הניחיהו לעשות פירות:

**Devorim 21:4:** The elders of that city shall bring the calf down to a rugged valley which was neither tilled nor sown. There in the valley, they shall decapitate the calf.

**Rashi Heading - shall decapitate:** He breaks its neck with a hatchet (meaning from the back of his neck). The Holy One blessed be He says, "Let the calf which is in its first year and has, therefore, produced no fruits, come and be decapitated at a place where the valley was not tilled and had, therefore) produced no fruits. This will atone for the murder of this man, whom they (the murderers) did not allow to produce fruit (i.e., to perform Mitzvos).

**Synopsis**

At the end of this week's Torah portion, Shoftim, we find a most unusual Mitzvah<sup>1</sup>. The Mitzvah is called "Eglah Arufah – עגלה ערופה" which serves as atonement. It is performed as follows. A body is found in a field that is between various cities. It is not known who murdered the corpse. The Sages of each of these cities leave the holiness of their respective rabbinic courts; they must travel to the area in question. They then measure, in order to see which city is closest to the corpse. The elders from the city which is closest to the body must take a calf with which no work was done and which had never drawn a yoke. The elders of that city must bring the calf down to a rugged valley which was neither tilled nor sown. There, they decapitate the calf from the back of its neck. The Kohanim shall approach all the elders of the city who are nearest to the corpse. They shall wash their hands over the calf that was decapitated in the valley. They must announce, "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see (this crime)<sup>2</sup>. Atone for Your people Israel, whom You have redeemed Hashem, and do not lay the guilt of innocent blood among your people Israel. And the blood will be atoned for them. And you shall abolish the (shedding of) innocent

1. See Our Parshah, Devorim 21:1-9.

2. Rashi explains further (Our Parshah, Devorim 21:7) "Would it enter one's mind that the elders of the court are murderers? Rather they say as follows. "We ourselves did not see him and let him depart without food. Likewise, we did not see him and not escort him."

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blood from among you, for you shall do what is proper in the eyes of the Lord.”

This entire ritual is obviously most unusual. It is explained in Rashi quoting from the Talmud<sup>3</sup> as follows. “*The Holy One blessed be He says*, ‘Let a calf which is in its first year and has, therefore, produced no fruits be decapitated in a valley which has not been tilled (and therefore bore no fruits). This will atone for the murder of this man, whom they (the murderers) did not allow to produce fruit (i.e., to perform Mitzvos).’” Rashi emphasizes the fact that G-d Himself makes this statement. What is the relevance of the fact that Hashem makes this declaration?

The explanation is, that without telling us that Hashem Himself told us to do this, we would think that this Mitzvah, decapitating a calf with a hatchet, is totally barbaric. However, we know that there are things which seem cruel, such as taking a knife away from a child, which are in truth the greatest kindness. That is why Rashi tells us that this is what “*the Holy One blessed be He said.*” That allows us to understand that it is a truly kind act.

### Rashi’s Explanation

This week’s Torah portion is Shoftim. It teaches us that<sup>4</sup> “The elders of that city shall bring the calf down to a rugged valley which was neither tilled nor sown. There in the valley, they shall decapitate the calf.” Rashi cites the words “shall decapitate” and writes the following. “He breaks its neck with a hatchet (meaning from the back of his neck). The Holy One blessed be He says, ‘Let the calf which is in its first year and has, therefore, produced no fruits, come and be decapitated at a place where the valley was not tilled and had, therefore) produced no fruits. This will atone for the murder of this man, whom they (the murderers) did not allow to produce fruit (i.e., to perform Mitzvos).’”

Rashi goes into great detail explaining this ritual. For the most part, he is quoting the Sages<sup>5</sup>. The Sages add even more detail than what Rashi actually quotes. However, the Torah itself goes into quite a bit of detail<sup>6</sup>. “The Sages of the city which is closer to the corpse will perform this Mitzvah. They will take a calf with which work has never been done and has never drawn a yoke. They will bring the calf down to a rugged valley, which was neither tilled nor sown. There they shall decapitate the calf. And the Kohanim, the sons of Levi, shall approach, for the Lord, your God, has chosen them to serve Him and to

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3. See Talmud Sotah Page 45, at the end of Side B in the Mishnah. See *ibid.* Page 46 at the end of Side A in the Mishnah. The Talmud’s phrasing is somewhat different than Rashi’s.

4. Our Parshah, Devorim 21:4.

5. See footnote 3.

6. Our Parshah, Devorim 21:9.

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bles in the Name of the Lord, and by their mouths shall every controversy and every lesion be judged. And all the elders of that city, who are the nearest to the corpse will wash their hands over the calf that was decapitated in the valley. They shall announce that "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor have our eyes seen this crime. Atone for Your people Israel, whom You have redeemed, Hashem, and lay not the guilt of the innocent blood among your people Israel." And the blood shall be atoned for them. And you shall abolish the shedding of innocent blood from among you. You shall do what is proper in the eyes of Hashem."

In his commentary to the Torah, Rashi does not generally explain the reason for Mitzvos. This is true regarding sacrifices, which we can divide into three types. There are sacrifices that serve a person as atonement. There are sacrifices which thank Hashem for blessings which He has brought upon us. Thirdly, there are those which serve as purification. These offerings serve as thanks for His blessings. A sacrifice which is brought to mark the end of impurity is also brought in order to thank Hashem<sup>7</sup>. These offerings must be brought "before Hashem." This means that they must be brought in the Bais Hamikdosh." That is because the Temple is the source of all blessings.

There are yet other types of sacrifices. There are the two birds that are offered to mark the end of the impurity of a Metzora. There are also two goats which are brought on Yom Kippur which atone for all of our sins. Marking the end of impurity is an occasion for giving thanks. The goat offering on Yom Kippur is not brought in the Temple, yet it is called a sin offering. This is because each goat was prepared for use in the Sanctuary. The red heifer is also called a sin offering, despite the fact that it was brought outside of the Sanctuary. The same is true of the Eglah Arufah which we are currently discussing.

### **Difficulties in Understanding Rashi**

This Mitzvah is performed as follows. A corpse is found in a field that is between various cities. It is not known who murdered the corpse. The rabbis from these cities leave the holiness of their respective rabbinic courts and must measure in order to see which city is closest to the corpse. The elders from the city which is closest to the corpse must take a calf with which no work was done. The calf also had never drawn a yoke. The elders of that city must bring a calf down to a rugged valley, which was neither tilled nor sown. There they shall decapitate the calf. And the Kohanim shall approach all the elders of that city, who are the nearest to the corpse and shall wash their hands over the calf that was decapitated in the valley. They must then announce, that "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see this crime. Atone for Your people Israel, whom You have redeemed, O Lord, and lay not the guilt of innocent blood among

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7. Parshah Vayikroh, Vayikroh 1:3.

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your people Israel." And so, the blood shall be atoned for them. And you shall abolish the shedding of innocent blood from among you, for you shall do what is proper in the eyes of the Lord.

We know that Rashi is very particular with the words he uses; he never uses more words than necessary. We need to understand why Rashi adds the words from the Talmud, that "the Holy One Blessed is He says..." Those words add *nothing* to Peshat. There are many places where it may seem appropriate to say "Hashem says," or something of that sort, However, Rashi generally does not write these words.

One might try to explain that Rashi is quoting the words of the Talmud. However, Rashi only quotes from the Talmud those words which add to our understanding of Peshat. The Talmud is not limited to explaining Peshat. Rashi is explaining only the simple meaning of the verse. Why does Rashi find a need to tell us that G-d said these words?

### The Explanation

There were various sacrifices which were brought outside of the Temple, which do not follow the ordinary rules of Temple sacrifices. One was the goat which was thrown down a mountain on Yom Kippur in order to atone for our sins. This was sent outside of all three camps<sup>8</sup>. The goat which was sent away was called a "sin-offering."<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that it was not brought on the altar, nevertheless this goat brought about atonement<sup>10</sup> for the Jewish people on Yom Kippur. Throwing a goat down a mountain seems unduly cruel.

That seems to be the case here as well. This explains why Rashi first writes that "he breaks its neck with a hatchet (from the back)," and he then writes that "the Holy One Blessed be He says ..." Arifah – עריפה, the act of cutting off an animal's head from behind with a very sharp knife, is a very cruel manner in which to kill an animal. The animal is being tortured<sup>11</sup>! That is why Rashi emphasizes that *G-d Almighty Himself* said this. There are times that something seems to be evil, but in fact it is the greatest kindness. If a toddler gets ahold of a sharp knife, and his parent takes it away from him, the child may cry because someone took away his new "toy." An onlooker, without realizing what is happening, may assume that the parents are torturing the poor child. However, in reality, the parent is performing the greatest kindness possible for him!

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8. This goat was one of a pair. Each had to be identical. The goat which we are discussing was sent down a mountain outside of all three camps. Its partner was brought as an actual sacrifice in the Bais Hamikdosh.

9. Parshas Acharei, Vayikroh 16:5.

10. Parshas Acharei, Vayikroh 16:10

11. See the Me'iri's commentary to the Mishnah in Sotah which we quoted earlier. It can be found on Page 45, Side B. The Me'iri quotes that "he cuts the animal with great strength from behind.

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Furthermore, we see this idea clearly from a story told in Tanach<sup>12</sup>. Shmuel the Prophet told King Shaul in G-d's name<sup>13</sup>, "Now, go and smite Amalek. You shall totally destroy all that is his. Do *not* have mercy on them. You shall kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." However, we are later told that<sup>14</sup> "King Shaul and the people had mercy on Agag, and on the best of the sheep and the cattle, and the fatlings, and on the fattened sheep, and on all that was good. They did not want to destroy them ..." We see that Shaul disobeyed Hashem's word out of a feeling of mercy. However, as a result of Shaul's "mercy," Agag sired a son from whom a very wicked person was descended; Haman who tried to destroy all of the Jews.

### **A Deeper Lesson from Rashi**

This teaches us a lesson about the "Eglah Arufah." It does not just affect those that live in the closest city to the corpse. It affects even the elders of that city; here the word elders have the connotation of Sages. Moreover, it even has an effect on the Supreme Court of the city. Not only that court, but it even affected the Grand Supreme Court of the entire Jewish Nation! These people are Sages in the truest sense of the word. The act of decapitating an animal can have an adverse effect upon any Jew; this includes the negative effect upon a great Tzaddik! A number of the members of the Great Sanhedrin had to be present for the calf's decapitation. From this we see that there was a need for even the greatest of the great to witness this extreme act of cruelty. This brought about the atonement of all of the Jews for this act of murder.

*(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Shoftim, Teitzei and Tavo 5730)*

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12. Shmuel I, Chapter 15.

13. Shmuel I, 15:3.

14. Ibid., 15:9.

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Passed away on Shabbos Parshas Beshalach, 13 Shevat, 5779

May His Soul be bound in the Eternal Bond of Life

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