

# Communal Responsibility

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The Torah reading this week includes a great deal about forms of government and leadership. It ends with the law of what happens when you find a corpse and no one can find any evidence to convict the killer or killers. In our world that is the end of the story, no evidence, no case and no conviction.

But the Torah does not just consider the legal issue of finding the murderer. It deals in addition with what happens when one cannot. It goes further to examine the idea of community responsibility beyond the law. And introduces a strange rite to convey that if one is murdered, the community must share in the blame.

The elders of the cities around the area of the crime measure which one is nearest. Then the elders of that city accept token responsibility for the crime. In Temple times, they offered a strange sacrifice of penance on behalf of the wider community. They took a young calf down to the nearest brook. I leave out how they killed it. And they had to declare both their innocence and their obligation to do more to prevent crime.

What this meant was that whenever something goes wrong it is not just the responsibility of the perpetrators. The community shares a responsibility for the collapse of in law and order. It should have been more aware of the breakdown in relationship, between families, friends, co-workers and citizens in general. It should have done more to protect the innocent as well as search out for wrongdoers. A caring community gets involved before a crime is committed.