

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Ki Teitzei

Human Dignity

וְכִי־יִהְיֶה בְּאִישׁ חַטָּא מִשְׁפָּט־מוֹת וְהוֹמַת וְתִלִּית אֹתוֹ עַל־עֵץ: לֹא־תֵלֵין נִבְלָתוֹ
עַל־הָעֵץ כִּי־קִבֹּר תִּקְבְּרֵנוּ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כִּי־קָלַת אֱלֹהִים תִּלְוִי וְלֹא תִטְמֵא
אֶת־אֲדָמַתְךָ אֲשֶׁר יְהִי אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ נַחֲלָה:

If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and you hang him from a tree, you must not let his corpse remain on the tree overnight; you must bury him the same day. For a hanged person is an affront to God: you shall not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving to you as a possession.

[Deuteronomy 21:22-23]

In the following two sources, the Rabbis seek to understand why “a hanged person is an affront to God.”

1. *A hanged person is an affront to God...* (Deut. 21:23) ... Rabbi Meir taught: When a human being suffers, what does the Divine Presence say? “My head hurts! My arm hurts!” – Now if the Omnipresent grieves when the blood of the wicked is shed, how much more so when it is the blood of the righteous! [Mishna Sanhedrin 6:4-5]

אָמַר רַבִּי מֵאִיר, בְּזִמְנֵן שְׂאָדָם מִצְטַעֵר, (שְׂכִינָה) מָה הִלְשׁוֹן אוֹמֶרֶת (בְּבִיכּוֹל)
קָלְנִי מִרְאשֵׁי, קָלְנִי מִזְרוּעֵי. אִם בֶּן הַמָּקוֹם מִצְטַעֵר עַל דָּמָם שֶׁל רְשָׁעִים
שֶׁנֶּשְׂפָּדוּ, קַל וְחֹמֶר עַל דָּמָם שֶׁל צְדִיקִים.

2. *A hanged person is an affront to God...* (Deut. 21:23) Rabbi Meir taught: How is it an affront? I will tell you a parable: There were two twin brothers. One was the ruler of the world, and the other became a thief. Eventually, the one who became a thief was caught and hanged for his crimes. When people passed by his body, they all declared, “Look! The King has been hanged.” [Tosefta Sanhedrin 9:7]

הִיא ר' מאיר אומ' מה תלמ' לומר כי קללת אלהים תלוי לשני אחים תאומים דומין זה לזה אחד מלך על כל העולם כולו ואחד יצא לליסטיא לאחר זמן נתפס זה שיצא לליסטיא והיו צולבין אותו על הצלוב והיה כל עובר ושב או' דומה שהמלך צלוב לכך נאמר כי קללת אלהים תלוי:

QUESTIONS: What are the theological implications of Rabbi Meir's parable? Specifically, how does experiencing the suffering of other human beings affect our relationship to God? What might this mean for people in situations that bring them into regular contact with suffering?