

# Rachtzah

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When the seder meal was originally ordered in late Antiquity, we washed our hands at rachtzah to purify them, so that the matzah bread would not become ritually impure. Although these purity laws are no longer current, the deep symbolic force of the purifying power of water still resonates within Jewish life. One example is the phrase "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities," which we recite during the yamim noraim [Yechezkel 36:25].

In the case of the eglah arufah, water not only purifies but absolves. To recall: A murdered corpse is found in the field, and the murderer is unknown. The elders of the nearest town are identified, a cow is brought, and its neck is broken. The elders wash their hands over the broken animal and declare, "Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it" [Devarim 21:1-9].

The mishnah [Sotah 9:6] that comments on this passage is incredulous: "Could it be that the elders of a Court were shedders of blood?" Rather, the mishnah (as cited in the Talmud Bavli [Sotah 46b-47a]), interprets the elders as saying, "He came into our hands that we should have dismissed him without sustenance, and we did not see him and leave him without an escort." The mishnah, then, according to the Bavli's reading, obligates the elders, i.e., those with the capacity to act, with a set of specific and concrete responsibilities. They must feed and protect people who pass through their town. If they fail this test, they are morally responsible; if they constantly meet this obligation, then the elders can literally wash their hands of culpability in a specific case that escapes their notice.

If, as Thomas Friedman famously announced, the world is flat in a globalized and interconnected age, can we legitimately continue to proclaim our innocence and wash our hands of all responsibility when we constantly encounter victims of injustice? I believe that just as the elders of the town must invest in the protection of life of everyone they encounter by sustaining and escorting visitors, we must do the same even if they are only encountered virtually. We can no longer say, "Never again," only to see and read about victims of genocide again (in Cambodia) and again (in Rwanda) and again (in the former Republics of Yugoslavia) and again (in Darfur) and again (in Democratic Republic of Congo).

Only after we have acted to the limits of our capacity to fight against the loss of life, can we, like the elders of the town, wash our hands in good conscience and enjoy the upcoming meal.