

## The Blame Game

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
Yom Kippur 2005*

If Jeffrey Zaslow, a columnist for the Wall Street Journal is not a rabbi, he should be. He recently wrote a column entitled, "It's All Your Fault: Why Americans can't stop playing the Blame Game" which reads like a High Holiday Yom Kippur sermon.

He wrote insightfully about the finger pointing currently taking place among federal and local officials over the multiple failures and breakdowns associated with Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. Eric Dezenhall, a crisis-management consultant in Washington, D.C. explained, "Every event must have a villain, a victim and a vindicator in order for our culture to understand it. History is calamity-driven, but Americans feel these things shouldn't happen here, and someone must be at fault."

There are people who actually study the biology and psychology of blame. Ohio University psychology professor Mark Alicke is one of them. He explains, "The human impulse to blame grows out of the evolutionary need to avert harm. If a group of early humans thought their survival was threatened because a member wasn't carrying his load -- hunting, gathering, whatever -- they'd point fingers, throw rocks, even commit murder.

Nowadays things are a bit more sophisticated. You can go on the internet to buy a "calibrated blame-shifting device" for \$4.95 from a clever ad agency. It is actually a giant foam hand with the words "It's your fault!" printed on the pointing finger.

"Our blame culture is rooted in both nature and nurture. We still succumb to primitive impulses: If we stub a toe on a chair, we'll kick it and curse at it, even though we know it's irrational to blame inanimate objects. From childhood on, we're schooled in the art of blame-shifting. "Parents blame each other, teachers blame students, parents blame teachers," according to Margaret Paul, a psychologist whose Los Angeles-based "Inner Bonding" program helps people tame finger-pointing tendencies.

How convenient it is to avoid taking responsibility and blame others. It was Ralph Nader's fault that Al Gore lost to George Bush in the 2000 election. It is never one's fault if you are not happy, and of course our parents are blamed for everything, much to the delight of therapists everywhere.

"Often, we blame because we lack the skills to problem-solve. Blame is about the past, and about words. Problem-solving focuses on the future and is about actions," says Cathryn Bond Doyle, a communications counselor in Medford, N.J. who encourages business executives to take positive steps rather than to mercilessly judge employees for their mistakes.

Mark H. McCormack author of *The Terrible Truth About Lawyers* cites some disturbing examples of the extremes and the abuses of our litigious society which reflects and feeds into this tendency:

- A California woman was driving a Porsche after having had several drinks. While driving 60 in a 25-mph zone, she had an accident in which her passenger was killed. Porsche was ordered to pay \$2.5 million for having designed a car that was too high-performance for the average driver.
- While in the process of attempting to burglarize a school, a man fell through a skylight. The company that insured the school was ordered to pay \$260,000 in damages and to give the would-be burglar \$1,500 a month for life.
- In Maryland, 2 men tried to dry their hot-air balloon in a commercial laundry dryer. The dryer exploded, injuring them slightly, and they ended up winning almost \$900,000 in damages.

The problem with blaming others though is that it is neither healthy nor does it contribute to solving the problem. If anything, it avoids dealing with the issues at hand. More often than not, as the Wall Street Journal article reports, “blame ruins everything, creating hostilities, scapegoats, and an avoidance of hard decisions that could actually solve problems.” Zaslow concludes his article with the adage: When you point a finger at someone else, all your other fingers point toward you.

Blaming others is not just an American phenomena. One of the major problems plaguing the Middle East and Moslem world, according to many scholars, is the inclination in Arab society to place the blame for the ills of their society on others. In but one small example, just two weeks ago, a column in the Washington Post by a Palestinian bemoaned the Israeli evacuation of the Gaza Strip for leaving and thus depriving Palestinians of jobs. As Johns Hopkins scholar Faoud Ajami has pointed out, instead of searching for solutions, or looking inward at what needs to be corrected, Israel and the West are constantly blamed for their problems, which is why the rate of illiteracy, impoverishment, lack of democracy, and backward economies plague Arab nations and thwart their advancement and modernization.

Indeed, we Jews are no stranger to the blame game. We are constantly blamed for all of society’s ills. It is basically the crux of anti-semitism. Hitler succeeded in convincing Germany that the Jews were responsible for Germany’s defeat in World War I, as well as all of their economic ills, and deterioration of their society, even though Jews only made up less than 1 % of the population. In the Middle Ages Jews were blamed for the Black Plague as well as a host of other maladies afflicting the world.

Part of the meaning of today is so that we, of all people should realize the need to rise above just shifting the blame in order to find a scapegoat for our own shortcomings.

The Torah reading for Yom Kippur morning is about the scapegoat who is set off into the wilderness bearing the sins of the people. I have often wondered not only about the

curious custom, but why we read it on Yom Kippur. Perhaps one of the reasons it is chosen is to show us how far we have come. A ritual that was central in Biblical times is no longer practiced, and contrasts with the whole theme of the liturgy, which is to urge us to take responsibility for our actions.

Similarly, we begin Yom Kippur with the Kol Nidre prayer which annuls and releases us from the vows we make to ourselves and to God so that we can begin the process of honestly, openly and directly confronting ourselves, and our shortcomings. It offers us a fresh start, a clear slate, a new beginning, all of which helps to explain the tremendous power of the Days of Awe. The Yamim HaNoraim offer us the chance to begin anew – to repair and amend our relationships, to look deep within our hearts to see what we need to change to be better.

All of this is the work we begin tonight, and focus on over the next 24 hours.

Our tradition maintains that change is possible. Even more than that, it encourages us to take the steps necessary to effectuate that change, even if those steps are painful, and even if they take a long time. In other words, tonight and tomorrow is all about the antithesis of pointing fingers and playing the blame game but to help us realize that if we are sincere in our desire to repent, to change our ways, and to improve ourselves, we have nowhere else to look but inside.

Each of us, as individuals stands before our Creator, on this, the Day of Judgment.

I heard a joke about a guy driving around in Jerusalem frantically looking for a parking place. Late for a meeting, he begins to panic. In desperation, he turns towards heaven and says, “God, if you just me a parking spot, I promise that I will eat only kosher and observe Shabbat and all the holidays.”

Miraculously, just at that moment, no sooner does he finish uttering these words, than a space opens up right in front of him. What does he do? He looks up to heaven and says, “Never mind, God, no need to bother -- I just found one.”

We are too quick to take credit when we shouldn't, and too hesitant to recognize the role of the Divine in our lives. But on this day, our excuses and accusations no longer matter. It is the time when we must be painfully truthful with ourselves, and about ourselves. Confessing the litany of our sins forces us to encounter our failures and to admit our mistakes. Throughout the year many of us may participate in all kinds of programs to work out, to stay in shape, to improve various skills and how we look. On this day, we focus on our spiritual needs and concentrate on our souls and our relationships. It is as if for an intense 24 hour period we are all enrolled in a giant self help clinic.

I just heard a story from a colleague about a guy in shul on Rosh Hashana who goes over to his friend and whispers in his ear, “Not that I would want to speak business on the holiday, but I have a car I'm trying to get rid of.”

His friend responds, “Not that I would want to ask about such a thing on the holiday, but how much would it cost?”

“\$25,000,” he responds, “not that I would discuss financial matters on Rosh Hashana.”

Some time passes, and the friend comes back during Musaf and says, “Not that we would negotiate in shul on the holiday, but how much do you really want for the car?”

His friend answers, “Not that I would do business on yom tov, but between sheni and shlishi, the second and third aliyahs I sold it for \$ 22,000.”

Today is a day when we set aside business and other concerns to concentrate on spiritual matters, on the meaning of the Day of Atonement and its message for us. On Yom Kippur we come before God asking forgiveness and pledging to do better. But we can't begin the process of seeking forgiveness unless and until we break loose from this blame-game mentality.

We need to not play the role of victim, but to take the challenges that life throws at us and use them as vehicles for growth.

Some of you may have heard the extraordinary story of Tibor Rubin who recently received the Medal of Honor from President Bush. This 76 year old man was belatedly honored for his bravery during the Korean War. He was a Holocaust survivor who was guided in his actions by the ethos of being a good Jew.

He single-handedly defended a hill for 24 hours against waves of Korean soldiers. His commander, a vicious anti-semitic consistently assigned Rubin the most dangerous missions and patrols. The commander's prejudice was so strong that he deliberately withheld submitting the paper work that would have resulted in his receiving the award.

While in a Korean prisoner of war camp for 2 ½ years, in an environment of every man for himself, he would sneak out every night to steal food from the supply depots to bring back and share with the other GI's. As one of his non-Jewish comrades wrote, “He took care of us, nursed us, carried us to the latrine...He did many good deeds, which he told us were ‘mitzvahs’ in the Jewish tradition...He was a very religious Jew, and helping his fellow men was the most important thing to him.”

Anyone else would have been honored a long time ago. Anyone else would have turned bitter. But not Tibor Rubin. Despite decades of slights, and being denied the honor he deserved, he maintained his sense of humor and perspective on life. He said, “I want this recognition for my Jewish brothers and sisters. I want the goyim to know that there was a little greenhorn from Hungary who fought for their beloved country.” (He used some other more colorful language, which is not quite appropriate to repeat on the pulpit.)

The power of our heritage in the life of one individual, who as a result of his upbringing and experience as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp learned the importance of saving the lives of others, and whose actions kept them alive and sustained others shows

how what can happen when a person remains positive in the face of insurmountable adversity.

This past winter I read an interesting article about basketball superstar, Shaquille O'Neal. To gain a psychological edge over the big players on other teams he uses trash talk to try to intimidate them, for everyone that is, except Houston Rockets center, Yao Ming.

He stopped doing it and even apologized to the Chinese all star after his father told him to stop.

I could end the story right here, and you would understand why it went into the High Holiday file. It illustrates several important points. How beautiful an image and what a wonderful role model that this giant of a man, this highly successful basketball player still listens to his father, and takes advice from him, for he recognizes that he serves as a moral compass for him.

But the story continues, and gets even better. Shaquille's father asked his son why he would trash talk Yao Ming, when after all, Ming had sent Shaq a Christmas card. The father gave him the card, which read, "Shaq, you're my favorite big man. I want to be like you in a couple of years. I love you." Somewhat sheepishly, Shaq said that he gained a tremendous respect for him, and also came to realize that the Chinese culture is based on principles of honor and respect, so, as he told the Washington Post, "I now respect and honor him."

We can take away from this vignette the importance of taking ownership of one's actions, the ongoing role of parents to provide moral education. It also reminds us of the significance of culture and values, of retaining those attributes of decency, and of the respect it engenders in others when people are guided to live by these qualities. It also is a tribute to Yao Ming that he stayed true to his values and did not allow Shaq's actions to change his basic nature, or to deter him from doing the right thing. His simple kind gesture, graciously overlooking and even forgiving Shaq for what he had done helped to erase any animosity. That is the power of teshuva, of reaching out to another.

Just imagine if we Jews were more faithful to our traditional teachings about respect for others, for being concerned with honoring and not humiliating another person, for fairness and honesty in business. I think the reason people are so profoundly moved by the worship experience on the High Holidays is because they are reminded of how beautiful our tradition is and how inspiring and applicable its teachings are to our everyday lives. It also affects us because the liturgy reminds us of our mortality and forces us to think about what is important in life.

About two months ago I received a most unusual phone call. On my way to visit and teach a session for a group of children at Camp Shorashim in Frederick, Maryland, the voice on the other end of the line asked if I was the same Stuart Weinblatt who had been involved in student politics at the University of Maryland in the early 1970's. A quick calculation on my part led me to realize that the statute of limitations had passed, so I said yes, I am the same person.

The woman, who I did not know called to ask if I remembered the person who was president of the student government, Howard Carolan when I served as the Director of State Affairs, the liaison to the Governor and Maryland state legislature on behalf of the student body. Of course, I remembered him. We had worked closely together on a number of issues. Although I had not seen him in almost 30 years, fond memories quickly came to mind, as my mind drifted, only to be abruptly interrupted by her telling me that he had suddenly passed away at the age of 52. But that was not the only reason she had called.

She wanted me to know that as she and his wife were going through some old files of Howard's they came across a column I had written for the student paper about Howard when he completed his term of office. They said they wanted to read it at the funeral scheduled later that day, because I had both described many of his accomplishments and captured the essence of his personality. I vaguely remembered having written such a piece. It was eerily titled, "Howard, we'll miss you."

When she said it read like a eulogy, I mentioned the irony, for unbeknownst to this woman, I revealed that I am now a rabbi, and write and deliver my share of eulogies.

After I hung up from that phone call, and for sometime afterward, I could not help but think back on those days which seemed so distant, yet which had passed so quickly. I thought about their intensity and how much had changed in the intervening time.

The power of this day and the new year is that it forces us to come face to face with our own mortality, with our values, and with what is really important in life. In the end, it really is about relationships and the kind of people we are.

This is why Pirke Avot tells us, that of all the crowns we wear, the most important and precious one is the *keter shem tov*, the crown of a good name.

Earlier this year it was revealed that the actress Goldie Hawn, originally from the Takoma Park area has an unusual habit. She likes to go back and visit her childhood home where she grew up. The part that is strange is that she will stop in, unannounced, and even enter if no one else is at home. I suspect this is much more than just nostalgia or the eccentric habit of a Hollywood star. It has to do with a desire to return to one's roots, to be reminded of where she comes from and how far she has journeyed to better understand who she really is.

And in a way, that is part of what Yom Kippur is about – stripping away the excuses, not shifting blame elsewhere, and honestly looking into our own hearts and souls. The midrash tells a story about a prince who set out on a journey. After the passage of much time, he wanted to return, but found that it was difficult to make the way back. He had traveled so far, and the distance was so great, he did not have the energy or ability to make the journey back. Word reached his father, the king that his son wanted to return, and so he sent out a messenger who told the prince, just start to take those first steps, and

I will come and meet you. According to the midrash we are like that son, and God is the king reaching out to us, and helping us make the journey home. It helps to explain the meaning and also why we chant several times in our service the words from the book of Psalms, “*Hashevenu Adonai alecha, vanashuva*: Help us return to You, and we shall return.”

May we use this Yom Kippur to strip away our excuses, not to blame others, so that we might be able to return --- to ourselves, to our inner souls, to our inner voices, to our heritage, to God and to each other.

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt*  
*Congregation B'nai Tzedek*  
*Potomac, Maryland*  
*October 12, 2005*  
[potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org](mailto:potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org)