

## Shifting the Blame

In this week's Torah portion, *Ki Tisa*, the Israelites make a golden calf and worship it while Moses is on Mount Sinai receiving the Torah from God. God is absolutely incensed, as expected, and as Moses is on his way down, God tells him:

לֵךְ-יָרֵד בִּי שָׁחַת עַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הֵעַלִיתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. [Exodus 32:7]

*Your* people? Whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt? Aren't the Israelites *God's* people, as God told them many times? A few verses earlier in Exodus we hear God saying:

וְנָתַתִּי אֶת-יָדִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶת-צְבֹאתַי אֶת-עַמִּי בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים:

I will lay My hand upon Egypt and deliver My hosts, My people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with great judgments. [Exodus 7:4]

And elsewhere God frequently says: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt".

God is implicitly shifting the blame to Moses. Sometimes when a mother is angry at her son, she tells her husband: "Look what *your son* has done!"

A Midrash makes that point clearly and tells us that Moses talked back to God:

Moses spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of all the worlds! When Israel had not yet sinned before You, You called them "*My* people". [Ex. 7:4] Now that they have sinned before You, You tell me, "Hurry down, for *your* people have corrupted themselves" [Ex. 32:7]. They are *Your* people, and *Your* inheritance, as it is said [in the Torah]:

וְהֵם עַמֶּךָ וְנִחַלְתָּם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ בְּכַחֲךָ הַגָּדֹל וּבְזַרְעֶךָ הַנּוֹטִיָּה

Yet they are Your very own people, whom You freed with Your great might and Your outstretched arm. [Deuteronomy 9:29]

[Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 45:7]

Another Midrash softens it a bit:

[Why did God tell Moses:]

Hurry down, for *your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. [Ex. 32:7] ?

Are [the Jews] not the people of the Lord? [Deuteronomy 9:29] How are we to understand this verse? [Like so: Moses] devoted his life to [the Jews], so they were called *his* [people]. [Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 15:1]

Moses doesn't stop here. He goes even further by going on the offensive, telling God that God Himself is the one who caused Israel to sin. He himself shifts the blame right back to God! The Talmud explains:

They said in the school of Rabbi Yannai: Thus spoke Moses before the Holy One, blessed be He: "Sovereign of the Universe, the silver and gold that You showered on Israel ... *that* was what led them to make the Calf."

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said: It is like the case of a man who had a son. He bathed him and anointed him and gave him plenty to eat and drink and hung a purse round his neck and set him down at the door of a brothel. How could the boy help sinning? [Berakhot 32a]

Then God explains to Moses that He cannot forgive Israel because He cannot retract the vow He made to destroy idolaters. The Midrash explains:

When Israel made the Calf, Moses began to persuade God to forgive them. But God said: "Moses, I have already taken an oath [as it says in Exodus]:

Whoever sacrifices to a god other than the Lord alone shall be destroyed.  
[Exodus 22:19]

I cannot retract an oath which has proceeded from My mouth."

Moses said: "Master of the Universe! Did You not grant me the power to annul vows? [see Numbers 30:3] If a jurist desires that others should respect his laws, he must be the first to observe them. Since You have commanded me concerning the annulment of vows, it is only right and proper that You should follow this procedure Yourself."

Whereupon, Moses wrapped himself in his tallit and seated himself in the posture of a rabbinical judge; and God stood before him as one asking for the annulment of his vow. What did Moses say to Him? A most difficult thing... He said [to God]: "Do You now regret Your vow?"

God replied: "I regret now the evil which I said I would do to My people."

[Note that God is back to saying "My people"!] ]

When Moses heard this, he proclaimed: "Be it absolved for You, be it absolved for You. There is neither vow nor oath any longer..." [Exodus Rabbah 43:4]

Score one for Moses for both imaginativeness andchutzpah. For one who claimed he was "slow of tongue" [Ex. 4 :10], Moses was a master lawyer.

Shifting the blame is something we all do. Without attempting to create an analogy with God doing it, *lehavdil*, let me point out other cases in our tradition. In our parasha, Aaron, Moses' saintly brother, helps the Israelites

build the Golden Calf, hoping it will avert a civil war and buy him time before Moses gets back. Moses confronts him:

What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?  
[Ex. 32:21]

Aaron replies:

They gave me [their gold] and I threw it into the fire and out came this calf! [Ex. 32:24]

A likely story! Translation: It was God who decided to make a calf out of the gold, not me!

In Genesis, we read:

[God asked Adam]: "Did you eat from the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?"

He replied: "The woman You put at my side—she gave me of the tree, and I ate."  
And God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done!"

The woman replied: "The serpent duped me, and I ate." [Gen. 3:11-13]

Later, Cain kills his brother Abel, and when God asks him where his brother is, he says: "Am I my brother's keeper?" [Genesis 4:9], implying: "*You* are my brother's keeper and you did not do Your job; you allowed me to kill him!"

Indeed, the Midrash says:

Cain retorted [to God]: "True, I slew him, but You created the evil inclination within me. Since You are the guardian of all, why did You allow me to slay him? You... killed him, for if You had accepted my sacrifice as You accepted his, I would not have been envious of him." [Midrash Tanhuma, Bereshit 9]

Moses himself is not immune to this. God tells him many times: Because you broke faith with Me among the Israelites at the waters of Meribah ... by failing to uphold My sanctity... you will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land. [Numbers 20:12, Numbers 20:24, Deuteronomy 32:51] Yet, in his farewell speech, Moses tells the people it's their fault:

Because of you, God was angry with me too, saying: "You shall not enter [the Promised Land]." [Deut. 1:37]

Passing the buck seems to be a very strong human tendency. On Yom Kippur, *even after* we have acknowledged our failings and repented, the Torah calls for the ceremony of the scapegoat, in which we physically see all our sins discharged upon another entity and moving away from us:

[On Yom Kippur] Aaron [the High Priest] shall lay both his hands upon the head of [a] live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites... putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the

wilderness. Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region. [Lev. 16:21-22]

Likewise, in the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we have the ceremony of *tashlich*, in which we throw pieces of bread representing our sins into a river, symbolically removing them from our person. It's not enough to repent, we want to see our sins physically move away from us.

In the modern world, we hear stories about children suing their parents for not raising them well. A student at the University of Kent in England was caught cheating, and then sued the university, saying he had been cheating for three years and it's the fault of his teachers that they didn't catch him sooner, and as a result he fell behind in his studies. Antisemites blame the Jews for everything they don't like in the world. But then there is the joke about the Jewish man who applied for a job as a television announcer. He didn't get it. A friend asked him why, and he said: "B-b-bec-cause, I'm J-Jewish!"

It comes as no surprise that, in certain quarters, God is blamed for all that's wrong in the world. There is even a Yiddish saying that goes: "If God lived on earth, all His windows would be broken". There are many jokes on the matter, such as this one:

A man orders a pair of pants. The tailor promises to have them ready in a week, but takes six weeks. The pants are nice and fit perfectly, but the customer can't resist criticizing the tailor: "You know, it took God only six days to make the world. And it took you six weeks to make just one pair of pants."

And the tailor replies: "Ah, but look at these pants, and look at the world!"

All these stories conveniently forget that God gave us free will. This means that we must bear responsibility for our actions. In most cases, we have only ourselves to blame. The rabbis even took this notion *very* far, saying that all the terrible things that happened to us Jews in our history were punishment for our own sins: The destruction of the first Temple because we engaged in idolatry, adultery and murder; the destruction of the second Temple because we engaged in *sin'at chinam* – senseless hatred; and so forth.

So, every once in a while, it would not hurt us to follow President Truman's lead and say: "The buck stops here".

Shabbat shalom.