

The Blame Game

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A cantankerous, lonely widower refuses to sell his house to developers, who have to build around it- this is the plot of the Pixar movie Up, but it also happened in real life. In 2006, two years after writing began on the movie, a woman named Edith Macefield drew considerable local and national attention for her refusal to sell her Seattle farm house to real estate developers. Nothing worked- not even the \$1 million she was offered. As a result of her intransigence, the developers had to build the complex around her house. In an ironic twist, she bequeathed the house to Barry Martin, a man she had befriended who was the superintendent of the construction project! Edith Macefield died in 2008, and in 2009, Disney hung balloons up on the house to promote the impending release of Up, the movie whose art life seems to have imitated. Edith Macefield is still commemorated as a local folk hero in Seattle- there is even a music festival in Seattle named in her memory. A small house surrounded by tall buildings is a compelling image; I think it is also a useful metaphor to describe a narrative in this morning's Torah reading. It is a short and seemingly insignificant section of the Torah, sandwiched between the biblical skyscrapers of the birth of Yitzchak, and Akeidat Yitzchak. The story is important

enough that our sages included it in the Torah reading on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, but I suspect most of us don't really know why- or what it is even about.

Avimelech, the King of the Philistines, and his general, Phichol, ask Avraham to make a non-aggression pact with them, to which Avraham agrees. Before he signs on the dotted line, though, Avraham does something strange:

וְהוֹכִיחַ אַבְרָהָם אֶת־אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ עַל־אֲדֹתָיו כֹּאֵר הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר גָּזְלוּ עֲבָדָיו אֶבְרָהָם:

Bereishit 21:22

Then Abraham reproached Abimelech for the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized.

Avraham is being offered a chance to neutralize a powerful enemy with virtually no sacrifice on his part. All he had to do was promise to deal honorably with Avimelech and his descendants, something he was likely going to do anyway. And yet, he is prepared to torpedo the deal over the behavior of a few of Avimelech's inconsequential underlings. Does this make any sense? Ask anyone who has worked on a business deal, only for it to fall apart at the last minute over something minor, how infuriated they were. If you have been in or set up a relationship that ended over seeming trifles when things got serious, you know how frustrating and counterproductive that is. Now Avraham was doing it. Isn't this terrible diplomacy, and poor negotiation tactics?

I'd like to offer an answer based on comments of the Netziv, Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin of Volozhin. In this exchange, Avraham was trying to take the measure of the kind of person he would be dealing with. Was he a person of ethics, honor and integrity? How would he react when a subordinate misbehaved, or when he was accused of wrongdoing himself? Avimelech's response told Avraham everything he needed to know.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִימֶלֶךְ לֹא יָדַעְתִּי מִי עָשָׂה אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְגַם־אַתָּה לֹא־הִגַּדְתָּ לִּי וְגַם אֲנֹכִי לֹא שָׁמַעְתִּי בְלִתִּי הַיּוֹם:

But Abimelech said, "I do not know who did this; you did not tell me, nor have I heard of it until today.

This seems like a needlessly wordy response, but according to Netziv, it was most revealing. Rather than being one repetitive phrase said by one person, it is actually three statements made by different people. When confronted with the report of the wayward servants at the well, Avimelech said to Avraham, "It wasn't me- I don't know who did this." He then turned to Pichol, accusatorily, and said "And you didn't tell me! You should know what is happening among the soldiers, and you should be updating me regularly." And Phichol replied, "I had faulty intelligence! This is the first I'm hearing of it!"

When confronted with reports of wrongdoing, neither Avimelech nor Phichol took responsibility, choosing instead to point fingers and assign blame to others. In this

short exchange, Avraham realized that the person he was dealing with was not a *baal achrayus*, a person who accepts responsibility, and knew that had to be careful.

It is much easier to assign blame, as Avimelech did, than to accept responsibility- a truth that goes a long way to explain today's political climate. Each side of the American political divide finds ample pretext to apportion blame, to stoke the smoldering fires of resentment among their base, and to translate disillusionment into votes. Every president blames the challenges faced by their administration on the mistakes of the previous one. Political candidates and populist demagogues blame America's problems on a host of people and issues who are not them and theirs. Reading from right to left, America's problems are the fault of rampant Inflation, so-called "woke politics," immigration and stolen elections, or disastrous environmental policies, racism, Evangelicals, Trumpism and the stripping of the rights of American citizens. If the Whatsapp groups I have been added to against my will are any indication, our fellow Jews have thrown their lot wholly and passionately with one side or another of the American political divide (and it seems just as divided after Tuesday as it was before), adding their voices to the full-throated chorus of blame. This is a mistake. Of course, everyone is entitled to their well-reasoned and carefully researched political views. But Avraham realized that if Avimelech was quick to assign blame, he would eventually be the one blamed. Anyone with even a passing familiarity with world history knows that whenever

there is economic uncertainty, societal upheaval and political unrest, fingers are pointed- and we know in which direction, everywhere and without exception. To quote Tom Lehrer, in his song *National Brotherhood Week*:

Oh the Protestants hate the Catholics

And the Catholics hate the Protestants

And the Hindus hate the Muslims

And everybody hates the Jews

Supporting one side or another will not help us when the side we support turns against us- as evidenced by the fact that there are plenty of conservative and liberal vocal anti-Semites can be found on both sides of the aisle, getting elected and reelected across the country. Our attempts to justify anti-Semitic expressions because the candidate espouses the social issues we care about, or is “Pro-Israel,” are meaningless, because we will always end up in the crosshairs. Playing the blame game may feel good in the short term, it may provide the illusion of some clarity, but it doesn’t solve any problems; it just creates scapegoats.

That is why it is so unfortunate that in the world’s only Jewish state, In the most recent Israeli election, blame was the order of the day; each party was able to pin unhappiness and uncertainty on some area that Israelis were concerned about.

Israelis in southern towns *are* being targeted by security rackets run by Bedouins, and violence has broken out in the last year in several Israeli cities between Jewish and Arab Israeli citizens. Politicians like Itamar Ben Gvir and Betzalel Smotrich translated these security concerns into a nationalist narrative that blamed “the Arabs” for the lack of it. Parties on the left blame the Occupation for the same kinds of security concerns. Issues over equal sharing of burden and disproportionate funding means that Chareidim remain a popular target of blame in any election, and Chareidi parties blame problems on social issues, and hatred of Chareidim. In the aftermath of the election, Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid blamed each other for Netanyahu’s win.

Yes, politics is the natural home of the blame game, but it doesn’t stop there. In our own lives, we assign blame to others for the deficiencies in our character, or our lives. We all have blame narratives: We would be less angry if everyone else around us weren’t so inconsiderate; this is, in one sentence, the premise of Larry David’s behavior in every episode of the show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. We would be better, more patient parents if our children listened to us the first time- or if they stopped blaming each other, as kids are wont to do. We would be more learned in Torah and knowledgeable in Judaism if we were better educated in our formative years, or we had better teachers. It is easy to do so, because it deflects responsibility from us, and prevents us from having to solve our own problems, and improving ourselves.

Faced with the temptation to point fingers, it would behoove us to recall the words of the prophet Yirmiyahu, in the third chapter of Eichah:

מִהֲיִתְאוֹנֵן אָדָם הִי גֹבֵר עַל־חַטָּאוֹ [חֲטָאִיו:] (ס)

Eichah 3:39

Of what shall a living man complain? Each one of his own sins!

The lesson of Avraham's behavior in his treaty with Avimelech presents us with a powerful challenge. Avraham realized that no one ever wins the blame game- not on a national level and not on a personal one. Let us learn from his example, so we can better ourselves, accepting responsibility and raising our children to do the same.