

***“Now Who Is Responsible for This?
How We Assign Blame and Accept It”
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Many childhood stories that I have shared with you began with the sentence, “I didn’t do it,” or “It wasn’t my fault.” That statement was always preceded by, “Who did this?” Or “Who is responsible?” Maybe it was referring to a mess someone had left in the den or in the kitchen. That was fine because it just meant that the mess had to be cleaned up. The real problem came when the question was referencing something that had been broken. The most concerning formation of that same question did not actually include the question at all. It was the statement that implied the question which raised fear and trepidation in my heart. I was most concerned when my mother would yell up to my room using both my first and middle names without referencing my siblings at all, “Jay Michael, come down here right now.” My mind would race. What had I done? What did I break? Whom had I offended?

What had I forgotten to do that I promised I would do? The panic only became deeper when I came up with nothing. If I could figure it out before my mother could get the words out, I could come up with an explanation. However, not having any advance notice meant there would have to be some pretty quick thinking. In retrospect, I think my mother was doing the same.

I think that as she called my name she began to think of the varied excuses I was going to make and how inadequate they would be. I think she was working through the arguments and the rebuttals...and so the chess game began. She knew it and I knew it. What I thought would be my ultimate move, would turn out to be just a trap set by my mother. My trump card was, “I didn’t do it,” or “It wasn’t my fault.” What could she possibly say to that? How could she challenge that? She would, and she did by simply saying, “So who did it?” Then, of course, I went to the noble answer, “Mom, you wouldn’t want me to be a tattle-tale, would you?” Then came *the look*, which essentially meant the game was over. “I guess you will get a pass,” was the first look followed by the next look which was, “One last chance to come clean.” However, I would stand my ground – and then I would bolt as fast as I could.

Sometimes things in life are neat and clean. Sometimes things go as planned. This week I watched as Mayor Michael Nutter and Governor Tom Corbett gathered to applaud the people of the great city of Philadelphia for following instructions with regards to Hurricane Irene. The instructions were to stay indoors and prepare properly for the hurricane and, as a result, there were very few injuries because most of those listening did follow these instructions. You see, following the instructions permitted those in charge of our safety to do their jobs. Mayor Nutter and Governor Corbett seem to imply that in other cities faced with the same extreme circumstance, the people found license to behave in ways that were unacceptable, some even criminal. Not this time. When nature tore through our neighborhoods, we sat quietly in the safety of our homes and shelters and rode it out. Calm was our response to chaos. Care our response to turmoil.

However, it could have easily gone another way. We are always given the choice of how to respond when life happens. Sometimes it turns out the way we expect and sometimes not, but how, we respond is most critical.

Please turn to page 1105, Chapter 21 in your *Etz Hayim Humash- the book of Devarim*. In this week's reading, 1 "If one is found slain in the land which the Lord your God gives you to possess, lying in the field, and it is not known who has slain him;" 2 "Then your elders and your judges shall come forth, and they shall measure the distance to the cities which are around him who is slain;" 3 "And it shall be, that the city which is nearest to the slain man, the elders of that city shall take a heifer, which has not been worked with, and which has not pulled in the yoke;" 4 "And the elders of that city shall bring down the heifer to a rough ravine, which is neither plowed nor sown, and shall strike off the heifer's neck there in the ravine;" 5 "And the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come near; for them the Lord your God has chosen to minister to him, and to bless in the name of the Lord; and by their word shall every controversy and every assault be tried;" 6 "And all the elders of that city, which is nearest to the slain man, shall wash their hands over the heifer that is beheaded in the valley;" 7 "And they shall answer and say, our hands have not shed this blood, nor have our eyes seen it." 8 "Be merciful, O Lord, to your people of Israel, whom you have redeemed, and lay not innocent blood to your people of Israel's charge. And the blood shall be forgiven them." 9 "So shall you put away the guilt of innocent blood from among you, when you shall do that which is right in the sight of the Lord."

The comment on the bottom of the page seems to suggest a far more gracious reading of the circumstance than is reasonable. When focusing on Verse 8, the comment implies a level of responsibility which is clearly in opposition to the plain reading of the Torah. Please glance downward to the comment of the observation. "The Gemara," (Sotah 45b) understands the oath of the town elders. This oath insists that they do not permit a climate of lawlessness and violence to exist in their community."

Well, in fact, they did. I imagine someone came to the defense of this poor nameless and homeless victim by asking, "Who is responsible?" This phrase demands that someone step up and take responsibility. The Mishna comes to the aid of the elders by giving them the following response.

"Yadaiydu lo shafcha et haDam hazeh v'eneinu lo ra'oo" "Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it." [The meaning of their statement is], "However, [The man found dead] did not come to us [for help] and we dismissed him without supplying him with food, we did not see him and let him go without escort." *"Ela shelo ba al yadeinu u'patranuhu b'lo mazon, v'lo rainuhu v'hinachnuhu b'lo l'vaya."*

As Kimberly Howard once said, and to which I respond, "Never ruin an apology with an excuse." I would have preferred they had said nothing. I prefer the statement of Pirkei Avot, *"B'Makom SheAyin Ish Hishtadel lihiyot ish,"* (2:5) "Where there is no person, strive to be a person."

The Tosophot makes the elders' offense even more glaring. It describes the reality of a person traveling on their own without food or protection. Often they could be robbed or killed. The

elders stake their claim that they didn't kill the man. To which I say, "You did not murder the unidentified man but you are, in fact, responsible for his death."

We are so good at watching our leaders dance around while pointing fingers at one another, sidestepping liability and shifting the blame. It is just like what my brothers might say under the accusing eyes of our parents, "It is not our fault, it is theirs."

Yes, by the letter of the law the elders in this scenario did not shed the blood of this unidentified victim and they literally washed their hands of the crime. However, as Henry David Thoreau taught, "Aim above morality. Be not simply good, be good for something."

A woman in the congregation, realizing that the hurricane was coming, does what she can. She cooks a few dishes, bakes a few pastries and then brings them to a neighbor she isn't sure is fully stocked for the storm. She doesn't have to, she is under no obligation. There are plenty of people who could have looked in on them. Her neighbor has children, she is their responsibility. She could have just called or stopped by to make the cursory offer but she didn't. I imagine she wasn't the only one.

"Kol Yisrael arevin zeh bazeh," "All in Israel are responsible for one another." In Judaism, responsibility belongs to all of us and it cannot be delegated away. Contrary to the plethora of rules found in the Torah, specifically their legislation and enforcement in this week's parasha, Judaism challenges us to go beyond.

The story of my mother never really ended with my escape. Usually my mother would say, "If you didn't do it and you won't tell me who did, then I will hold all of you responsible and all of you will be punished." This was a move that was supposed to pressure me either into taking responsibility myself or to point the finger at the guilty party. Many teachers and counselors have employed this technique in their classrooms or in their bunks and the lesson will always be the same. Either we take personal responsibility or all will be held responsible. That is true of society and that is true of our world.

"Aim above morality. Be not simply good, be good for something."