

Temple Israel
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Blaming Others

Many of us by now are probably familiar with the “Live Gulf Oil Spill Camera.” No matter which major television network or on-line news source one prefers, the camera’s live feeds have constantly offered viewers a chronicle of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico since the collapse of BP’s offshore oilrig on April 20. Immediately following the catastrophic events, which killed 11 people, crisis managers have tried to minimize the damage on and off shore, and, as we know, there are still great challenges ahead as crews try to seal the well.

At the same time, since the explosion many Americans have become incensed not only about the environmental concerns, but also by the information that has surfaced about the well and its construction such as a faulty cement job performed by Halliburton, a deplorable safety record by BP and TransOcean, and a lackadaisical government regulation department. Yet, instead of each corporate party involved immediately accepting responsibility for their actions, sadly, Halliburton, BP, Transocean and the American government tried desperately to preserve its own image by passing the blame of this disastrous event to the other. While this “blame game” might seem trivial, this tactic used by groups, corporations, and individuals can be an extraordinarily dangerous entity.

Blaming others is not an isolated phenomenon, but can more often than not plague a social system. Findings from organizational behavior experts Nathanael Fast and Larissa Tiedens in the November 2009 issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* show that “just watching someone pawn their failures off on another can make you do the same to protect your self-image.”¹ As Dr. Fast explains, “When we see others protecting their egos, we become defensive too...We then try to protect our own self-image by blaming others for our mistakes.” Furthermore, he adds, “that in the long run, such behavior could hurt one’s reputation and be destructive to an organization and further to our society as a whole.”²

¹ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34940422/ns/health-behavior/>

² http://www.world-science.net/othernews/091120_blame.htm

This contagious spread of scapegoating, we, as Jews, sadly know all too well. In less than two weeks, we observe Tisha B'Av, the day that mourns the destruction of the First and Second Temples, the Edicts expelling Jews from England in 1290 and Spain in 1492, and the mass deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto a little over 70 years ago. In each of these societies, Jews were absurdly and irrationally scapegoated in times of economic and social crisis. Unfortunately, even in America following the most recent economic collapse, a Boston Review survey in 2009 showed that almost 40% of non-Jewish Americans attributed a portion of the blame to Jews.³ Being the scapegoat is not limited to Jews. Other groups and individuals have consistently and wrongly been condemned for societal and our personal problems, such as other minority groups, the other political party, and spouses.

While the temptation to blame others permeates our society, our Torah portion this week provides us a channel to avoid this alluring, yet problematic, way of dealing with our issues. As the Israelites finish their journey in the wilderness, our text concentrates on the cities of refuge, which were designed to protect perpetrators of a crime from immediate retribution. Why would our text suggest offering asylum for a criminal? Because it offered victims time to calm down, so that no one would act upon their feelings of anger and blame. Instead, due process, rather than blame, could guide the ensuing outcomes.

BP, Halliburton, TransOcean, and our government could find much value from our Torah portion this week. Pushing blame onto others does not reconcile our problems, but rather exasperates the predicament. In order to overcome our issues in life, we must be willing to accept our faults and to take responsibility for our actions. By doing this and eliminating scapegoating, we can rise above our games of blame and focus on remedying situations, so that they do not happen again.

³ http://bostonreview.net/BR34.3/malhotra_margalit.php