

Question:

What original Yom Kippur ceremony is kept in obscurity—being totally obsolete,
In part, because its ultimate meaning is problematic if framed in a modern context,
and yet, whose significance holds the key to our successful social interaction,
If not ultimate spiritual peace of mind on this planet
for our nation, our people, ourselves?

Clue:

The term derived from it has unfortunately marked us historically as a people.
In fact, ritual rewind would have us undertake this rite which would seem ancient,
if not downright strange.

Living out Leviticus 16's mandate,

amassed in the outer courtyard of our Holy Temple, in Jerusalem,
as the High priest was inside, ritually slaughtering the favored offering
which the community has brought forth, a ram and a he-goat,
we'd be awaiting the entry of Goat B—the one marked for *Azazel*.

Left standing "*before the Lord*" to witness the sacrifice of his brother,
hoping for a better fate, the Goat marked for *Azazel* would then be brought forward,
and as the High Priest laid hands on its head,

the collective sins and transgression of the entire people Israel are transferred to it...

Thereupon a designated "driver" escorted Goat B—better known to us as the "scapegoat"
off into the wilderness, never to be seen or heard from again.

With this elaborate ritual of purification—the path to atonement was clear:

Greater than any personal or communal confession, though that happened too,
to rid ourselves of all wrong, we put our guilt on the goat...

In effect, our most ancient atonement moment is an original form of "the blame game."

Not that we are alone in this magical transference of evil...

From Arabian tribes who would kill a village camel to counter the outbreak of a plague,
To Middle Ages courts who'd put an animal on trial when a fire broke out to quell further flames
To the 17th century witch hunts in Salem, [yes, my neck of the woods]
where holier-than-thou colonists sentenced over 300 to death,
convinced their sorcery was responsible for society's maladies,
the art of scapegoating to calm our fear and assuage our guilt is as old as the hills...
And yet—in its 21st century incarnation, it has raised fault-finding to a whole new level.

15 year-old Gregory Rhymes is over 400 pounds.

WHY?...Because for years, his daily lunch, and sometimes dinner
was the quarter pounder with fries & a shake at McDonalds...

Now, claiming, along with his mother's support, "I had no idea it was destroying me..."
The obese teen is suing the fast food chain.

"They have a marketing strategy that ensnares children..." remarked his lawyer,
who is also representing seven other NYC kids who've likewise been lured in,
eating the super-calorie, artery-clogging cuisine for years,
never expecting what evil lurked beyond those golden arches...

Ridiculous...Yes—but not at all uncommon, nor surprising.

Everybody plays the blame game...

In part—some sociologists would suggest,
because we are hardwired from our earliest origins to do just that.

Consider the account of Koko,
the now aging gorilla living in captivity in California
who's been taught over a thousand words in sign language
with which she communicates.

One night, Koko broke a toy cat she was playing with.
Next morning, when asked by her keeper what happened,
Koko quickly signed that it was her night-time attendant who broke it.
Fearing retribution or rejection,

even our primate predecessors mastered the not-so-subtle art of finger pointing.

[The Blame Game, B. Dattner, pg 35]

Taking responsibility is no easy feat.

In fact, how we receive credit and attribute blame early on informs our responses as adults
And the way we deal with the life-difficulties we face.

It is not simply that our 'Generation Y' kids have been labeled, I believe accurately,

[by the Wall St. Journal] as "the most praised generation," but that with it
comes expectation of constant-kudos, and concurrently, instantaneous success...

So if failures or setbacks come to our kids along the way, it must be somebody else's fault.

Naturally, we as parents have a good deal to do with it,
and often with the best of intent.

The extent to which we fear letting our children fail,
or allowing them to try getting back up on their own when they do,
plays a significant role...

I would venture a qualified guess that many parents today, along with me,
As opposed to a generation ago, would stand guilty as charged.

For those who listen to Garrison Keilor on NPR, its known psychologically as
"The Lake Wobegon Effect," the fictional Lutheran Minnesota town
where "all the children are above average."

And in our case, because our children are unquestionably brilliant,
We inadvertently reinforce the "couldn't be me" life approach.

Thus, underscoring the import of receiving credit,

And building our children's immunity for taking the blame,

We set them up for that competitive dynamic—for playing the game...

Point is, that much as praise builds self-esteem,

It may also foster a no-fault notion that becomes a personal disclaimer.

Yet there comes a point when kids have to be held accountable;
to put personal achievement in perspective,

to learn how to give credit—not just take,

and to take responsibility for their actions, errors included.

And not just our kids...If we expect it—we'd better do it ourselves.

So how are we doin?...Just look at our nation...

When, a couple of years ago,

the implosion of key investment banks lead to a house of cards economic collapse,
impacting companies still-standing after the dust settled

and countless highly qualified individuals now suddenly unemployed, everyone from Wall St to Main St seemed to be responding the very same way: finger-pointing...

Knowing the complexity of factors, barely understanding that multiple levels of risk on many fronts lead to a layering of stress points on the system's ongoing functioning, we still wanted someone—something to blame.

“That damn Madoff—its all his fault!”

Unbelievably enormous as his Ponzi scheme actually turned out to be, was he, point-of-fact, the responsible party for the entire collapse?

Though reprehensible, to be sure, even he didn't hold the keys to the kingdom.

As a political communications expert told the Times,

“Under these circumstances, you have victims and you need to find a villain.” [pg 38]

It is almost the operative assumption for many: It must be someone else's fault.

Taking credit when things go well and blaming others when they don't,

Its just how you play the game....

But its really not a game at all.

As we know well from our historic journey, and likewise from personal life-experience, scapegoating any group, any individual, pinning the fault of societies woes or your own slip-ups on a designated third party, gives rise to far-reaching results: often destroying the social dynamic, eroding the common trust and throwing into question the human connection we share. Even more—the perpetuation of blame; the need to find fault first and ask questions later, is a core cause of our nation's—our people Israel's, some of our own most intractable problems, fueling a toxic tone, an incendiary environment so harsh—hazardous, it can cause any sense of hope to go up in flames.

In his new book, just released this past Spring, [The Blame Game](#), [Free Press, Simon & Schuster] Industrial psychologist and long-time consultant of companies large & small, Ben Dattner explores how “the journey to the mountain of credit sharing often involves traveling through the valley of blame.” [[The Blame Game](#), pg 13.]

Sifting through a series of both psychological and situational factors as they apply to the workplace—and by extension—every arena of our lives—the most telling piece as it translates for today is Dattner's insight on the culture we create through our frame of blame...

Allow the stark contrast between two airlines to underscore the impact.

American is the world's largest passenger carrier but its financial footing is ever in question, While Southwest boasts a market cap four times that of its much larger competitor...

WHY?... Though innovation and customer services are crucial,

Their distinctive responses to playing the blame game are decisive.

In a study just last year, American “employees involved in flight departures displayed a great deal of blaming and blame avoidance.” As one gate attendant spoke up:

“Unfortunately, when something goes wrong, they need to be able to pin it on someone.

You should hear the higher-ups fight on whose departure gets blamed for the delay.”

At Southwest, where problems arise in virtually identical ways,
“employees communicate rather than assigning blame.”

As one pilot shared: “We figure out the cause of the delay.

We don’t argue about whose fault it is.

It’s a matter of working together, not finger-pointing...”

Giving credit to collaborators, analyzing and discussing failures,
not pretending mistakes didn’t happen;
accepting collective responsibility as a motivation to deal with/fix problems;
such approaches create a culture of openness and trust,
where everyone shares in success as in failure,
and where building a better future wins out over critiquing an imperfect past.

Sadly, in our society, more often than not, we face an “American Airlines attitude;”
an unforgiving, if not largely unaware culture of blame.

It is almost our governmental system’s middle name...

Witnessing the political partisanship, the name-calling,
The mud-slinging which so sullied all parties involved
Surrounding the debt-ceiling crisis, did it not make you wish
Our political leaders would spend less time on blame,
Adept as they are at finding fault, and more on proposals towards resolution.
4 trillion is a foreboding figure, but laying blame as to why we’ll never reach it
is not the approach our people needs.

As an unemployed master electrician, a registered Independent attested
right after the last Republican presidential candidates debate:

“Yep, there’s a whole lot of blame game goin’ around.” [NPR, 8.24.11]

In the wake of WW II, President Harry Truman faced a
downturn economy—with unions up in arms & Black-List, Red-scare targeting tactics
which seemed to preclude a country falling apart at the seams...

Bearing the brunt from critics on all sides,

Truman chose to do something virtually unheard of in today’s political scene:
He took responsibility, even when he could have much easier pointed the finger.

Most of us recall that Harry Truman lived by the foot long wooden and glass
2 inch-high placard on his desk: “The Buck Stops Here.”

But his actions were likewise guided by what was written on the reverse side of that
sign, three grounding words: “I’m from Missouri.”

The side which he alone could see...

The humility that derives from truly knowing who you are
brings a sense of perspective and integrity of purpose,
a care for the common good,
which makes the blame game unnecessary altogether.

Sometimes, however, you get so caught up, you don’t even realize you are playing...

And so, our Israel... After all, what is the age-old conflict between brothers,

The Israelis and Palestinians, if not a perpetually self-renewing blame game...

With the increasing unrest—Autumnal outbursts
in the aftermath of the Arab Spring...
the recent ransacking of the Israeli Embassy in Cairo,
the expulsion of Israel's Turkish Ambassador,
the diplomatic isolation of the Jewish State is the perfect prelude
to the grand political theatre of this past week's UN General Assembly,
with its vote on the Palestinian Authority's Unilateral Declaration of Independence
now up for grabs.

For the spotlight now shines on an Israel which is both Scrooge and scapegoat
At one and the same time.

But how did the situation get so far gone?

In the words of the Jewish Week's Publisher Gary Rosenblatt,
"No one is blameless here..." Indeed!...Play it out.

So it's the P.A.'s fault,

Specifically—in the short term, Mahmoud Abbas.

For under PM Olmert negotiations in 2008, he'd come to terms

On demilitarization and was starting to talk land swaps,

based on the '67 borders...But with everyone's chips on the table,

the P.A. picked up and—yet again—walked away...

But wait...Abbas didn't exactly walk away...

He lost his partner when Olmert was indicted on corruption, among other charges...

So is the defrocked Israeli PM in all his immoral indecency not to blame?...

Or, some might say, the onus rests squarely on the current PM,
Who eventually came back to the negotiating table but insisted,

"without pre-conditions"—roughly translated,

all the prior agreements you reached are off.

So the progress went out the window,

as did the motivation for moving forward.

As the Editor of Ha'aretz said just last week,

"Bibi has not done a thing to mitigate the fallout."

Then again, as J.J. Goldberg admits [in the Forward]

"Netanyahu has other factors to consider, and who are we to argue.

How could an Abbas-led Palestine expect to be immune from

The popular unrest that is toppling regimes in the region?"

So with terror our real threat,

wouldn't it make sense to point the finger at the organization

who pointed and fired thousands of Kassam rockets on Israeli residents of S'derot,

Be'ersheva...The same Hamas who pushed out their own people's more moderate
leadership, filling the void of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza with violence?...

Of course, you could take a more global route to guilt,

blaming the U.S. President, take your pick, from Bush II's

unquestioning support of Israel, thumbs up but hands off...

To Mr. Obama's questioning support, pushing towards what it sees as progress,
and others see as a problem...

Or maybe it is actually the ongoing corroboration of the greater Arab world, Specifically its Arab League leaders, as the NY Times Cairo correspondent recently noted, “traditionally using Israel as a convenient scapegoat, turning public wrath against it and blaming it for their problems.”

... You’d think, or at least hope, that an activist, more thawed out Middle East would open debate, if not greater dialogue... On the contrary, the Arab street’s autumnal early freeze has continued to point the finger at the injustice of Israel’s occupation, oppressive and unduly authoritarian, making the Jewish State the fall-guy for the failures of an unfulfilled Arab future.

So, if the Arab league’s not global enough, why not blame the U.N. itself, for making it possible that such a plan go forward; a General Assembly that has no official decision-making or enforcement powers...

How can they vote to create a state without knowing that the parties on the ground, the peoples who must live with it—can agree to its terms? Of course, that sort of happened before, you may recall... in November of ’47. When the vote on Resolution 181 passed what we now know as the Partition Plan...

And with surrounding Arab States poised to attack, to wipe the newly proposed Israel off the map, Ben-Gurion declared the Jewish State... unilaterally, by the way, though a two-state solution had previously been affirmed by the world body.

So I suppose you could say this whole thing is Ben Gurion’s fault, For having the chutzpah to declare statehood, already granted, in the first place...

The blame game—punctuated by the P.A.’s unilateral declaration proposal Not simply one-sided but ill-equipped, gets the process nowhere fast.

As the P.A.’s Prime Minister, Salam Fayad, said at the summer’s start, “Unless Israel is part of the consensus, the vote on statehood won’t change our people’s reality.”

However, it could give the P.A. non-member observer state status, like the Vatican [go figure]—enabling it to further delegitimize Israel by bringing the Jewish State up—thanks to an unbearable 43 year occupation, on violation of human rights charges in the International Court of Justice.

We could always try and pin this mid-east mess on the perils of history...?

How ridiculous, to imagine you can back into statehood—without borders, Without security arrangements in place, without talking to the people you represent, And as importantly, to the neighbors you have to live with, who’d better jump at the opportunity, when its right, to no longer be occupiers... As Israeli Knesset member, up & coming political voice Einat Wilf put it, “Abbas knows he is not resolving anything.

He is simply taking the conflict to another place.”

The place where blame trumps cooperation/mutual trust every time.

What then could lead towards resolution?
Since there is no “one-state solution,”
With leadership worthy of Rabin’s legacy,
As Netanyahu said last week at the UN & will hopefully follow-thru & do,
For Israel to set the table for substantive talks and invite the P.A. to have a seat...
Then it would be up to *them* to stop playing the game.

Finding fault—finger-pointing, will only lead us back to where we began...
And in the age-old conflict between Arab and Israeli—between Isaac & Ishma’el,
There is no sacrificial atonement, no goat to neatly carry our sins away.
For if there is a 21st century take-away from the biblical ritual,
it is contained in the mystery of the goat’s very name...
Where does the goat go to which we attach all blame?
To *Azazel*—that place in the Wilderness where demonic forces reside.
Thus with a symbolic good-riddance to the burden of blame
That oft-times gets the better of us—and brings out the worst,
Sending it back from where it came, we stand, wholehearted before God...
ready to walk together down the long, hard road to resolution.

A New Yorker cartoon makes the challenge crystal clear.
Pictured is a Mom, a Dad and their little boy,
lost in a tropical jungle.
The father, rubbing his chin in disbelief speaks the caption.
“OK, I admit it, we’re lost.
But the important thing is to remain focused on whose fault it is.”
And so we go through our lives, blaming first,
as if that will somehow help us find the way...

These HH Days, we know the way.
For when it comes to our family/daily lives—our workplaces...
In addressing our nation’s political entanglements...
And aiming to transcend the perennial trouble Israel faces,
There is no magical cure-all to carry wrongdoing away...
But there is a way to break the cycle—to create a culture of cooperation, of trust.
Our HH Day Confessional is couched in the plural,
“*We have sinned, we have transgressed...*”
As the list goes on, however, you might well say to yourself...
“gluttony, arrogance, irreverence...” Not me!
But the rabbis remind us, since our peoplehood stands as one body before God,
If a muscle in our back or our wrist is strained—do we not feel it?
The pain is shared—and so too, must be our care—one for another.
The blame is no one person’s, no one party’s, no one people’s to bear.

We are here to support—to celebrate one another,
By being our truest selves, and allowing others to be as well...

We are here to stop blaming
and to start taking responsibility for our own wrongs,
knowing as we reach out, we have a chance to make them right.

We are here, this new year—as citizens of this country,
as members of this people Israel...as flawed yet forward-looking human beings,
To learn to listen not with ears alone but with heart;
To affirm that sincere collaboration trumps hypocritical condemnation,
To move from unilateral blame to collective accountability,
Knowing—without a scapegoat,
The problems we face can only be fixed if we remember that our goal,
of a more peaceful planet, a more harmonious world, is greater than us all...

So with hands extended rather than fingers pointed,
And with a bit more credit to the Creator,
so may it be.....AMEN.

