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"Meltdown"

In the Oval Office, President Harry S. Truman had a 2 ½ by 13-inch sign on his desk, mounted on a walnut base that read, "The Buck Stops Here!" This popular expression was a constant reminder for Truman that he alone was accountable for whatever decisions he made as the chief executive officer.

It seems that in today's world all too many people are either transferring responsibility or blame to others or are just pointing fingers at the "guilty" parties. Home mortgages, Iraq, Israel, Romney, Obama, and steroids come to mind as a few headlines that illustrate this. In fact, on the upper right hand corner of the cover of a Time Magazine, there is a picture of a hand with a finger pointing (like this) and the words "The 25 people to blame for the economic mess."

Time is correct about the state of our economy, despite a growing Dow Jones figure. There are many statistics that bolster this outlook. We just need to look at home prices and employment data from the Department of Labor's website. Figures might be trending in a favorable direction, but things are far from ideal. Bellinghamsters know this all too well. We all want to know what caused this mess in 2008 in the first place. Some say extravagant greed caused this meltdown. Others argue that it was the foolishness of consumers or the neglect and non-diligence of professionals in the financial world. Others contend that it was Bush's fault, or Alan Greenspan's fault, or the Democrats fault. The Time article explains how each of these parties might be most responsible. Perhaps it was, as someone joked to

me, “a tremor in the force.” (A Star Wars reference) Eventually, however, one must ask if it does any good to point fingers. Does it get us anywhere except looking backwards?

In parasha Ki Tisa, and the commentaries on it, we learn more about this issue. In Exodus 32, we read of a community bowing and sacrificing to a calf made of gold; the **first** meltdown in Jewish history. Aaron was the one responsible for collecting the gold, turning it into the calf and finally building an alter for it. It appears that all parties were guilty of idolatry while Moses was on the mountain receiving the 10 commandments. However, our tradition looks at every angle and in the end, it is up to us to decide who, if anyone, was most culpable.

When Moses re-enters the camp after many days on the mountain, he asks his brother Aaron “What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?” Aaron immediately blames the Israelites claiming that they are “bent on evil.” God does the same thing when God tells Moses that they “have acted basely.” But, while the Bible blames the people, the commentators look in other directions.

Ibn Ezra, a 12th century Spanish rabbi, criticizes Aaron, asking, “how could God choose someone to serve Him who would be so stupid as to be fooled in this way?” In the *Kuzari*, Judah Halevi (a peer of Ibn Ezra’s) also absolves Israel but not Aaron, explaining how the calf served merely as a reminder to the Israelites of their God who delivered them from Egypt while Moses was gone for 40 days without food or water. Halevi writes that those 3000 Israelites never gave up their allegiance to God. Israel should not have made any image, but it was understandable. Rather, it was Aaron who is to blame for turning their “theoretical disobedience into a reality.”

And then there are texts that exonerate Aaron. In the midrashic collection, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Moses says to Aaron, upon seeing the golden calf “what have you done to this people? You have made them unruly...He said to Moses, ‘I saw what they did to Hur, and I feared very greatly.’”¹ Aaron saw that the Israelites killed Hur and thought that if he did not do what they requested, then he too would die by their hands.

The events described in Exodus 32 are hard to believe. After all that had transpired, Israel and Aaron of all people got mixed up in a form of idolatry. Maybe they did not technically worship the golden calf, or even think that it was a replacement for God, but they transgressed. They had experienced God once and wanted more. Aaron never objected to their requests. He carried them out. And yet he “passed the buck.”

In studying this story, we notice that there is a fine line between blaming and understanding, and it seems that the Bible and commentators do both. Aaron, for instance blames, while *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* and Halevi try to understand the motivations of the parties involved.

Why did Aaron immediately blame the Israelites? Why do we blame? When things go wrong, people tend to look for a scapegoat before looking at themselves. Pointing fingers does do one thing; it makes us feel good. It is satisfying. And it happens all the time. It is part of our culture to point fingers. In the end, does it really matter who did what which caused X to happen? Or who did what to whom? Blaming may very well lead us nowhere.

¹ *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*. Gerald Friedlander, Translator. Harmon Press (New York, 1965) p.356

On the other hand, pointing fingers may lead us past a feeling of stagnation. In Ki Tisa, we see what Aaron and God do and then, like the commentaries, we can unpack their words in order to understand the motives of each side. In terms of our current situation, blaming has and will continue to lead to the punishment of those who cheated others intentionally, namely predatory lenders, unethical corporate executives, and some hedge fund and money managers. They should pay for their transgressions. Blaming does have the potential to help us comprehend a story more clearly. The catch is, we mustn't get caught up in it, despite how easy and satisfying it is.

How do we get beyond pointing fingers? How do we keep the faith that things will work out in the end when it seems that there is no one to trust these days? Just imagine if everyone became their own banks by stuffing all their money underneath their mattresses.

John Bogle, the former chairman of Vanguard, said in an interview recently, "Investing is an act of faith. Faith in our corporate managers, faith in our financial markets, faith in our economy, faith in our money managers, and every single one of those cases, our faith has been taken advantage of...How do we restore this faith we once had? It will certainly take a long time, but it will happen. We need to face up to reality and try to understand that things are for the better." In reality this may be true. Bogle, among other experts believes the market was overvalued. However, this is difficult to hear; that things are for the better. This is not always so comforting. People right now are in serious trouble. People right here in Bellingham.

Unfortunately, it would not be surprising if our children's children face a similar situation. These meltdowns tend to be cyclical. They too will look for explanations just as our relatives who survived the great depression of the 1930's had to figure out what went

wrong. Eventually, they persevered and their situation was much graver than ours. We have been faced with a great challenge. Like all other challenges throughout time, we will overcome it and move forward.

Moving forward means taking action and not getting stuck seeking out the bad guys. As individuals and as a community, we need to transition from blaming to reassessing our priorities and lifestyles.

Though we might not all be trained therapists and clergy, our friends, peers, neighbors and family need our pastoral guidance now. People are very nervous and scared even if they aren't showing it. Encouraging people to become more transparent to their friends and family is essential. Some people are ashamed of their decisions and are too full of pride to let others in on their problems. Letting people know that we are all in this together may be comforting to some, or it may be ignored. We are not problem solvers, but we can comfort and find support for people in need.

Finally, we just need to be on the lookout for our friends and provide whatever support we can. Losing one's job or a partner losing a job or losing a lot of money in the market can have serious effects on someone. They might become withdrawn, or they might seem on edge or angry. I am not a therapist, in fact I was a stockbroker for 6 years, but I am sure there are many other ways people react to such life altering situations. All of us are able to give pastoral care. It might not get anyone out of a jam, but it is help, nonetheless.

In the end of Ki Tisa and shortly afterwards, the Israelites receive the commandments in stone form and go on to build the *mishkan*. This portable dwelling place for God in the desert represents the people's love and devotion to God. It's building was in a way, a symbol of their *teshuva*, or repentance. In a sense, they became stronger from their

experience with the golden calf. Yes, there were setbacks following the calf episode and the Israelites never became a perfect, law-abiding community. We just need to open up the book of Prophets or Nevi'im to see that. But in the short term, they did not demand again any likeness of God be made. They realized soon after Moses melted the golden calf that God did not become any more immediate than before.

We are in the aftermath of an economic meltdown. Our Jewish tradition is able to guide us through this time. We Jews are seekers of truth and asking questions is in our blood. Let's attack this situation as we do a sacred text. Let's ask the tough questions in order to uncover the issues. At the same time, let's put our fingers to better use and lend a hand.

Are we going to follow in Aaron's footsteps in Ki Tisa, passing the buck, or will we take the path of the Israelites who, after the calf episode, collectively built the *mishkan*?