

Between Blame and Responsibility: Seeking Common Ground for the Sake of our Future

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The world is divided into two types of people - Those who enter a dirty room and ask, “who made this mess?” and those who ask, “where is the broom?” The difference between these two is the difference between placing blame, and taking responsibility.

When a car goes through a red light and collides with another vehicle that entered the intersection on a green light, there is no doubt that the first car is to blame for the accident. Yet when a responsible driver enters an intersection, he looks both ways, and maybe even slows down, even when the light is green. In so doing, he can potentially prevent an accident that would not have been his fault, had it taken place.

Little or no good almost ever comes from asking the questions “who is right?” and “who is to blame?” These are important issues in a court of law, but they are dangerous and foolhardy in other contexts.

The poet Yehuda Amichai wrote, “Flowers will never sprout in spring from the place where we are right.” This is because looking into blame is an investigation of transgression, of the past, of the negative and the destructive.

Feelings of shame are so overwhelming that we spend much time, knowingly and unknowingly, attempting to transfer them from ourselves to others. We try so hard to avoid feelings of shame that it is rare to find a person prepared to willingly confess their wrongdoings. Taking responsibility is the opposite of the feeling of shame, for it is focused on the future, on repair, on that which is positive and productive. Instead of emptying a person of his powers, it fills him with meaning and motivation. It is therefore relatively common to meet people who take responsibility on themselves. Yom Kippur in the time of the Temple focused mostly on atonement and guilt. The actions of the High Priest attempted to atone for the past year’s sins committed by the Children of Israel. When the Temple was destroyed, our sages transferred the focus of Yom Kippur from the Temple to the home. They removed the responsibilities of the day from the shoulders of the High Priest and placed them onto each and every Jew. And they changed its main theme - from atonement to repair, from fixing the past to bettering the future. There is a shift in focus from the guilt of the past year’s transgressions to the responsibility for that which will be in the year ahead.

Where is the Broom?

We must consider which questions we choose to ask: If we ask who is guilty for what happened in Tel Aviv, we will receive an answer filled with negative emotions and painful baggage, digging us deeper into the arguments and the destruction, while immersing ourselves in a river of self-righteousness that demands nothing more of us. But if we ask ourselves what we can do so that a similar incident won’t take place again, and so that things will improve going forward, we will find an answer which is full of progress, is beneficial and is positive, placing expectations and responsibilities on each of us for immediate action.

For a long time, those running the conversation have been the people who ask, “who made this mess?” It’s time now for a leadership that asks, “where is the broom?”