



Blame and Responsibility

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The LORD said to Moses, “Let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.” (Exodus 32:10, NRSV)

I wonder, sometimes, why God does not.

Consume us, that is. Burn against us. Unleash holy rage.

Surely we are no less stiff-necked than the ancient Israelites who melted their finest jewelry in order to cast in gold an image of a calf for worship. I might even suggest that we are more stiff-necked than our forebears in the wilderness: Start wars that will devastate generations? Bring it on, we repeatedly say. Hold our nose at accountability for past injustices? Don't mind if we do. Excuse hatred and bias in the name of God? Always convenient.

Genuinely I wonder: Why doesn't God take us out?

(Spoiler alert: the answer isn't “Jesus.” And full confession: if it was in my power to do so, I'd be sorely tempted to press “restart” on humanity.)

There is an ongoing debate between Moses and God, Moses and the people, God and the people about who is responsible when the community misbehaves ... and who is to blame. In Exodus 32, the blame is squarely on Aaron and the people for creating a golden calf. As punishment, they are made to drink gold-infused water from the deconstructed calf, and then further subject to massacre and plague. A classic feel-good Bible moment.

But blame is easy. The harder question: Who is responsible for holding a community accountable for errant and injuring behavior? Who is responsible for correction, healing, redemption? Who responds to redress an injustice?

Who will clean up the mess of war?

Who will account for history's wounds and measure out the necessary repairs?

Who will show up for God's work of healing from hatred, of confession from bias, of reconciliation from fear?

Moses and God draw straws over the question. "They're your people," God says to Moses. "No, they're your people," Moses says to God.

Too often those who have already experienced injury—those whose privileges and comforts have already been sacrificed—are tasked with the responsibility of healing and justice, while those who made the mess (and those who consider themselves unaffected by it) provide analysis and critique. "The Afghans can take care of themselves." "The Palestinians need to stop resisting land acquisition." "The Civil War should be remembered with pride."

Moses loses his debate with God over who is responsible for the people, so he must do the work of cleaning up the mess. There are people sick from drinking the gold-infused water. There are grieving families from the aforementioned massacre. There are lingering spiritual wounds and doubts from the horrors of slavery in Egypt.

Moses puts in the hard work of repairing the people's relationship to God, to themselves, to one another.

Why doesn't God take us out?

Perhaps because it's not God's responsibility to do so. In the flip of divine coin and the drawing of holy straws, humanity "lost" and God made us responsible for one another—commanding us to take on the necessary labor of healing, reconciliation, and justice.

It's God's responsibility to love us.

It's our responsibility to do the hard work of holding one another accountable in light of that love.

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