A Version B World: Rewriting Our Story with Accountability
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What does accountability look like in leadership?

We know what it doesn't look like—leaders who deflect blame and who double down rather than own up. Sadly, headlines from around the world give us endless examples. But the Bible gives us one too: *David Melech Yisrael*—King David of Israel.

In a moment of sheer hubris, King David decides to count the people of Israel. This is not a census commanded by God. It is not for military strategy or any national purpose. In fact, his own army chief of staff, Yoav, pushes back: *"Why does my lord the king desire this thing?"* (II Samuel 24:3)—וַאדֹנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ לָמָּה חָפֵץ בַּדָּבָר הַזֶּה.

David is on a power trip. He wants his people tallied like sheep, like coins, like property—just so he can know how much he owns, how many fall under his reign. The biblical account is so unsettled by David's decision that in one place it says God incited him, and in another, that it was Satan who draw him towards this sin.

Soon after, the prophet Gad confronts David with the choice of divine retribution: *"Shall seven years of famine come in your land, or three months of fleeing before your enemies while they pursue you, or three days of pestilence in your land? Now consider—what shall I answer the [Almighty] One who sent me?"* (II Samuel 24:13).

The prophet forces the king to face his abuse of power, his choice to treat people as objects for his own self-glorification. This is David's moment of reckoning—his chance to humble himself and show true accountability.

Remarkably, the Bible gives us a split-screen response.

In the Book of Samuel (II, 24:14), David says:

(יד) וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל גָּד צַר לִי מְאֹד נִפְלָה נָּא בְיַד יְקֹוָק כִּי רַבִּים רחמו רַחֲמָיו וּבְיַד אָדָם אַל אֶפֹּלָה׃

*And David said to Gad: "I am in great distress; let **us** fall, I pray, into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are many; but into the hand of man let me not fall."*

On the surface, this sounds like responsibility, a leader owning his failure. And yet, when the story is retold in the Book of Chronicles, David's words shift ever so slightly:

(יג) וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִיד אֶל גָּד צַר לִי מְאֹד אֶפְלָה נָּא בְיַד יְקֹוָק כִּי רַבִּים רַחֲמָיו מְאֹד וּבְיַד אָדָם אַל אֶפֹּל׃

*And David said to Gad: "I am in great distress; let **me** fall now into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are very great; but into the hand of man let me not fall."* (I Chronicles 21:13)

In exhibit A, David says: *"let **us** fall."*
In exhibit B, David says: *"let **me** fall."*

Which is it? Why did the Chronicler make this subtle yet profound switch, from us to me?

In version A, David is still willing to let his people suffer for his own sins. He learns nothing. His subjects remain objects—collateral damage for his failures.

In version B, David finally internalizes Gad's rebuke. He accepts that he, and he alone, must bear the consequences. He holds himself accountable—*"let **me** fall."*

For us, the tragedy is that we live in a version A world—a world where leaders deflect, dodge, and too often sacrifice the people they are meant to serve. And yet, I keep hoping against hope for a version B world, for a different chronicler to come and tell our story differently.

The question that haunts me is: how do we get there? How do we retell our story, shift our culture, and move from blame to accountability, from denial to responsibility?

Israelis often joke that Hebrew does not have a word for accountability. The truth is more complex. In rabbinic texts, we find the expression ליתן דין וחשבון—"to give judgment and accounting." Perhaps the best-known example appears in *Pirkei Avot*:

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ג משנה א
עקביא בן מהללאל אומר הסתכל בשלשה דברים ואי אתה בא לידי עבירה דע מאין באת ולאן אתה הולך ולפני מי אתה עתיד ליתן דין וחשבון:

Akavya ben Mahalalel says: Consider three things and you will avoid sin: know from where you came, where you are going, and before Whom you will give account. ליתן דין וחשבון.

Akavya ben Mahalalel's questions— *know from where you came, where you are going, and before Whom you will give account*—are the kind of questions we should ask ourselves regularly, and at the very least once a year.

In this teaching, accountability is bound up with an awareness of time. Akavya's questions press us to consider how our actions emerge from our past, what they project into our future, and how they might shape our ultimate legacy.

On a personal level, when I face a difficult decision, I often ask myself: What would my grandparents, z"l, think of this choice? How will it affect my wife, my children, and even our community? And, looking further ahead, how might it impact generations still to come? Framing a question or action within this wider temporal context deepens my own sense of accountability.

The expression *דין וחשבון* made its way into modern Hebrew as the acronym *doch*. For example, a parking ticket is a *doch chaniyah*—calling on the driver to give judgment and accounting for their parking violation. The acronym has even become its own verb: *ledaveach*—to give judgment and accounting—meaning 'to report.'

While modern Hebrew draws on rabbinic language in clever ways, the Torah grounds accountability in a different—and perhaps surprising—source.

In *Parshat Pekudei* (Exodus 38:21), Moses is commanded to give an account of every item donated for the *mishkan*, for the tabernacle. In this context, *pakad* or *pekudei* simply means to take stock and account for every detail. On a deeper level, it calls on us to recognize and claim what is ours—accountability is about owning our responsibilities, and not passing them off.

Here, the biblical root *pakad*—to count, to take notice—offers significant insights, which rabbinic midrashim elaborate on extensively. The midrash (Tanchuma Yashan 4) asks a striking question:

ולמה עשה עמהן חשבון והקדוש ברוך הוא מאמינו

"But why did Moses offer an accounting, after all, God had already declared him faithful? As it is written, *Not so, my servant Moses; he is faithful in all My house"* (Numbers 12:7).

Midrash Rabbah explains that Moses deliberately called others into the process. The midrash offers this interpretation:

"A man of faithfulness"—this refers to Moses. Even though he managed the treasury himself, he called others and accounted on their behalf. It does not say "which Moses counted," but: "which were counted by Moses, through Moses, in the hand of Ithamar" (Exodus Rabbah 51:1).

According to this midrash, accountability is primarily relational and not simply private or personal. This idea is reflected not only in midrash but in modern Hebrew as well. For example, an official is a *pakid* and an army commander is a *mefaked*. Both titles carry the expectation of oversight, reminding us that responsibility is never merely private but also always relational.

For each of us, the midrash also raises important personal questions: in our private lives, have we cultivated relationships that hold us accountable? Do we have a trusted friend, a relative, or even a colleague who can call us out when necessary? And if not, how might we begin to create the kinds of relational dynamics that can truly hold us to account?

There is another, deeper, and more surprising layer.

The verb *pakad* also appears in the context of God's judgment: *pokéd avon avot al banim*—God holds children accountable for the sins of their parents (Exodus 34:7).

This phrase appears famously in the passage describing God's thirteen attributes of mercy, the formulaic prayer we chant repeatedly during these days of repentance. Its inclusion within this passage begs the question: why would holding children accountable for their parents' sins be considered a manifestation of God's mercy?

Some commentators explain that God delays punishment, giving the next generation a chance to correct errors from their parents' past.

Others suggest that God judges in context—taking into account a person's upbringing, the sins of their parents, and the behaviors modeled during childhood—and in doing so tempers judgment and opens the door to mercy.

Be that as it may, there is something striking—and even intuitive—about the linguistic choice of *pakad* in this context. Lack of accountability is generational. Children raised in an environment where adults evade responsibility often bear the cost. The sin of irresponsibility is contagious. When accountability is left unchecked, it passes on to the next generation. And the next generation, not as a punishment but as a natural consequence, is held to account.

Perhaps God's mercy is precisely this: that our lack of accountability will eventually catch up with us, and if not with us, then with our children—and that reckoning, painful though it may be, might yet be for the better of our nations, our communities, and our homes.

We, of course, don't want to shirk responsibility and pass its aftermath to future generations. How then do we bring about this change?

When I first became the rabbi of this shul, I spent a week with my predecessor, Rabbi Yair Silverman, who shared insights from his years leading our community. Many of those insights have stayed with me and served me well.

In one of our meetings, Rabbi Silverman told me: "Learn how to apologize." He paused, then added two critical words: "Learn how to apologize—a lot."

I took that advice to heart and tried my best to apologize. A lot.

At first, I think I did it simply because he told me to. But over time, I've come to fully grasp the power of his advice. I've also come to appreciate that a genuine apology—one that clearly communicates personal responsibility—creates spaciousness and helps foster a culture of true forgiveness.

In truth, I've seen this play out in my own home. My wife, Frayda, insists that we apologize to our children explicitly whenever we fall short of being our best selves. And in recent years, as some of my children have grown, I've noticed them taking on that very practice with one another—offering apologies when they've missed the mark. Accountability, it turns out, is not only powerful but also contagious. It too can cross generations and reshape our homes.

This, then, is the advice I would give to anyone seeking change: we all need to learn to apologize. A lot. Often. Readily.

It has transformed my home. It has changed our shul. And our tradition teaches that it can even change the world.

We need to *lifkod ve'latet did vecheshbon*. We need to take stock, to account, and to own.

We may not be able to change the state of politics, world affairs, social media, or even the media itself—but we can change our own path and our own hearts. And we can, and we must, shield ourselves from a dominant culture that denies accountability and personal responsibility.

Lifkod ve'latet did vecheshbon. We need to take stock, to account, and to own.
And that, at least, is where we ought to begin.