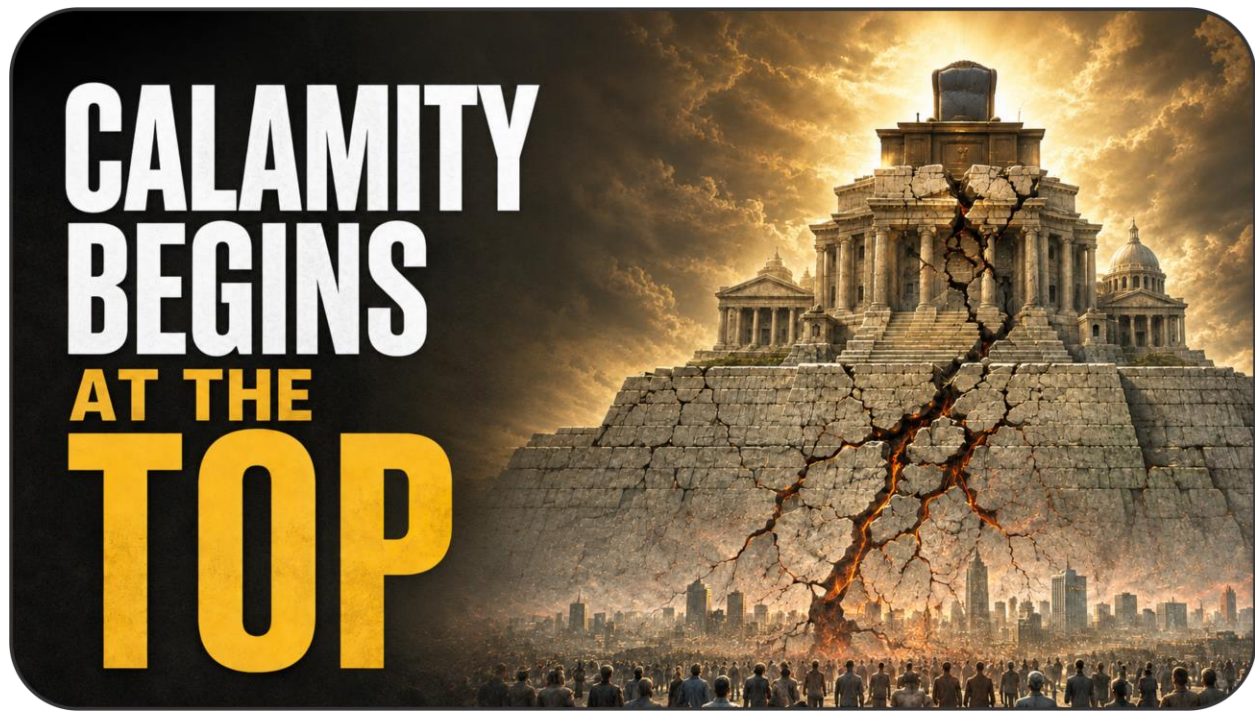




UNCOMPRESSED THINKING

Calamity Begins at the Top

*Leadership, Divine Judgment,
and Who Bears Responsibility When a Nation Fails*

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***Responsibility may be shared, but it is not symmetrical.
Greater authority must mean greater responsibility.***

Where Responsibility Begins

Nothing in history happens entirely outside God's will. For an observant Jew, that statement is not permission to pretend that we can read God's mind, and it is not an excuse for people who commit evil. Human beings remain free and responsible for what they do. But history still carries moral meaning. A nation is not only defeated by an army, impoverished by bad economics, or shaken by revolution. It may first decay from within. By the time the visible calamity arrives, the decisive failure may already have taken place.

That leads me to a basic question: when a nation descends into catastrophe, who bears primary responsibility, its people or its leaders?

The common answer is that both are responsible because leadership is merely a derivative of the nation. People produce their leaders, leaders influence their people, and the two form an endless loop in which responsibility can no longer be separated. I do not accept that as a sufficient answer.

The relationship may become circular in its effects, but it is not circular in moral responsibility. Leadership comes first because authority comes first. Leaders control institutions, law, education, public information, national resources, diplomacy, and the instruments of reward and punishment. They receive warnings earlier than ordinary citizens. They possess the power to correct a dangerous course before the danger becomes irreversible.

A population may be frightened, divided, shortsighted, angry, or vulnerable to easy promises. Those are familiar human weaknesses. The purpose of leadership is not simply to reflect them. It is to restrain them, educate them, and guide the nation above them. When leaders instead exploit fear, deepen division, reward dishonesty, and suppress criticism, they convert ordinary weakness into national policy.

Even when a leader originally emerges from the people, he does not remain merely their reflection. Once entrusted with power, the direction of influence changes. A corrupt society may help produce a bad leader, but a bad leader institutionalizes corruption, protects it, and multiplies it. The public remains responsible for its conduct, but responsibility is not symmetrical. Greater authority must mean greater responsibility.

The Pattern Across History

History repeats this pattern with disturbing regularity. In the biblical kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the prophets did not reserve their strongest accusations for anonymous crowds. They confronted kings, priests, judges, and false prophets. Foreign conquest delivered the final blow, but the deeper indictment was directed at those who had corrupted justice, misled the people, and allowed the covenantal order to disintegrate.

The same structure appears beyond biblical history. The late Roman Republic did not disappear because every Roman citizen suddenly rejected republican government. Political elites and military commanders weakened its norms through personal ambition, political violence, and armies loyal to individuals rather than to the state. Before the French Revolution, the monarchy and privileged classes resisted meaningful reform until the old system could no longer govern itself. In imperial Russia, autocratic rigidity, repression, and disastrous wartime leadership opened the way to revolution and the destruction of the existing order.

Germany is an especially important example because it is often said that Hitler simply expressed what Germans already believed. Public prejudice, anger, and participation were certainly real. But the catastrophe was organized from the top. The governing establishment placed Hitler in power, and the Nazi leadership then used propaganda, intimidation, emergency authority, law, education, and the machinery of the state to turn social weakness into dictatorship, war, and mass murder. The people were not innocent, but the leadership made evil systematic and powerful.

Imperial Japan was led by militarists who progressively silenced restraint and committed the country to expansion and war. The Soviet Union created a centralized system that punished truthful information, independent thought, and local initiative. Its leaders built institutions incapable of honest self-correction, then blamed the people for the apathy and dishonesty those institutions had produced. In Yugoslavia, political leaders did not invent every ethnic grievance, but they selected, magnified, and weaponized those grievances until political division became war. In Rwanda, ordinary people participated in unspeakable crimes, but extremist leaders organized the killing, armed the militias, and used public propaganda to direct it.

The list could be extended to many ancient and contemporary states. The histories are not identical, and no serious argument should reduce every national collapse to one cause. Nations can be overwhelmed by external force, natural disaster, disease, or economic events beyond their control. But when a society undergoes a prolonged political, moral, and institutional collapse, leadership failure is usually the point where vulnerability becomes catastrophe.

External enemies, wars, economic shocks, and popular unrest may become the mechanics of destruction. They remain responsible for the damage they cause. But they often succeed because leadership has already hollowed out the nation's competence, unity, legitimacy, and ability to correct itself. The visible blow may come from outside. The opening through which it enters is often created at the top.

The Golden Calf as a Leadership Failure

I see this principle in the story of the Golden Calf. The usual explanation focuses on the weakness of the people. Moses remained on Mount Sinai longer than they expected. They became frightened and impatient, demanded a visible god, and fell into idolatry. All of that is true, but it does not complete the story.

Impatience did not build the calf by itself. The people supplied the fear and the demand, but Aaron, who held authority in Moses' absence, gave that demand form, legitimacy, and religious meaning. The impulse came from below. The national transgression was enabled from above.

I go one step further. The crisis revealed a weakness in Moses' leadership that existed before he went up the mountain. He had led the people out of Egypt, but he had not yet formed a community capable of preserving its direction without his physical presence. This does not diminish Moses' greatness or deny the extraordinary burden he carried. It establishes a demanding principle: a leader must build a moral structure capable of surviving his absence.

When God tells Moses, 'Go down, for your people have become corrupt,' I hear the words 'your people' as more than identification. I hear responsibility. These are the people God entrusted to Moses to lead. Their failure does not release him from that assignment. It activates it.

The biblical text does not explicitly declare that Moses caused the Golden Calf, and this is my theological reading of the event. Aaron bears the immediate responsibility for surrendering to the demand. The people bear responsibility for making it. But Moses carries the higher burden of leadership because the nation could not hold its course when he was gone.

Moses' greatness becomes clearest in what he does next. He does not stand apart and say that the people made their own choice. He pleads for their survival, confronts the failure, returns to them, and rebuilds the covenant. Good leadership does not merely claim credit for the people's achievements. It accepts responsibility for their failures and then does the hard work of restoration.

The Jewish Crisis at 'Year 0'

This brings me to what I call 'Year 0.' I use the phrase as a metaphor for the turn of the Common Era, not as a literal calendar date. For me, it marks a decisive crisis in Jewish history, one in which religious, civil, and political leadership had become dangerously compromised.

Judaism did not disappear. It would adapt with extraordinary resilience and rebuild itself around Torah, study, prayer, law, and community. But the national and religious order centered on the Temple and Jewish self-government was already deeply weakened and would soon be shattered.

Judea lived under Roman domination. Jewish society was divided among competing groups, while part of the ruling and priestly establishment operated within a political structure dependent on Roman permission. The high priesthood itself was subject to appointment and removal by Roman authority. That fact does not prove that every priestly leader was corrupt, nor does it justify treating Jewish leadership as one undifferentiated body. Jewish life contained many teachers, movements, communities, and competing visions.

My criticism is directed toward those members of the governing and priestly elite who placed position, privilege, and political survival above moral and national renewal. Their relationship with Rome was not merely theoretical. Rome needed local leaders who could help maintain order. Those leaders needed Roman power to preserve their own authority. In practical terms, each side helped the other manage the Jewish population.

Such an arrangement may produce temporary stability, but it creates a deep spiritual danger. Leadership begins to see the unhappiness of its own people not as a warning to be understood, but as a threat to be suppressed. It becomes more comfortable negotiating with the occupying power than confronting its own corruption. Eventually, it may use external force against the very people it was entrusted to lead.

This is the atmosphere in which Jesus of Nazareth appeared. From an observant Jewish perspective, I do not accept him as the Messiah, and nothing in my argument requires acceptance of later Christian theology. I see him first as a Jew speaking to Jews, criticizing parts of Jewish religious and social life and giving voice to a dissatisfaction that established leadership had failed to answer.

Jesus as Warning, Not Cause

The Gospel accounts must be handled carefully. They were written by followers of Jesus, not by neutral historians, and they were later used to place collective guilt upon the Jewish people. That accusation produced centuries of persecution and cannot be repeated in another form. Rome ruled Judea. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment. Pilate possessed the power of life and death, and Roman authority ordered and carried out the execution.

At the same time, the conflict described in those accounts presents a serious theological question. If part of the Jewish establishment sought Roman power to eliminate a Jewish critic whom it regarded as a threat, then the leadership failure was profound. Its representatives were no longer protecting the people from imperial power. They were using imperial power to protect themselves from the people.

This is why I do not see Jesus as the guilty cause of the suffering that later came upon the Jews. I also do not believe that the Jewish people were punished because they failed to recognize the 'true Messiah.' That is a Christian theological conclusion, not mine.

My conclusion is different. The appearance of Jesus was a warning that an internal crisis had already become severe. His message found an audience because something in the religious and social order was not being answered. To the extent that the central outline is historically sound, the response of threatened leadership converted that warning into a rupture.

It may be tempting to describe the man himself as a punishment. I would put it more precisely. Jesus was not the punishment. He was a sign that judgment was approaching, and the leadership's inability to hear, correct, or unite helped turn the sign into an instrument of history. The movement that formed around him, its eventual separation from Judaism, and its enormous later influence did not emerge from a vacuum. They arose in part from a crisis the established order could neither resolve nor contain.

The historical paradox is extraordinary. Rome executed Jesus. Rome later persecuted his followers. Centuries afterward, the Roman Empire embraced and institutionalized the religion built around him. Christian states and institutions then became responsible for immense suffering inflicted upon Jews. None of this makes Jesus personally guilty, and none of it absolves Rome or later persecutors. A power may become an instrument within divine history and still remain morally responsible for every cruelty it chooses to commit.

Divine Judgment Does Not Erase Human Choice

This distinction is essential to my position. To say that nothing happens without God's will does not mean that God commands every evil act. Providence and approval are not the same. God may permit a person, movement, foreign power, or crisis to arise as a warning, a test, an instrument of judgment, or the consequence of human failure. The people involved still choose what they do and remain responsible for it.

Jewish tradition gives us a powerful interpretation of the destruction of the Second Temple: the people continued to study Torah, observe commandments, and perform acts of kindness, yet the society was consumed by *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred. Religious observance alone could not preserve a nation whose internal relationships had been poisoned.

Some may read that teaching as proof that the people, rather than the leadership, were primarily responsible. I read it differently. Hatred may spread among the people, but leadership is charged with healing division, preserving justice, and preventing factional hostility from becoming the governing condition of the nation. If leaders participate in the hatred, profit from it, or use foreign power to suppress their own people, they do not merely fail to solve the crisis. They become its organizing force.

The people are not children, and they are not morally innocent. They may follow false voices, accept easy lies, denounce neighbors, participate in injustice, or remain silent when courage is required. Individual responsibility never disappears. But leadership exists precisely because a nation cannot depend on every citizen seeing every danger in time. Leaders are entrusted with greater knowledge and greater power. That is why their responsibility must come first.

The Warning for America

I extend this principle to every nation, including the United States, regretfully. America is not exempt from the moral structure that governed ancient Israel, Rome, Germany, Russia, or any other state. Strong institutions do not operate by themselves. They depend on leaders willing to respect their purpose even when violating it would bring immediate political advantage.

When American leaders encourage division, manipulate fear, tolerate corruption, degrade public language, substitute slogans for thought, or place party and personal survival above the national interest, it is not enough to say that they merely reflect the American people. They were not entrusted with authority simply to mirror our weaknesses. They were entrusted with authority to restrain those weaknesses, protect institutions, tell difficult truths, and guide the country toward a higher standard.

The claim that 'the people wanted it' is one of leadership's oldest excuses. It turns public weakness into permission. It allows leaders to encourage the worst instincts of the population and then point to the resulting public mood as proof that they had no choice. That is not representation. It is the manufacture of consent followed by the denial of responsibility.

Citizens still have duties. We must think, judge, resist manipulation, defend truth, and choose better leaders. A free society cannot survive if the public abandons those obligations. But the first responsibility belongs to those who hold power because they possess the greatest ability either to stop national decline or to accelerate it.

The corruption of a nation may become visible everywhere, but its conversion into calamity begins with leadership. External enemies, economic shocks, civil disorder, and political movements may become the mechanics of destruction. The deeper failure begins when leaders make correction impossible and turn the nation's weaknesses into instruments of their own power.

The Burden of Authority

My argument is not that people bear no responsibility. It is that responsibility must follow authority. The person who controls more, knows more, and can prevent more must answer for more. Otherwise, leadership becomes a privilege without obligation and power without accountability.

The lesson of the Golden Calf is not simply that frightened people can lose their way. It is that leadership must create a moral order strong enough to survive fear and absence. The lesson of 'Year 0' is not that the Jews rejected the Messiah and were punished for it. It is that compromised leadership failed to answer a national and spiritual crisis, then looked to imperial power for protection from the consequences. The lesson of later history is that the same structure can appear in any civilization, under any religion, and within any political system.

A nation may survive weak citizens if its leaders summon what is best in them. It cannot long survive leaders who organize, legitimize, and empower what is worst.

A civilization rarely falls because ordinary people suddenly become worse. It falls when its leaders make what is worst in the people powerful.