

Yom Kippur 2015

“Goat to Hell, and Back Again.”

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If I were a goat, I'd have crossed my hooves and hoped for the wilderness.

Sending a goat out into the wilderness seems a far more compassionate and honorable gesture than selecting one to be sacrificed on an altar. And yet, the elaborate rituals of the High Priest on Yom Kippur suggest the exact opposite: of the two goats brought to him for the annual ceremonial lottery, the one selected for sacrifice to God is the winner, and the one sent off to the wilds of Azazel carrying the people's sins, the clear loser.

What exactly does the term “seir la'azazel/a goat for Azazel” even mean? It is found nowhere else in the Bible outside of this morning's Torah reading. The truth is no one really knows for sure.

Scholars have suggested three possibilities:

1. Azazel is the name of the place in the wilderness to which the goat was dispatched.
2. Azazel is a word that describes the goat itself: “ez”= goat; “azal” = go away. Hence, the goat that goes away. This is similar to the Sages' term for the animal in the Mishnah (Yoma): “seir hamishtaleach/the goat that is sent away”. This is the interpretation that led to the English rendering of “seir la'azazel” as “the scapegoat”, from “escape goat” which first appeared in Tyndale's English translation of the Bible in 1530.
3. Azazel is an ancient name given to the demonic ruler of the wilderness. The goat then becomes the personification of the evil wilderness.

In the words of the Or Hachayim: The barren desert is the habitat of Satan. “Aza Zal” in Aramaic literally means “the place of a base or mean force”.

It’s this last interpretation that lead the Sages in the Talmud to expand the ritual to include not just sending the goat away, but completely destroying it.

In Massechet Yoma the Talmud tells how the goat would be pushed off a cliff at a rocky ledge so that by the time it was halfway down the mountain its limbs would have been torn apart as it suffered a certain and violent death.

To be sure, the Bible at times used the image of the wilderness -- uninhabited, uncultivated land -- as a metaphor for complete desolation, an evil place, a place of danger, peril, hunger and thirst. In the Torah, the *midbar*, the wilderness, is frequently the setting for sin: the building of the golden calf, the rebellion of Korach, and the people’s confrontations with God over water all took place in the desert.

Linda Hogan, a novelist and poet who has written about the Native American connection to land, put it this way:

“The wilderness, mentioned in the Bible 300 times, is almost always referred to as the place of evil, the devil’s place. It is seen as a dangerous realm, the untouched place of demons. It lives at the edge of the civilized world, and in the human mapping, it is the place inside humans that behaves according to instinct and inner drive and cannot be controlled by will. Wilderness is what the dominating have tried to push away from themselves, both in the outside world and inside their own bodies.”

Rabbi S.R. Hirsch stated it more succinctly when he wrote: Azazel is the “uncontrolled might of sensuality.”

Against this backdrop, it makes sense to explain this unusual ceremony in terms of the phenomenology of riddance, of doing away with what is to be avoided. The High Priest placed all our evil, all our sins, on this goat, this *seir la'azazel*, which itself represented evil, and sent it and our sins into the wilds of evil to be completely destroyed.

This is classic scapegoating: we place our sins on the animal, and the animal gets destroyed as a result of them, instead of us getting destroyed.

Violent scapegoating rituals took place in others areas of the ancient world, too. But nowhere in our Biblical account in Leviticus/Vayikra 16 does it mandate or even suggest that this goat for Azazel was to be mistreated in any way.

While the Talmud records a grisly end for the animal, the description in the Torah simply describes the goat being set free in the wilderness. The word used again and again is "*sheelach*" to set free, the very same word used repeatedly by Moses as he pleaded with Pharaoh to release the Jews from Egypt: "*shelach et ami/set my people free!*"

While in the Bible we do find some negative associations with the wilderness, we also find some very beautiful and powerful connections with the desert. In fact, one of my favorite verses, from the book of Jeremiah, reads: "I recall the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me into the desert, a land not sown."

The Gerrer Rebbe, a brilliant Hassidic Master, understood that reference to the desert as a place of spiritual beauty where God and Israel's love for one another flowed freely and passionately, unencumbered by the responsibilities and obligations of the mitzvot that were to come with the Torah at Sinai.

Other prophets such as Hosea, Samuel and Isaiah romanticized the wilderness and referred to it as a place of purification, as a place of refuge.

In fact, Rabbi Hirsch even noted that halakhically speaking, there were only two requirements concerning the goat for Azazel ritual: one was the *hargalah* – the lottery to decide which goat was to be sacrificed and which was to be sent to the wilderness; and the second was the *vidui* – the confession of the people’s sins upon the goat selected for Azazel.

Neither escorting the goat to the desert, nor pushing it off a cliff, was required. So why does the role of the goat for the wilderness evolve from the peaceful vision of the Torah to the savage vision of the Talmud? And what message does this whole ritual contain for us as we read and contemplate it these thousands of years later?

To answer that we have to understand what the goat ritual symbolized in the Yom Kippur ceremonies of the High Priest, what its original message was and its connection to the Day of Atonement.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas, in a book entitled Leviticus as Literature, shares some fascinating insights into this ritual and some related biblical rites. She notes how the goat ritual was foreshadowed by rituals described earlier in Leviticus. The two goats parallel the two pairs of birds used in the rites to purify a leper. In chapter 14 we read how two birds were taken – one was killed and the other, after being dipped in the blood and sprinkled over the leper, is set free.

The same is done for cleansing a house struck with leprosy: two birds again, one killed, the other dipped in its blood, and “*he shall let the living bird go out of the city into the open field.*” (Lev. 14:53)

Douglas then cites parallels between the rituals of anointing a cured leper and that of consecrating Aaron and his sons as priests by Moses: both involved anointing the tip of the right ear, the right thumb, and the big toe on the right foot. She notes these in the same context as the rituals with the goats and birds because she sees in all of them a fundamental premise of the Vayikra text, something she calls “Uneven Complementarity”.

“Uneven Complementarity” suggests that in the Torah’s understanding, the world is made up of pairs. One is always “chosen”, or selected for sacred service, and one is not and set free. She sees it with animals, with sides of the body, and even with people. To her, the book of Vayikra and its laws and rituals are an ongoing commentary on the biblical narratives that shaped the lives of the Jewish people.

Recall the grossly uneven destinies of pairs of brothers in the book of Bereishit: Isaac and Ishmael; Jacob and Esav. One is “chosen” and becomes defined by the Brit, by covenantal responsibilities, while the other is allowed to go free.

As we read over Rosh Hashanah, Isaac is chosen for God and his life becomes defined by the covenant. Ishmael is not chosen, and instead, his mother Hagar is told by God, *as they wandered in the wilderness*, that her son will grow up to be a “wild ass of a man”. Douglas suggests that these words were not meant harshly by God, but simply that Ishmael would be unconstrained by the covenant.

She writes: *“There is no judgment against Ishmael [by the Bible]; he is neither immoral nor destined to an unhappy or godless life. He is not condemned; he is free to roam the wilderness and will be a great prince. He is like the bird and the goat which were NOT chosen, while Isaac is parallel to the goat or the bird on which the lot of the Lord fell, destined to a sacred calling.”*

How amazing to read our Yom Kippur Torah portion as a commentary on, or a ritual reenactment of, our Rosh Hashanah Torah reading!

But what is the message of all this?

Here's where Mary Douglas' anthropological analysis becomes most meaningful for us today. She answers by saying, "**the Leviticus writer may be mourning the loss of the other half.**"

These rituals teach us a timeless lesson about complementarity. Douglas continues: *"The pairs are not so much uneven as different; respecting their difference is symbolic of completion and totality. Recall that parallelism is not just a way of writing, not just a stylistic device. It is only possible to write in parallels because it is a way of thinking, which is also a way of living in which it is impossible to organize except in terms of wholes and their halves, sometimes equal, more often unequal."*

So the ritual of atonement (at-one-ment), the separating of two goats, is one in which we mourn the loss of one-ness, of wholeness.

Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esav, the Northern and Southern kingdoms: wholes divided and left to vastly different destinies.

The two-goat ritual in Vayikra on the Day of Atonement is a reenactment of the parting of ways between brothers, family members, communities and nations. It is a mourning of the loss of the other half. It is a story repeated all too often in history. It's humanity's core myth. We can relate to it on a personal and global level as we consider those from whom we remain divided – emotionally, socially, ideologically.

The Jewish people in Israel and the world over continue to suffer the consequences of being morally, politically and violently estranged from our other halves in human civilization. This same story of disconnection is at the center of so much other tragic conflict in the world as well. Through this ancient two-goat ceremony we mourn humanity's existential rift. We mourn the gulf that divides the world between those who love peace and pursue justice and those who show disdain for life and embrace war.

Relationships that start out as separate but equal in the biblical narrative quickly degenerate into competition, envy, hatred, and eventually war and death. The interpretations of this central Yom Kippur ritual that move from the peaceful biblical account of the goat for Azazel being set free in the wilderness to the Talmudic account of it being pushed off a cliff to its death is the cultic representation of this shameful arc of humanity's disintegration.

On the Day of Atonement, on Yom Kippur, when we come face to face most directly with our own mortality, our own individual destinies, our prayers suddenly focus on an ancient ritual that reminds us of the connection between our own fate and that of our "other".

Symbolically replaying the diverging destinies of our biblical ancestors and their "others", the ritual of the goats is a required step in the forgiving of our sins to teach us that full atonement is not available until we come face to face with our estrangement from one another; the source of so much of our pain.

But all of this begs some important questions:

If this ritual truly symbolizes the gulf between us and our "others" why aren't two completely different animals used to as a way of demonstrating how differences too

often keep people apart unnecessarily? Why use two goats, which I imagine looked quite similar to each other, and underplay the distinctions between them?

One reason was that two similar looking animals reinforced the truth that while differences between creatures and people exist, and while we are each unique, we share a common, sacred life-force – a truth too often obscured by prejudice and anger.

Another took the symbolism of the goats more deeply inside. Their similar looks suggested they were really two halves of a single whole, alerting us to the inner struggles we wage with disparate and disconnected parts of our own being. So many of us are divided within ourselves in addition to being divided from others. We are often conflicted about our dreams, our desires, our values, our opinions, our feelings, our relationships, and our choices. In the ensuing battles we fall prey to self-loathing and self-recrimination, failing to remember that we are in our entirety reflections of the divine, and that life is about forging integrity and fashioning wholeness from the alchemy of human nature. We are complex beings, but our complexity doesn't belie our oneness. The ritual thus symbolized the inner, personal, individual gulfs that needed to be healed before any reconciliation between people was possible.

As Jews we're weaned on tenacity and hope and our array of highly textured rituals reflects the optimism at the heart of our tradition: we dip apples in sweet honey to affirm the blessings of a New Year; we sit in frail sukkot but we make them beautiful dwelling places; we shake our lulav and etrog in thanks for our life's abundance; we eat matzah which is both the bread of oppression and the bread of freedom; we greet every Shabbat with light and wine; we even form lines of comfort and support around mourners leaving a cemetery to show community and solidarity. So I can't help but wonder: if this ritual of the two goats precedes and is a prerequisite to the

granting of forgiveness for our sins, a prerequisite to atonement (at-one-ment) which bespeaks a return to wholeness, why don't we engage in a ritual of symbolic reunification of two halves, a ritual of reconnection between the selected and the other? Why does the ritual replay the separation and not the reintegration?

The answer is both simple and complicated, for one single reason: the reintegration is entirely up to us. All the High Priest could do was to invite us into the breach.

In another provocative teaching, the Gerrer Rebbe notes that our ancient sages in the Mishnah decreed that until we reconcile with one another, Yom Kippur does not atone for the sins between us. For Yom Kippur is all about unity and what divides us from each other is sin. Sin creates distance and separation, both between people and the Source of Life and between people themselves. And both types need to be bridged today.

But it's not just about righting such wrongs between us as when we take things that belong to someone else. We have to right the wrongs that specifically cause us to feel alienated from one another, that cause unity to feel elusive, such as when we feel hatred or indifference in our hearts for another. We have to reconcile to the point where we not only overcome the hatred, the Gerrer Rebbe says, but until we return to feeling desire and love for one another.

This is hard stuff. It is much easier to repay someone you stole from than it is to restore feelings of love for someone you've come to despise.

On this day of Yom Kippur, when forgiveness is promised if we reconcile our sins that divide us, unity and attachment become possible once more, fulfilling the Torah's core principle: to love another as we love ourselves.

For this reason, the Gerrer Rebbe teaches, the second set of tablets were given to us by Moses on Yom Kippur. The sin of the golden calf created disunity and shattered us. But when Moses came down a second time and gathered us together, we had overcome the gulf that sin created, and became worthy once again of receiving the Torah. For the Torah's power is dependent upon our coming together. It can only exist in a place of harmony and peace.

The ritual of the two goats parting from one another which took place once a year on Yom Kippur was a symbolic calling to us to step into the breaches that alienate us from ourselves and from each other, and to come home to one another, to return to one another in *teshuvah*, to restore the bonds of *chesed* and *rachamim* between us, bonds of loving-kindness and mercy.

And it is exactly the healing of our estrangement from each other on this very day long ago at the foot of Mount Sinai that made way for the bond between humanity and the Divine by activating our holy Torah as source of guidance to help us sustain and grow our love for each other.

Remember that Mary Douglas explains the ceremony of the two goats as “mourning the loss of the other half.” Reaching out to the other half is the *tikkun*, the repair, the healing that awaits us, and that is up to us alone.

It was necessary to enact this ritual dramatization of the original biblical tales of enmity between brothers and disintegration within families to remind us that wholeness will only come when we confront brokenness, and when we accept the truth of our eternal connectedness to one another.

In every generation the goat is set free in the wilderness. In every generation we must decide whether, and how, to bring it home.

