

D'var Torah Yom Kippur 2012

Acherey Mot

Leviticus 16 Yom Kippur 2019

The Reconstructionist *Machzor* gives us the choice between two very different Torah readings for *Yom Kippur* morning. Most often we have chosen to read and study *Nitzavim* on this most holy of our holy days. It is the more contemporary choice, and much easier to relate to and deconstruct. It focuses on free will, something we can identify with as part of our own process of atonement. *Nitzavim* directly involves the people, *Acharey Mot*, today's reading does not.

But it does present us with the actual *Yom Kippur* practices of our ancient tradition. It comes to us in two parts - the high priest's obligations and rituals on this Day of Awe and the strange (to us) story of the scapegoat - which we learn may be one of our earliest teachings on the collective expiation of our sins. This morning I'm going to focus on the scapegoat, since it is still a source of ambivalence and debate. The scapegoat is frankly the most interesting part of the reading as we once again approach our own confessionals. This portion is found in *Leviticus* 16 - As most of you know, *Leviticus* is the book that is designed primarily to instruct the *Levites*, the priestly tribe, as to their obligation to be intermediaries between God and the people Israel. It contains laws and practices outlined for us to follow as well. Most of the text is still the source of debate. Traditionalists sometimes use it to defend seemingly indefensible positions - ignoring the fact that even God's opinions are capable of change. The God of Adam is not the God of Abraham or the God of Moses or the God we may find within. Torah is very clear that as the people evolve so does God.

As we absorb this portion, we must look at what we are being taught, what we can absorb and what we must deny - with the hope we are seeing ourselves more clearly. We are no longer willing to believe that an intermediary, whether a priest or a scapegoat, is required for our spiritual growth. This is *our teaching*. We too often ignore when these words were codified and who they were meant to teach. *Leviticus* is full of meaningful instruction, some of which give us a clear path to follow that still works and the rest just no longer touches us. But both paths teach us who we were and who we can become.

The Book of Leviticus is redeemed for me by *Leviticus 19:2*, part of which is called *Kedoshim*, or more commonly, the holiness code, which gives us the ethical obligations that join with our practices to help us fulfill one of the most amazing assertions in Judaism. The short but mindboggling line is ten words long and is enough to change your life. The words are simple: "*You shall be holy because I, your God, am holy*". For me this is the most powerful of all the Godly injunctions... the target for my personal arrow. But since it comes three chapters after today's portion, I suggest you take a look yourselves.

In our text, the first path follows the priests, who were keepers of the Temple and of our religious practice. They are commanded in great detail as to the role they must play and also to the incredible responsibility they have to follow God's instructions to the letter. There is no creativity permitted the priests because they are the keepers of God's house - the holy of holies ... where we are told God resides.

The portion opens with the assumption that we know our text. We are told simply "the Almighty spoke to Moses, after the death of two of Aaron's sons." Looking back, we learn they died because they broke the rules. They violated God's instructions and were consumed by Holy fire. It was a horrific punishment for what seems to be a mistake but not a

capital crime - but it is the Torah's way of telling us priests are held to a higher standard.

There is no "why?" from Aaron or Moses. The ancients understood.

A complicated ritual is then described and this is where the scapegoat enters our history. The High Priest is to take two kid goats of identical size and appearance and choose by lot for one to be traditionally sacrificed to God and the other to be banished to the wilderness, to the mysterious Azazel, still carrying with it all the sins of Israel. Before the goat is sent away, Aaron places his two hands on its head and makes confession for himself and all of the Israelites. Through the High Priest's hands these sins and transgressions are moved from the people to the "scapegoat" and the goat is then led into the wilderness. This all happens without any participation by the community. It is a private act.

This portion confronts us with a still unanswered question. What or who is Azazel and how is it possible that this practice, this laying on of hands, can atone for our sins? And from the Mishnah through the Talmud through endless rabbinic and scholarly debate, this particular ritual has been a source of uncertainty. Is Azazel a place or a person? The question is still unresolved. Azazel's name is most often thought to mean "place or power". Some think Azazel was a fallen angel, a demon or simply a mountain or canyon. We are not told whether the goat is killed or just left to die in the wilderness. To many, the chosen goat is being sent to the source of all evil -- in essence taking our sins back to their origin.

We have no second act for Azazel in our story. No answers for the unanswerable.

But my struggle is not with who or what this Azazel might be. My struggle is with the lack of self-reflection and confession that the goat represents. Only Aaron makes a confession, for himself, his family and the people Israel. The goat that is chosen for God is sacrificed for the people's sins and then Aaron, alone in the Tent of Meeting atones in holiness

and privacy. The people are outside, untouched by self-examination, untouched by reflection on the future, untouched by the powerful connection with the Holy. That experience is solely felt by the High Priest. And when the scapegoat is sent off bearing the sins of the people, it is not carrying the real sins, the dark secret regrets we each carry within us. The High Priest alone determines and atones for the sins of the people.

Upon reflection, I have always loved the fact that Judaism allows a relationship with the holy for all of us, without someone telling us what to believe or what to feel. When we had priests speaking for us we were isolated from the feeling that tells us to sit together today and search within for our failures and limitations. Although this may be the day more Jews are in synagogue than any other, it is also the day when our internal assessments, our regrets and our failures, our sins against our community and against God are only ours. Certainly we share our sins. Certainly we ask for communal forgiveness. Certainly as a community we know where our faults lie. But as the godly within is our target, we each have to own up to what we've failed to do - and that reflection is ours alone.

The scapegoat is today a word used to identify someone who unfairly carries our burdens. We now, as modern Jews, know that the burdens are carried by no one but ourselves. We no longer accept intermediaries. We pray - we reflect - we are engaged. We are not kept "outside the Tent of Meeting" while a High Priest atones on our behalf and liberates us from our sins by sending a goat bearing the weight of all those sins to Azazel...

When the Second Temple was destroyed, the tragedy was also a liberation. Without the Temple the priests direct role in the lives of the people ended. The Rabbinic period began, and with it the joy of debate, the joy of study, and the joy of becoming a people with our own relationship to the holy. The Rabbis were not a substitute for the priests, but teachers, often of

great learning, who saw their role as developing a portable Judaism - one not dependent on a single place or person.

So as I prepared to discuss this portion I found the poor goat such a contradiction to my own understanding of the search for atonement I wasn't sure I could even find the teaching moments within. But here they are: First, a few negatives, which are as important to understand as the positives: The High Priest cannot/could not speak for me. The Instructor God in this portion has no place in my understanding of the Godly. Sending a goat into the wilderness to die, whether through the action of a demon or a physical accident is not sufficient to purify my soul. Sacrifice worked for the ancients but I cannot imagine a rebuilt Temple where sacrifices take place.

Now the positives- and there are many. These are our roots and being able to see how we have evolved religiously is critical to the continuing development of Judaism. To know there can be change has saved us as people over the centuries. The Rabbinic movement also saved Judaism by opening it up to all the people rather than having secret practices that gave the Israelites no way to grow religiously. The concept of atonement and purification is at the heart of who we are. The ancient belief in redemption, although practiced in a different way, is a key to our modern Judaism as much as it was to the ancients. We seek forgiveness as well as being forgiving. We are obligated to teshuvah, tzedakah and tefilah and we are judged, by ourselves or by the Holy, on how close we've come to hitting the mark they represent.

So as the portion is read today, feel free to let yourself ask some internal questions. Where do we unpack our darkness to find the light? There is no goat or High Priest to do it for us. Why are the practices of Yom Kippur described in such detail? How can Torah tell

us that atonement shall be made for us when we know that unless we take on that responsibility ourselves we won't know what we've done or how to fix it?

But Yom Kippur has many names and each reflects its diverse reality. This is the Sabbath of Sabbaths - a time of abstaining but also a time of joy. This is the close of the Days of Awe - a time of unbelievable power as well as deep-seated humility. This is the completion of the High Holy Days and this is the Day of Atonement.

I'd like to close with the words of an anonymous liturgist as I read a prayer called "God's Blessings" a clear message of what can be envisioned.

God's Blessings

May God bless you with **discomfort**, at easy answers, half-truths, superficial relationships, so that you will live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with **anger**, at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people so that you will work for justice, equality and peace.

May God bless you with **tears** to shed, for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you will reach out your hand to comfort them and change their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with the **foolishness** to think that you can make a difference in the world, so that you will do the things that others tell you cannot be done.