

Yom Kippur morning

The Scapegoat

There are two high-voltage three-letter words in our vocabulary with diametrically opposing effects. The first three-letter word is “s-e-x,” which without fail gets people’s immediate and undivided attention. The second is “s-i-n,” which equally effectively shuts down the attention center of the brain. This morning, I’m sorry, I’m going to talk about sin.

We Jews are confused about sin. We never use the word; for many of us, the word arouses feelings of nausea. We are fine with “mistake,” “bad choice,” “lapse of judgment;”even “transgression” feels semi-acceptable. But sin feels like a Christian concept.

But now here comes Yom Kippur, with its famous list: *al chet sheh chatanu l’fanecha*, “for the sin which we have sinned before you.” In case you hadn’t noticed, this prayer book is full of talk about sin. I wonder if it has ever occurred to someone to ask “could it be possible that Yom Kippur is not really a Jewish

holiday?” Maybe it is a Christian fundamentalist “stealth” holiday, which got slipped into our calendar when we weren’t watching!

I would like to take some time this morning to talk about sin, to share with you my understanding of the basic idea of Yom Kippur. And in the process, I’d like to suggest that we could become a little more comfortable with the notion of sin.

To begin with, Yom Kippur is an intensely psychological holy day, the holiest day of the year for an intensely psychological people. Yom Kippur is an ancient, complex and marvelous system for coming to terms with our *averot*, our sins.

The problem which Yom Kippur attempts to solve is captured in a catchy little song which we teach the kids here, that goes like this: “*mitzvah goreret mitzvah; avera goreret avera, ah ah. Mitzvah goreret mitzvah, goreret mitzvah, ba da da da da.*”

That song was written about 2,000 years ago...well, at least the words!... by a great rabbi named Ben Azzai. He said: Run to perform even a minor *mitzvah* and flee from an *avera*. Because *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*; one *mitzvah* draws another after it; and

avera goreret avera; one sin leads to another. It's a simple truth of human nature: we follow established patterns and pathways, whether it be our patterns of eating, of exercise, or in the ways we respond to criticism. The way we handle conflict. The way we deal with our fears. The way we relate to strangers. In every aspect of our lives, including our moral behavior, we are creatures of habit. We know this.

And that's the problem. All of us, with maybe a few exceptions, want to be good human beings. But we remember our *averot*, our transgressions! And we feel the weight of those *averot* pulling at us: *avera goreret avera*. Those memories make me doubt my own ability to act differently next time. For 3,000 years, this day has been about the need to confront and to overcome our past.

We just read from the Torah, how in ancient Israel, the climax of the Yom Kippur day occurred when two goats were brought before the High Priest. Lots were cast and one goat would be designated for God, and was sacrificed as a burnt offering. The

other goat was designated “for azazel” and the High Priest would lay his hands on the head of that goat, and recite out loud all the sins of the people, laying the sins on the goat. The goat was then led out to the wilderness, and there he was set free, symbolically carrying all the sins of the people, never to return.

To us, this ritual looks utterly primitive, superstitious...something out of our distant, most alien past. But let’s look again! “Scapegoat” is part of our everyday vocabulary. That powerful and evocative word comes directly from this Torah portion and describes a universal, timeless, human tendency. A scapegoat is a person or a group onto which we lay our own sins. Maybe we need to think more deeply about this portion after all. Here is my reading of it:

To begin with: I want to be a good person. In fact, to feel confident about my own moral strength, I need to see myself as a good person. But I have done some things I regret. So how do I restore my sense of myself as good? Our ancient Israelite strategy was to symbolically unload our sins onto a goat and to send it out

into the desert. An even older strategy, which goes right back to Adam and Eve, is to load our sins onto other people, often the ones closest to us.

You all remember the story....(garden, humans, tree, snake, eat) Then, when God asks Adam in the Garden of Eden, “how did you know you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?” Adam replies: “the woman...whom YOU gave to be with me...she gave me of the tree, and I ate!” And God turns to Eve and says, “What is this that you have done?” To which Eve replies “The snake...tricked me, and I ate.” Have we really changed at all since then? It’s the blame game, and we all do it, at least from time to time.

The blame game and the scapegoat ritual have one and the same goal, which is to distance ourselves from our moral failures. The underlying impulse to do that is not evil—we want to be good people but we have these.... shortcomings....like a pile of dirty clothes messing up the beautiful living room of our moral life! So in an effort to clean house, we may go dump them on a goat, or our

spouse, or our child, or our neighbor or our co-worker. Carl Jung observed that groups often achieve a sense of unity by scapegoating, by choosing an individual to bear the sins of the community. We Jews have sometimes been made the scapegoat for the world; and we have done scapegoating of our own. The impulse to distance ourselves from our sins is not evil, but the resulting behavior can be. Scapegoating a human being or group of human beings has produced the worst evils in human history.

Now coming back to Yom Kippur, since we don't use a goat anymore, and scapegoating is clearly wrong, what are we supposed to do with our shortcomings? I think that a more in-depth study of the history of the scapegoat ritual can point us in the right direction.

We saw this morning in the Torah, that the original Yom Kippur procedure involved the second goat being laden with the sins of the community and then led out into the wilderness and sent away from the camp. The next time in Jewish history that we hear anything about this ritual is in the Mishnah, which was written

roughly 1,000 years after the Torah. The Jewish world had changed dramatically since the time of the Torah. Our nomadic shepherd ancestors had become farmers and city-dwellers. The Mishnah describes the scapegoat ritual as it was performed in the great city of Jerusalem during the period of the Second Temple.

Here is what the Mishnah describes:

They built a ramp for the goat leading directly from the Temple in the center of the city to beyond the city walls, above the heads of the populace, because before the ramp was built, some of the people would grab at the goat as it went past and pull its hair and yell “take and get out! Take and get out!” And then the Mishnah describes in graphic detail that the goat was taken several miles outside the city, to the edge of a cliff, pushed over and would tumble down and down until, in the words of the Mishnah, *lo hayah magia lechatzi hahar ad sheh naasah eivarim eivarim*..before it reached half-way down the mountain, the goat broke into pieces.

What had happened during the centuries from the time of the Torah to that of the Mishnah? How did the Torah's simple sending of the goat out into the wilderness become the Mishnah's violent destruction of the goat? Here is my theory:

I would guess that over the centuries, the ritual was felt not to be working ...somehow people were not feeling sufficiently relieved of their sins. And so they sought and found a more definitive, more intense way of putting distance between themselves and their sins, in an ever-increasing desire to assure that those sins would not return. The goat had to be not merely sent away, but actually visibly destroyed. And the thing is...it still did not work.

Look at the behavior of the people of Jerusalem as described in the Mishnah, as the goat was being led out of the city. Pulling its hair and yelling at it. They are a mob and manifestly impure. The frenzied effort to drive their sins away only pushed their sins deeper and deeper inside themselves.

The lesson that these Yom Kippur texts taken together teach us, I believe, is that it is ultimately impossible to send our sins away from us. Yes, we still keep *tashlikh* as an excuse to go to the beach on Rosh Hashanah afternoon. And in some Jewish circles they do still wave a chicken over their head before Yom Kippur and declare “my sins on this chicken.” But I think we all understand that we will never become whole so long as we look to unload the bad memories, the regrettable mistakes of our past. There is only one way to wholeness, and that is: we need to become the goat. We need to find the strength, the courage and the faith to say “I will carry these sins myself. They are mine, after all, and they contain everything I need to know to become a whole person.”

This, by the way, is a deep point of difference between classical Judaism and classical Christianity, in which the sins of humankind are loaded onto the god-man Jesus, whose death is relieves humanity from the burden of sin.

In Judaism, we own our sins and carry them ourselves. The rabbis of the Talmud expressed this thought as follows: “a repentant sinner stands on a rung upon which a perfectly righteous person cannot stand.” Over fifteen hundred years ago, our sages understood that our sins are part of our journey, part of our growth...if we can own them, take responsibility for them, and use them for our moral development. We don’t want them. We wish they hadn’t happened. They shame us and humiliate us. The memory of our own moral failures will always be painful, but ultimately it is a pain we need...a pain that can help us to do better the next time. This is what it means to be our own Yom Kippur goat, to carry our own sins.

A final word: I don’t think that the goat was bitter! After all, it was the other one that became the burnt offering! In the Torah portion, the scapegoat is referred to simply as *ha-sa’ir heh-chai*, the living goat; and he gets to go out to the wilderness...the place where our people encountered God. That is where we need to go with our sins....the wilderness....but not on a camping trip. This

long Yom Kippur day is a wilderness...a place without food or water, uncivilized, a place beyond time, a place of God. If we are willing to be our own Yom Kippur goat, to carry our sins ourselves, and not attempt to drive them away or unload them onto someone else... our path then leads us out to the wilderness. And there, in that place of revelation, we will find ourselves in a new way, made whole. *Ha-sa'ir heh-chai*. The goat, truly and fully alive.