

Yom Kippur 5769 -- Sins, Scapegoats and Ritual Atonement

The Torah portion we just read describes an odd ritual involving one bull and two goats. The *Cohen Gadol* (High Priest) sacrifices the bull to make expiation for himself and his household. One of the goats is sacrificed to God as a sin offering on behalf of the People as a whole. With the blood of these two animals, the Sanctuary itself is purged of all sin that has accumulated there as a result of sins committed by the Israelites. The other goat is sent out into the wilderness. “Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the evil of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions and sins, (**avonot, peshaim, v’chata’ot**) putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send it forth into the desert. And the goat shall bear upon it all their evil unto a desolate land.”

In Ancient Israel, this ritual effected **kaparah** – atonement -- for the whole community – the whole Israelite nation. Was this because they BELIEVED it worked, or did something actually change in the heavenly spheres? Was there a shift in the energy field of the Temple, Jerusalem and the whole Land of Israel? Perhaps there is no point in distinguishing between something being effective because people **believe** it works, vs there being a “real” energy shift, because belief – faith – actually **causes** an energy shift.

Apparently, everyone felt unburdened, purified, more whole, when one goat was sacrificed as a sin offering and another was cast out into no-man’s-land bearing their sins.

In Ancient Israel, they didn’t observe Yom Kippur in the way that we do today. They DID practice self-denial, and they did NOT work. Those 2 elements remain the same. They DIDN’T say the “*Ashamnu*” and the “*Al cheyt...*”—the litany of sins that we recite 5 times on this day (“for the sin we have sinned before you by

x,y,z”); they didn’t spend 40 days doing *cheshbon hanefesh* (a spiritual accounting) in preparation for Yom Kippur; they were not required to ask forgiveness from or to forgive one another. In this chapter from Leviticus, there is nothing about *teshuvah*, *tefillah* or *tzedakah*.

In the rabbinic period – long after the Torah was written -- structured prayer was developed as a substitute for animal sacrifice. So in the Torah, there is nothing about spending Yom Kippur in prayer.

The biblical Yom Kippur ritual is the origin of the term scapegoat (from **escape** goat). When that goat was sent away, everyone felt better. But were their sins really carried off? Is it that easy? Can we transfer our sins onto an animal? How about onto another person?

We actually do this, or try to do this, all the time...it’s called projection and blame – a topic I discussed in my Rosh Hashanah sermon.

Scapegoating can be directed at an individual or at a group. Whenever a system is under stress, the system looks for a place to lay the blame. Historically, the Jews have been the world’s most chosen scapegoat. This dynamic played out most dramatically in Nazi Germany. Right now, with the economic crisis in the United States, the system is primed for scapegoating.

Scapegoating also happens in organizations, workplaces, schools and other communities. It often happens within families as well. Many families have “black sheeps” and/or “identified patients.” As long as one group or one individual is blamed for the ills/sins/dysfunction of an entire system, that system can never attain health. It is always easier to blame an individual and “send them away” – like the goat sent into the wilderness -- than to look at ourselves or to look at the system as a whole. When the identified problem-person or group is sent away, the system

breathes a sigh of relief for a while; but unless systemic problems are identified and addressed, the system will keep looking for and finding new scapegoats.

Even if an individual has made significant mistakes and might benefit from some loving rebuke, everyone would learn and grow more by looking at what part the system plays in exacerbating weaknesses and negative tendencies.

Have you ever been a scapegoat?

Have you ever been involved in scapegoating – either by participating actively in ostracizing, mistreating or blaming a group or an individual – or, by witnessing the scapegoating phenomenon and passively allowing it to go on?

Scapegoating happens because we don't want to acknowledge our dark sides.

Projecting our psychic shadows onto a scapegoat whom we banish means cutting off a part of ourselves rather than healing wounds and finding a way to integrate all of our disparate parts.

Scapegoating today is a much more malevolent – and in some ways a much more **primitive** -- process than when we did it ritually with goats! Back then, the animals were sacrificed on the Temple altar, or sent off into the wilderness. Today we tend to blame other humans for our individual and collective failings, instead of doing the work of examining and transforming ourselves as individuals, as groups, and as a society.

Rational analysis affects the conscious mind.

Ritual affects the imagination and the unconscious mind, which are extremely powerful forces in all of our lives.

We may actually be more effective at purging ourselves of our transgressions, healing our dysfunctions, and transforming

ourselves and our communities through rituals, than through rational analysis. At the very least, we can use ritual to complement rational approaches to growth and healing.

Could a ritual like the one described in Leviticus still work for us today?

The Rosh Hashanah ritual of *Tashlich*, which first became popular in early 15th c. Germany, may have been inspired by a line in the Zohar (13th c) that says: "whatever falls into the deep is lost forever; ... it acts like the scapegoat for the ablution of sins." This *minhag* (custom) was also inspired by the prophet Micah, who said: "God will take us back in love. He will cover up all our iniquities. You will hurl all your sins into the depths of the sea" (7:19). As I said earlier, the energy that we invest in a ritual action – our *kavannah* – is what gives it the power to effect change. We symbolically transfer our sins onto breadcrumbs and toss them into a natural body of water. Standing at the water's edge, we quietly go inside and think about the patterns of behavior, speech and thought that we most want to change in the coming year. We set a clear intention to cast off one of these painful patterns for each crumb that we toss. One year we may throw 3 crumbs in the water. Another year we may feel the need to cast off a dozen or more. This year after Rosh Hashanah morning services, 14 of us walked down to the harbor together. (I asked and received Jonah Vesery's permission to mention him in today's sermon). I noticed that Jonah didn't look too happy downstairs at the oneg after services. We had a conversation in which he shared why he was in a bad mood. He gave some reasons, and then confessed that external circumstances didn't really explain it, yet he wasn't able to shake it off. *Tashlich* was transformational for him! He left the harbor beaming a huge, bright, genuinely joyful smile, with arms open wide for hugging. I was struck by the dramatic change in his affect! Ritual is meant to be like this, as is prayer. *Kabbalat Shabbat* – the candle-lighting

and the traditional sequence of songs that we sing on Friday evening to welcome Shabbat – is consistently transformational for me. At times I enter the sanctuary on Friday evening feeling tense, fatigued or sad, and the combined mental and physical acts of bringing in the light of the candles to fill the week ahead, welcoming the angels of shalom, and stepping outside to welcome the the Sabbath bride – always bring me joy, peace and renewed energy.

The transformational effect of ritual or prayer can be dramatic and immediate. Or sometimes the process of transformation is more subtle and takes a long time.

When I was in India almost 13 years ago, I participated in a ritual in which we each threw a stick into a fire with the intention of burning up the one issue we each most wanted to transform in ourselves. The intention I put into the stick was that I wanted to stop being so affected by what other people thought of me. In the next two months, I found myself being very triggered by how a particular woman was treating to me. I had moved on from the place where we did the fire ritual, to an ashram with over 20,000 people, where one woman kept showing up and chastising me out of the blue. It was uncanny! I felt hurt, and became very upset, defensive and angry. Then one day it hit me that this woman with her penchant for admonishing me was **exactly** what I had asked for when I threw that stick in the fire 2 months before! I smiled and my heart opened. I felt grateful to God AND to the woman, who of course is one facet of God. After that internal shift happened, she never scolded me again.

That was a major breakthrough, but I can see that that stick that I “sacrificed” in the fire is still working. It is still burning my oversensitivity to criticism out of me. It is still teaching me not to be affected so deeply by what people think of me. We all care what some people think of us some of the time, as well we should. It’s a matter of degree.

Being a congregational rabbi has been a wonderful opportunity for me to keep working on this unhealthy, painful pattern in my life. As I stand before you today, I am sincerely thankful to all of you who have been critical of my decisions and my style since I arrived here in August of 2004, because you have all helped me work on this core issue.

What are your core issues? The patterns you most want to change in yourself? Your most persistent and damaging “sins” – or, as I prefer to think of it -- ways of missing the mark? The lesson you have had to keep learning?

If you could throw one stick into the proverbial fire, what would it be?

The High Holidays, with hours spent in prayer and reflection in synagogue; the process of *cheshbon hanefesh* – spiritual accounting – that ideally begins on the 1st of Elul, one month before Rosh Hashanah; the piercing blasts of the Shofar; the *tashlich* ritual; the requirement to do *teshuvah* – to change our ways, ask forgiveness, make amends, and forgive others; today’s fast; the repetition of the litany of “*al chets*” – it’s all a brilliant, precious, sacred opportunity for us to transform unhealthy patterns. It’s all a precious opportunity for us to open our hearts -- to God, to ourselves, and to one another.

The ancient biblical Yom Kippur ritual with the bull and the 2 goats effected atonement for our ancestors.

May all of the ritual, prayer (*tefillah*), *tzedakah* and *teshuvah* work we have engaged in over the past 10-40 days, and the fasting and praying we will continue to do until 7:00 tonight, effect atonement – “at-one-ment” -- for all of us.

May the combination of our efforts and God’s grace and love bring us lightness, purity, wholeness and peace, and may we

carry this with us into joyful community celebrations of Sukkot and Simchat Torah over the next two weeks.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah