

This year, our Torah reading is the **story** of the Yom Kippur ritual, as our ancestors recorded it in Leviticus chapter 16. This story – which Julie and Rondi introduced so beautifully last night – can be found in your handouts. It’s an extraordinary story with sacrifice and blood, with aromas and ritual washings and enrobing in linen. It’s a story of two identical goats with different fates; of a single high priest enacting some sort of ritual of atonement in an extraordinarily specific place, time, and manner, on behalf of the entire Israelite community.

Our rabbinic ancestors, after the Temple was destroyed **2000 years** ago, designated this story (Mishna Megilla 4:5) as the Torah reading for Yom Kippur. In subsequent centuries, more rabbis elaborated on the ritual and made the verbal recitation the actual act of atonement. In 1894, our Reform ancestors took it out of the Union Prayer Book and replaced it with now familiar “*Atem n’tzavim* – all of you standing here today, this is not beyond you, choose life!” The leaders of that time made a bold move which made a lot of sense: we don’t have animal sacrifice, we don’t worship at a centralized Temple; the message of modernity was of personal responsibility.

Yet stories – like dreams, rich in metaphor – speak directly to our souls in ways that literal expositions never can. Stories can feed us metaphoric missing pieces of what we neglect in our journeys toward wholeness. Stories speak to the soul, in the land of imagination and on the threshold of consciousness. So we return to this story today with humility, with curiosity.

We begin with a reminder of the death of Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu, who were killed by God in the process of making an offering and they died. God says to Moses, tell Aaron not to come make an offering at any time or in any way, but in the way I-God am about to spell out. Aaron is given very specific instructions – via Moses – on how to make offerings and not die (literally) – because the presence of YHVH will appear in the cloud over the cover of the ark. Aaron must bring a bull from his household, and a ram and two identical male goats from the community. He is to stand these two goats in front of God’s presence at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and cast lots – like at Purim; like in the story of Jonah – one goat is designated for God “l’Adonai” and one goat is for Azazel “l’Azazel”. Then several steps must be followed meticulously, including bathing, enrobing in linen, offering incense to block the view of God’s presence, bathing again, sacrificing a bull to “make expiation” on behalf of himself and his household, cleansing the altar. Then Aaron is to slaughter the goat that is designated “l’Adonai,” and sprinkle its blood seven times with his finger. When this is all done, Aaron turns to the other goat, the one designated for Azazel. “Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man. Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to a region that is cut off, and sent off to the wilderness.” (Lev 16:21-22)

So essentially, Aaron makes a *Vidui* – a confession on behalf of the entire community onto the head of a goat; then the goat is sent away to Azazel, in the wilderness, with an escort. The story concludes with more ritual cleansings; then the part that made it into this machzor follows: “This shall be to you a law for all time: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self-denial...” Once a year, today, everyone in the community is to

afflict themselves on Yom *hakippurim*, and the *kohen gadol*, the high priest, is to effect atonement on behalf of the community.

As I mentioned, the story of Yom Kippur is in your programs, and not in our machzor. It felt important to bring it to the community this year, because it asks contemporary questions: What is atonement? What does it mean to atone individually and as a community? How has this idea of a scapegoat been helpful and harmful? Can our transgressions really be sent away? What is the role of a leader in “effecting atonement on behalf of the community”? How might this story lead us to wholeness?

It would be amazing to all of us if I could answer all of those questions – but the story utterly defies explanation. So let me share some background and some reflections:

The book of Leviticus spells out a complex system of laws, to be managed by the Levites – the priests. The goal is to keep God’s presence amidst the people. There’s this idea of *tamei* – a state of impurity – and *tahor* – our natural state of purity, which gets covered over through the ordinary activities of being human. *Tamei* (impure, contaminated) and *tahor* (pure) get translated as unclean and clean. But it’s spiritual cleanliness, completely affected by physical behavior. Specifically proscribed, physical, ritual acts such as time outside the camp, bathing, and offerings restore this ritual purity, enabling God’s presence to dwell in our midst – which means, to me, that we are individually and communally in the proper flow of life.

Turns out there’s a Hebrew verb that describes this sort of purification: *L’kaper*. As in Yom Kippur, the day of doing *that thing* that gets us collectively back to a state of purity so that God wants to hang out with us, i.e. so that we are in proper flow and relationship with life itself. The translations of *kaper* tend to lose us, when Aaron “shall effect purgation” or “effect atonement” or “make expiation.” When we look for how else the word is used in ancient Hebrew and other languages of the era, we see that *l’kaper* means ‘to purge or wipe away,’ suggesting that the blood sacrifice removes the stain of sins. In the Torah *l’kaper* is also used to mean ransom, as in saving the life of someone, redeeming them – which implies that there is something life-saving about this process of *kapparah*, atonement, ritual cleansing. So to effect *kappara* – *yom hakippurim* – we are somehow using mystical scrubbing bubbles to wipe away or cleanse the psycho-spiritual contamination, allowing the collective soul to shine through.

The rabbis of the first centuries post-Temple did something brilliant: they added the notion of *teshuvah* to Yom Kippur. The process of *teshuvah* requires us **as individuals** to bring awareness to what we’ve done wrong and how our behavior has done harm; apologize, make amends, and most importantly refrain from repeating the behavior given a similar situation.

Mishna Yoma (8:9) says:

One who says, "I will sin (*chet*), and then repent (do *teshuvah*), I will sin [again], and then repent," will not receive an opportunity to do *teshuvah*; one who says "I will sin, and Yom Kipur will wipe it away," Yom Kippur will not wipe it away. Yom Kippur atones for transgressions between a person and God, but for a transgression against one's neighbor, Yom Kipur cannot atone, until the person works it out with their neighbor.

So they added the personal responsibility toward our neighbor; but something – some sort of communal ritual purification, the part between the person and God – is still supposed to happen on Yom Kippur!

So let's turn back to the story for some insights.

This ritual of wiping clean on behalf of the community involves two main parts: the designated priest slaughtering one goat to YHVH, the Source of All Being, and smearing its blood with his fingers; and confession of communal transgressions – unspecified in the Torah – upon the head of a second identical goat – the scapegoat – and sending it away to Azazel.

But why a goat? And what is Azazel? Sa'ir means goat, demon, or satyr in Hebrew. Goats – smelly, constantly mating, dancing, mischievous – were the animals sacrificed to atone for people's animalistic sins. The goat in ancient pagan religions was connected to the feminine, to sensuous beauty, and to nature religions – as well as to erotic and aggressive instincts. Perhaps this story marks the beginning of our civilization's splitting off from its wholeness...relegating certain qualities to outside the community. This story is the origin of the scapegoat, a word that came to be used for a person, animal or object to which the impurity or guilt of a community was formally transferred and then removed from that community.

The goat carrying all the community's transgressions is sent to Azazel. The name Azazel in pre-Israelite time referred to a Canaanite goat god. But our Hebrew ancestors could never be sending a sacrifice to another God. So it's also translated as a "jagged mountain," or simply a place that is "really away." The apocryphal book of Enoch describes Azazel as a former angel of God, who was cast out of heaven for teaching women to make cosmetics and men to make weapons. Contemporary Leviticus scholar Baruch Levine suggests our ancestors were giving back to Azazel what rightly belonged in his domain, not the domain of YHVH.

Some have also linked Azazel with a midrashic angel, much like Satan in the book of Job, whose name was Azazel. He and his pal Shamhazai challenged God: Why are You so patient and forgiving with these people who always let you down? God replies, "If you lived in the world, the impulse to evil would gain mastery over you, and you would be more stubborn than the children of men. (Ginsberg, p. 26) It's not easy being human. Do you want to try?" So Azazel went down, "immediately misbehaved with the daughters of men" and his punishment was to live far from civilization for eternity.

Modern Jungian Sylvia Brinton Perera, in a book called "The Scapegoat Complex" cites this midrash, saying:

Azazel came then to stand, psychologically, for the arrogantly pure condemning, supercritical judge who would hold [hu]men to a standard of behavior he cannot live by himself... His is a standard that takes no account of the facts of life and the embeddedness of humans in nature. It implies that, by arrogance and will alone, one can withstand the tests of life...

[Azazel] represents divine Justice separated from divine Mercy, what Gershom Scholem, writing on the Kaballah, calls 'the radically evil.' He represents the evil of a demonic one-sidedness and splitting, of being swept away by a single pattern of behavior." (p. 20)

Perera here is articulating the dangers of disowning our dark sides. It relates to what Rabbi Lekach-Rosenberg talked about on Rosh Hashanah – how someone so filled with light – like Shlomo Carlebach, like so many priests, rabbis, yogis, and moguls – that we know of, can behave so badly. When we only identify with the good in ourselves, and psychically place what

we're afraid of in ourselves onto others, we become brittle – and more susceptible to acting out.

This whole premise of Yom Kippur, then and now, is that we humans have both impulses and behaviors that we are ashamed of – and that can be harmful toward cooperative living in society. The ritual of conscious confession and sending away – back to where it came from or to nature, the wilderness, provided our ancestors with a vital way to stay in community with all their humanity. Our biblical ancestors came together, unified around an appointed leader, and witnessed a very dramatic sensory experience where something really happened. Today, we unconsciously lay the burden of gunk we don't want to deal with or take responsibility for outside of ourselves – on others.

And we enact this splitting as a society, to our enormous detriment. Most of us in this room and our loved ones have received the scapegoat projection at some point – whether for being a Jew or a woman, for being not-white, gay, lesbian, gender-fluid; for experiencing disabilities, poverty, homelessness or mental illness. This scapegoat projection also gets placed on the “black sheep” of a family – which means that that person doesn't conform to their family's norms – whatever they may be. (*Please see post-script!*) We have been judged as less-than, by ourselves and others, sent to Azazel.

Most of us in this room and our loved ones have also been overly identified with L'Adonai: We've made moralistic judgments, holding ourselves and others up to collective virtues at the cost of our actual embodied life.

For this next section, I'd like to share with you an extensive quote from psychologist David Richo:

“The Shadow is the archetype of the unconscious that represents the feared, denied, unaddressed, forbidden, and excluded parts of ourselves. Joseph Campbell calls the Shadow ‘the inconvenient or resisted psychic powers that we have not dared to integrate.’ We project these powers (characteristics) onto others ... and react strongly to them.

“**The negative Shadow** is composed of our own unacceptable and disowned defects that we strongly condemn in others. What we are unconscious of in ourselves, we become emphatically conscious of in others.

“**The positive Shadow** is composed of the good qualities hidden in us that we strongly admire or envy in others. We consciously respect in them what we inwardly disavow in ourselves. ‘in every work of genius, we can recognize our own rejected thoughts. They come back to us with a certain alienated majesty’ (Emerson).

“The Shadow turns some of our ‘I’ (what is really ourselves) into ‘It’ (which seems to exist only in others). Befriending the Shadow means restoring our ‘I’ to its wholeness by taking back – recollecting – all our projected, banished parts.

“What we exclude and disown becomes larger than life. It turns on us and scares us. We are then hurt by an un-lived part of our very selves. To recollect or integrate our projections is to acknowledge them and let them back in. Then we contain all the parts of ourselves. This is the meaning of ... healing: acknowledging what we have denied and restoring the full complement of our own powers.” (pp. 93-94)

Bringing light (consciousness) to our shadows (by definition unconscious) is **really** hard work, and important work, and it's part of the work of Yom Kippur. (A good therapist can be essential!) This ancient Yom Kippur ritual of atonement is a deeply archetypal story which points us to **sacrifices** that need to be made **in our belief systems**.

We **must** reclaim our wholeness, starting at the individual level. It's time – for the sake of Creation, for the earth and all her inhabitants. There is no “us and them.” We are all in this life together.

If you're like me, this exploration has raised many more questions than it has answered. Returning to Mishna Yoma: when we do our inter-personal *teshuvah*, **Yom Kippur atones for sins between ourselves and God**. We all have our own relationship with God or our highest best self.

So this Yom Kippur, let's allow into the light more of what we haven't seen in ourselves. Let's take our conscious and unconscious expectations and beliefs about our own purity of motivation, our need to be seen by ourselves and others as all good – and sacrifice those beliefs in the temple. Let's also take those false beliefs we have of being unlovable, unworthy, failures, and put those beliefs on a goat and send it away. That would free us to be in real relationship with what is unfolding in this moment. That's atoning. That's choosing life.

My prayer for all of us is that we may wipe away our illusions and false beliefs, consciously sacrifice the beliefs and behaviors that no longer serve. Give them back to their source; make room in ourselves for new life, what wants to come through and manifest through each one of us. *G'mar chatima tova*.

Postscript:

When I was speaking of the various groups of people who have received the scapegoat projections, I said “or the black sheep of a ‘perfectly good family.’” I realized afterward that I was careless with my words by adding that phrase without explaining that “perfectly good” was in quotes. I may have implied that all the scapegoated groups of people I had just named were not perfectly good. I have been examining my internalized biases since realizing what I said. For the fact that I said it, I am deeply sorry. In my conscious/rational mind, the phrase was signaling the capricious norms that tend to be established in most families and systems. The child who doesn't conform to these norms can feel aberrant, set apart, or tabooed.

The irony is not lost on me – that I stepped right into the heart of the atonement we're working so hard on as a community, while sermonizing about our shadows, the unconscious unowned aspects of ourselves, and atonement, in the heart of the Day of Atonement.

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The translation of Leviticus 16 printed in the programs was an amalgam of the JPS, Everett Fox, and my own translations.