The Scapegoat

The strangest element of the service on Yom Kippur, set out in Acharei Mot (Lev. 16: 7-22), was the ritual of the two goats, one offered as a sacrifice, the other sent away into the desert “to Azazel.” They were brought before the High Priest, to all intents and purposes indistinguishable from one another: they were chosen to be as similar as possible to one another in size and appearance. Lots were drawn, one bearing the words “To the Lord,” the other, “To Azazel.” The one on which the lot “To the Lord” fell was offered as a sacrifice. Over the other the high priest confessed the sins of the nation and it was then taken away into the desert hills outside Jerusalem where it plunged to its death. Tradition tells us that a red thread would be attached to its horns, half of which was removed before the animal was sent away. If the rite had been effective, the red thread would turn to white.

Sin and guilt offerings were common in ancient Israel, but this ceremony was unique. Normally confession was made over the animal to be offered as a sacrifice. In this case confession was made over the goat not offered as a sacrifice. Why the division of the offering into two? Why two identical animals whose fate, so different, was decided by the drawing of a lot? And who or what was Azazel?

The word Azazel appears nowhere else in Scripture, and three major theories emerged as to its meaning. According to the sages and Rashi it meant “a steep, rocky or hard place,” in other words a description of its destination. According to Ibn Ezra (cryptically) and Nahmanides (explicitly), Azazel was the name of a spirit or demon, one of the fallen angels referred to in Genesis 6:2, similar to the goat-spirit called Pan in Greek mythology, Faunus in Latin. The third interpretation is that the word simply means “the goat [ez] that was sent away [azal].” Hence the English word “(e)scapegoat” coined by William Tyndale in his 1530 English translation of the Bible.

Maimonides offers the most compelling explanation, that the ritual was intended as a symbolic drama: “There is no doubt that sins cannot be carried like a burden, and taken off the shoulder of one being to be laid on that of another being. But these ceremonies are of a symbolic character, and serve to impress men with a certain idea, and to induce them to repent; as if to say, we have freed ourselves...”
of our previous deeds, have cast them behind our backs, and removed them from us as far as possible” (Guide for the Perplexed, III:46). This makes sense, but the question remains. Why was this ritual different from all other sin or guilt offerings? Why two goats rather than one?

The simplest answer is that the High Priest’s service on Yom Kippur was intended to achieve something other and more than ordinary sacrifices occasioned by sin. The Torah specifies two objectives, not one: “On this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins” (Lev. 16: 30). Normally all that was aimed at was atonement, kapparah. On Yom Kippur something else was aimed at: cleansing, purification, teharah. Atonement is for acts. Purification is for persons. Sins leave stains on the character of those who commit them, and these need to be cleansed before we can undergo catharsis and begin anew.

Sin defiles. King David felt stained after his adultery with Batsheva: “Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity and cleanse me of my sin” (Psalm 51: 4). Shakespeare has Macbeth say, after his crime, “Will these hands ne’er be clean?” The ceremony closest to the rite of the scapegoat – where an animal was let loose rather than sacrificed – was the ritual for someone who was being cleansed of a skin disease:

If they have been healed of their defiling skin disease, the priest shall order that two live clean birds and some cedar wood, scarlet yarn and hyssop be brought for the person to be cleansed. Then the priest shall order that one of the birds be killed over fresh water in a clay pot. He is then to take the live bird ... And he is to release the live bird in the open fields. (Lev. 14: 4-7)

The released bird, like the scapegoat, was sent away carrying the impurity, the stain. Clearly this is psychological. A moral stain is not something physical. It exists in the mind, the emotions, the soul. It is hard to rid oneself of the feeling of defilement when you have committed a wrong, even when you know it has been forgiven. Some symbolic action seems necessary. The survival of such rites as Tashlikh, the “casting away” of sins on Rosh Hashanah, and Kapparot, “expiations” on the eve of Yom Kippur – the first involving crumbs, the second a live chicken – is evidence of this. Both practices were criticized by leading halakhic authorities yet both survived for the reason Maimonides gives. It is easier to feel that defilement has gone if we have had some visible representation of its departure. We feel cleansed once we see it go somewhere, carried by something. This may not be rational, but then neither are we, much of the time.

That is the simplest explanation. The sacrificed goat represented kapparah, atonement. The goat sent away symbolised teharah, cleansing of the moral stain. But perhaps there is something more, and more fundamental, to the symbolism of the two goats.

The birth of monotheism changed the way people viewed the world. In polytheism, the elements, each of which is a different god with a different personality, clash. In monotheism, all tension – between justice and mercy, retribution and forgiveness – is located within the mind of the One God. The sages often dramatised this, in Midrash, as a dialogue between the Attribute of Justice [middat ha-din] and the Attribute of Compassion [middat rachamim]. With this single shift, external conflict

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between two separate forces is reconceptualised as internal, psychological conflict between two moral attributes.

This led to a reframing of the human situation. Jack Miles says something profoundly interesting about the difference between Greek and Shakespearian tragedy:

The classic Greek tragedies are all versions of the same tragedy. All present the human condition as a contest between the personal and the impersonal with the impersonal inevitably victorious . . . Hamlet is another kind of tragedy . . . The contest is unlike that between doomed, noble Oedipus and an iron chain of events. It is, instead, a conflict within Hamlet’s own character between ‘the native hue of resolution’ and ‘the pale cast of thought’.

Monotheism relocates conflict from ‘out there’ to ‘in here’, transferring it from an objective fact about the world to an internal contest within the mind. This flows from our belief in God but it changes our view of the soul, the self, the human personality. It is no coincidence that the struggle between Jacob and Esau, which begins in the womb and brings their relationship to the brink of violence, is resolved only when Jacob wrestles alone at night with an unnamed adversary – according to some commentators, a portrayal of inner, psychological struggle. The next day, Jacob and Esau meet after a twenty-two year separation, and instead of fighting, they embrace and part as friends. If we can wrestle with ourselves, the Bible seems to suggest, we need not fight as enemies. Conflict, internalized, can be resolved.

In most cultures, the moral life is fraught with the danger of denial of responsibility. “It wasn’t me. Or if it was, I didn’t mean it. Or I had no choice.” That, in part, is what the story of Adam and Eve is about. Confronted by their guilt, the man blames the woman, the woman blames the serpent. Sin plus denial of responsibility leads to paradise lost.

The supreme expression of the opposite, the ethic of responsibility, is the act of confession. “It was me, and I offer no excuses, merely admission, remorse, and a determination to change.” That in essence is what the High Priest did on behalf of the whole nation, and what we now do as individuals and communities, on Yom Kippur.

Perhaps then the significance of the two goats, identical in appearance yet opposite in fate, is simply this, that they are both us. The Yom Kippur ritual dramatised the fact that we have within us two inclinations, one good (yetser tov), one bad (yetser hara). We have two minds, one emotional, one rational, said Daniel Goleman in Emotional Intelligence. Most recently Daniel Kahneman has shown how the same duality affects decision-making in Thinking, Fast and Slow. It is the oldest and newest duality of all.
The two goats – the two systems, the amygdala and prefrontal cortex – are both us. One we offer to God. But the other we disown. We let it go into the wilderness where it belongs and where it will meet a violent death. Ez azal: the goat has gone. We have relinquished the yetser hara, the instinct-driven impetuosity that leads to wrong. We do not deny our sins. We confess them. We own them. Then we let go of them. Let our sins, that might have led us into exile, be exiled. Let the wilderness reclaim the wild. Let us strive to stay close to God.

Monotheism created a new depth of human self-understanding. We have within us both good and evil. Instinct leads to evil, but we can conquer evil, as God told Cain: “Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you can master it” (Gen. 4: 6). We can face our faults because God forgives, but God only forgives when we face our faults. That involves confession, which in turn bespeaks the duality of our nature, for if we were only evil we would not confess, and if we were wholly good we would have nothing to confess. The duality of our nature is symbolized by the two identical goats with opposite fates: a vivid visual display of the nature of the moral life.

Hence a supreme irony: the scapegoat of Acharei Mot is the precise opposite of the scapegoat as generally known. “Scapegoating,” as we use the word today, means blaming someone else for our troubles. The scapegoat of Yom Kippur existed so that this kind of blame would never find a home in Jewish life. We do not blame others for our fate. We accept responsibility. We say mipnei chata-enu, “because of our sins.”

Those who blame others, defining themselves as victims, are destined to remain victims. Those who accept responsibility transform the world, because they have learned to transform themselves.

Shabbat Shalom

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