

Parashat Acharei Mot

The Symbolism of the Scapegoat

The strangest element of the Yom Kippur service, as set forth at the beginning of *Parashat Acharei Mot*, is the ritual of the scapegoat. Two identical goats are chosen, and lots are drawn—one is to be offered as a sacrifice, and the other one is sent “to Azazel” in the wilderness. It was led over a cliff where it, together with the sins of the Jewish people, was torn to pieces as it tumbled down.

The Talmud provides a list of mitzvot that Satan belittles and tries to get the Jewish people to cease observing or abandon altogether. These consist of those mitzvot whose rationales are not immediately evident or belong to the plane of Kabbalah: the negative commandments about eating pork and wearing wool and linen together, and the positive ones of *chalitzah* (removing the shoe to reject levirate marriage) and the scapegoat. Affirming that one must observe these without knowing the divine calculations behind them, God declares: “I have decreed it and you have no right to question it.”¹

The fact that these mitzvot belong to the set called *chukim*, whose reasoning is opaque, has not deterred great minds from trying to pierce the veil. In the case of the scapegoat, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik was determined to find meaning in this centerpiece of the holiest day of the year. Even though the actual ritual is no longer performed, we continue to recite a poetic version of the sacrificial rite in the Mussaf prayer, so its relevance must endure. The Rav unpacked the meaning of three essential aspects of the ritual.

Fate Makes All the Difference

While physically indistinguishable on the basis of size or age, the two male goats could not have had more different fates. Pure chance alone, completely out of the animal’s control, decided which would be “for God” and which “for Azazel” (Leviticus 16:8). This, the Rav argued, is how the penitent can petition for forgiveness and claim that he or she is not guilty. Like the goats, one can claim that they have been compelled to sin by outside forces rather than out of their own free will.

In truth, so much of our life seems the product of chance, of actors and circumstances beyond our control. We do not choose our parents, siblings, or children. The formative culture in whose orbit we are raised is inescapable. Character traits are the clear expression of genes passed down to us. Hormonal imbalances can give rise to certain states of mind and drive us to act uncharacteristically. In this way, much of life is like a lottery, and sometimes we draw losing numbers.

The penitent therefore draws God’s attention to the blurring between what is within the realm of free choice and what should be chalked up to mitigating circumstances. God alone can evaluate the degree of our culpability. In this way, the rite of the scapegoat is “a psychodramatic representation of the penitent’s state of mind and his emotional need.”²

¹ *Yoma* 67b.

² Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, 46–47.

While the Rav's approach does not excuse a sinner from his transgressions, it does offer hope for understanding and forgiveness, on the one hand, and the opportunity to improve, on the other.

From Satan to God

The Torah instructs us to cast one lot "for Azazel" and then send the goat "to Azazel" in the wilderness. Who or what is Azazel? According to the Ramban, "Azazel" is what the Midrash and Kabbalah refer to as "Samael," roughly the equivalent of Satan. "And we give Samael a bribe on the Day of Atonement" is how the Ramban phrases it. But how does a sacrifice to Azazel not fall afoul of idol worship?

The Rav laid the emphasis on the fact that it is God's will that we do so: "it was not intended that the scapegoat offering be sacrificed by us to Satan, God forbid, but that when making it, our intention is nothing else but to carry out our Creator's will as He commanded us."³ The Torah never instructs us to bring Satan a sacrifice per se. Both sacrifices are sanctified for God and God alone. It is God who tells us what to do with both of them.

Still, why does God direct a sacrifice to the realm of Satan, and why is it integral to the effecting of atonement?

Go and see the feelings of sorrow, of disappointment, of frustration and of distress that man endures... for the sake of petty human cupidity, financial covetousness and the craving for honors. [...]

This terrible feeling of alienation and loneliness usually overcomes man due to an excessive pursuit of futile vanities.⁴

The Rav writes that in our transgressive pursuits we endure a great deal of self-inflicted suffering. It is the bitter fruit of our sinful intent and iniquitous action. On Yom Kippur, God accepts these painful emotions as though they were suffered out of devotion to God: "It is seen as offering to the Almighty and not, as it was in truth, an offering to Satan."⁵ Through this ritual, then, "the Almighty revealed the great mystery of the quality of mercy which is operative on the Day of Atonement."⁶

To summarize: "The scapegoat symbolizes man who suffers because of his own failures. If he feels remorse and has second thoughts of repentance because of them, these failures are then regarded as a sacrifice offered up to God."⁷

An Uncontrollable Descent

The underlying principle behind *teshuvah* (repentance) is that the human being has been granted free will. In his laws on repentance, the Rambam formulated this notion beautifully:

³ Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 294–295.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 298–299.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 300–301.

“Free will is granted to every man. If he wishes to incline himself to the path of good and be righteous the choice is his; and if he wishes to incline himself to the path of evil and be wicked the choice is his.”⁸

Inanimate things are by definition passive objects, acted upon by outside forces and obeying precise physical laws. Roll a ball off a table and witness the laws of motion and gravity in action. Free will, however, allows man to be a subject, an actor. Sin occurs, said the Rav, when man becomes an object.

The simplest verbs which denote the dichotomy between a subject and an object are those of ascent and descent, respectively. Ascent involves an act of overcoming the force of gravity, while descent involves succumbing to this force. If a person loses his dynamic, subjective existence and cannot counteract various forces which tend to pull him downward, he is acting as a simple object.⁹

The Rav suggested that this is the symbol of the scapegoat. The Mishnah describes graphically the scapegoat ritual: “He pushed it backward and it rolled down. It was dismembered before reaching halfway down the mountain.”¹⁰ This is an accurate description of what sin can do to a person: “Even before his total descent he is broken apart, an abject victim of gravity.”¹¹

Exploring the Rav's Insight

Yaakov offered a blessing to his grandchildren, and to all his future descendants, before leaving the world: “may they be as numerous as fish (וַיְדַגּוּ לְרַב)” (Genesis 48:16). The most common understanding is that the Jewish people should proliferate prodigiously. A different reading could be “may they be as great as fish,” for healthy fish swim against the tide. Rav Kook expressed the idea that the fish lives in its own world under the sea, uninfluenced by the events and atmosphere outside of its sphere.¹² This blessing was most appropriate for the descendants of Yosef because he himself exemplified the trait of resolutely retaining his faith and making his own way in a foreign, debased society. Instead of being objects of fate, let us be agents of our own destiny.

⁸ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah*, 5:1.

⁹ Soloveitchik, *Before Hashem*, 31–32.

¹⁰ Mishnah, *Yoma*, 6:6.

¹¹ Soloveitchik, *Before Hashem*, 32.

¹² *Ein Ayah, Berachot*, 9:62. See further *Parashat Vayechi*, “The Scaly Armor of Fish.”