

# A TALE OF TWO GOATS

By Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

On Yom Kippur we read in the Torah a tale . . . not of two cities, but of two goats: One, a goat for God, which dies in the Sanctuary. And the other, a goat for something called *azazel*, sometimes referred to as the scapegoat, since Aaron, the high priest, confesses the sins of Israel over its head.

One goat dies and one lives, although in every other way, they are identical—the same in appearance, height, weight, coloring, etc. Both are picked at the same time. Both are to atone for the community. And then the live goat, the so-called scapegoat, is set free.

Now a scapegoat, of course, is someone or something that is made to bear the blame for others. But how can a goat possibly be blamed for something that a human being does?

Much of our answer to this question comes from the commentary of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888).

Some people actually think that this free goat is sent away to appease a demon by the name of Azazel who lives in the wilderness. But the word used in the Torah, *l'shalach* (לשלח), doesn't really mean sending *to*. In the Torah, this particular form of the verb usually means to send *away from*.

But send away from what?

Literally, it is to send away from the altar in the Sanctuary. But in the sanctuary, everything and every moment have meaning, what we could call a teaching moment. Our sanctuary, for example, is teaching us, at this moment: First, there is a vision for our lives in the Torah, an ideal that can make us holy. But this moment of Yom Kippur is also teaching us that it's not enough to think about the ideal. We also have to think about how far away we are from that ideal. And it's only by acting on both of these teachings at the very same time that we can reach the spiritual heights, which the altar is meant to symbolize. That is, grasping the ideal only has value when we use it as a yardstick with which to measure how far from it we really are. But also, being depressed over our actual shortcomings only serves God's purposes when it becomes the base on which we elevate ourselves up to that ideal. Yet even more important, our life inside this sanctuary, here and now, including all the rituals that are performed in it, only get their true meaning and value if they are realized in the rest of our life outside the sanctuary.

And that is also the case with the ritual of our two goats. Here we have a picture of two creatures, originally completely identical, that at the thresh-

old of the sanctuary part company and proceed on two entirely different paths. One dies as an offering and is gathered into the space that represents the ideal of a life based on Torah. And the other, the one for *azazel*, remains untouched. It does not die in the sanctuary. It is sent out, away from human habitation, out into the wilderness. And there, turning its back on the Sanctuary, it ends its life in desolation, carrying our sins on its head.

And yet, can we really believe that a goat could magically carry off our sins?

The word atonement or *kaparah* (כפרה) literally means a “covering over” or “burying” of the past. It is the highest act of the power of God, an act of interference with the natural laws of cause and effect. For the sake of *kaparah*, God can do away with these natural laws, because God is the one who created them in the first place.

And the point of *kaparah* is to make it possible for us to regain our moral freedom, our mastery over ourselves, which is dulled by every wrong that we commit. For every sin has a double effect, external and internal. Every sin makes us more liable to continue doing wrong. But God is not only the creator of the laws of nature; God is also the one who, out of love for us, is ready at any moment to allow a new and fresh future to begin. Whatever our past may have been, however and wherever we may have done wrong, before God we can and we are to rise with a new spirit and a new heart to a new future.

Of course, it doesn't happen by magic. We have to do our part. And the ironic thing about it is, that the more a bad past is to be buried by God, the more necessary it is that we keep that past clear in our own minds. That is the meaning of Jewish confession, *vidui* (וידוי), which is not a confession to another person, and not even to God, but rather to us—a confession that silences every excuse. For every true self-judgment includes self-knowledge, not only that we should have behaved otherwise, but that we could have behaved otherwise. It is only when we have the courage to look at our wrongdoings with God's eyes, only then will our resolutions for the future be realized.

And no goat, of course, has any ability to realize such a future. Obviously it is the priest that confesses over the goat, and not the goat over the priest. But to the extent that the two goats are identical, it is because they really symbolize only one personality—us. And to the extent that they wind up differently, that's because they represent two

different destinies—ours. For each of us has the power to be obstinate, the power to resist. In fact, Israel is said to have acquired the Torah partly because of that obstinacy.

The question is: What will we do with that power?

We could use it to attach ourselves to God. We could use it to resist all the things that lure us away from God's will. We could become like the goat that enters the sanctuary, that is, for God.

Does it mean that we have to die?

Literally, no, but in a way, yes. God does not desire that we die, but rather that we live, that is, truly live. And that means giving up a certain kind of life. A life of being mastered by our senses, or living our lives on the basis of what "feels" good. In any case it does not mean giving up our sensuality, but rather living it within certain boundaries.

On the other hand, we can turn the power of resistance that God has given us against God. We can give ourselves up without a fight to a life of the senses and all of its allurements. And this sinking into the power of our own senses is called *azazel*. For the simplest way of taking the meaning of this word is *az*, the character of obstinacy, which is *azal*, without a future—that which digs its own grave.

In the world of the non-human forces of nature, the creator has granted only one possible direction, from which the animals cannot turn aside. They obey their creator when they follow their senses. That is what the organic world is all about. It has no moral free will of its own. And if everything that is good in the eyes of God were sweet to us and everything bad were bitter, the laws of nature would work in us too just the way they do in all the other creatures.

But we have been given something different and higher. In fact, it's only when we practice this other, higher calling that we really are worthy of being called human beings. For God only breathed free will into one creature in the midst of the countless un-free ones. God has only said to one creature: be like Me! Be a god in miniature, in and over the little world that I have appointed for you. That refers to us, and the little world appointed to

each of us is our own body. Within our bodies, powerful urges and forces work in the same way as they do in the rest of the creation. But we have the power to master them. We have the spirit to understand God's will.

Of course, having free will means that we have the ability to choose wrongly. But without that ability we would not be human beings. Our whole height and dignity and worth lie just in our ability to do wrong. In the animal, vegetable or mineral world, there can be no sin, but just because of that, no morality either.

So just like the two goats, all of us are, without exception, placed at the entrance to God's sanctuary to decide between God and the power of our senses. Facing the Torah, we make the decision. We can decide for God; we can use all of our power to resist everything that would tear us away from God; we can decide to be like God, doing good of our own free will. Or we can decide for *azazel*; we can decide to live a life based on what "feels" good. And respected or not, big or small, rich or poor, today or tomorrow, in any state of life and at every time, each of us can be for God or for *azazel*.

The point is to make us holy and keep ourselves morally free. And to get ourselves back to that place, if we aren't there now.

So I leave you with this poem of mine. It's called: Dissatisfy My Heart.

Dissatisfy my heart  
For any goodness  
But Yours.  
Teach it to demand  
Your Presence  
In my every act.  
And if I should  
Go away from You,  
Oh God,  
Turn back my heart  
Teach it to expect  
Only You  
To arrive  
In my every  
Moment.

Click [here](#) for more congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of Gather the People with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here](#)!