

Of Goats and Scapegoats

Jody Myers

Two mountains are central to Jewish tradition: Jerusalem and Sinai. In *Sinai and Zion*, Jon Levenson points out that each mountain is connected with a different physical sense. Sinai is associated with hearing. At Sinai we heard the sound of the shofar and then the sound of God's words, the sound of the Jewish people saying *na'aseh ve-nishmah*, "we will do and we will listen." Sinai is not a mountain significant for its appearance; its location is never disclosed. When Elijah the prophet in 1 Kings 19 makes a pilgrimage to Sinai, he doesn't find God in signs and wonders, but in a still, small voice. If we want to return to Sinai, we do it by listening, once again, to God's commands.

Jerusalem, or, more precisely, *har tziyon*, is associated with the sense of sight. Long before the Temple, Abraham looks up and sees the mountain upon which he will sacrifice Isaac. Isaac sees all the equipment but not the lamb for sacrifice, and finally, Abraham sees the ram and offers it in place of his son. Abraham names that place *Adonai yireh*, God sees, and Genesis 22 verse 14 tells us that this explains the common expression *b'har Adonai yeira-eh*, he is seen on the mountain, or on God's mountain there is vision. The Temple was the visual representation of God's presence on earth. We have descriptions of its height and breadth, the colors of the Temple's fabrics, images of the clouds of incense and the smoke of its sacrifices rising up to Heaven.

The Rosh Hashanah Torah and haftarah readings are all about seeing. The binding of Isaac is read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. The first day's reading, the story of Sarah and Hagar, is full of references to the sense of sight. Sarah sees Ishmael sporting and banishes him and his mother; Hagar cannot bear to see the death of her boy, and then she sees the well. In the haftarah, the priest Eli watching Hannah pray sets off a series of events that leads to her son serving at Shiloh, another visible house of God.

The binding of Isaac is read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. In the haftarah, Jeremiah prophecies that the day will come when the watchmen on Mount Ephraim will call all the tribes together to go up to Zion, the mountain of seeing.

Now, you may say, "The sense of sight is quite common, and the appearance of words for seeing are likely to turn up in such a long service." But you won't find any such words in the Yom Kippur Torah reading. Although the ceremony was quite a spectacle, only Aaron saw it. The text avoids any reference to the act of seeing.

For the atonement ritual, Aaron stations two he-goats near the altar. One he-goat, designated as the sin-offering, is dealt with like a normal sin offering and sacrificed to God as an expiation. The second he-goat is also a sin offering, but a most unusual kind: it is left alive, not sacrificed. Upon it Aaron confesses the sins of all Israel and sends it off *la-azazel ha-midbarah*, to the wilderness for Azazel.

What is Azazel? The word appears nowhere else in the entire Bible and has always eluded precise definition. According to Baruch Levine, author of *The JPS Torah Commentary* on Leviticus, three interpretive approaches have developed over the centuries. The first regards Azazel as a place in the wilderness. The *'ayin zayin* in the place name refers to the word *'azz* meaning strong and fierce. The Talmud, in Yoma 67B, records this opinion, explaining that the place had a fierce, difficult terrain. The second line of interpretation understands the phrase to refer to the goat. These commentators regard the word *'azazel* as a contraction of the two words *'ez azal*, a goat goes away, or—in the words of Mishnah Yoma chapter 6, a goat that is dispatched. The 16th century English translation of the Bible accepts this interpretation, and translates it as a goat escapes, "escape goat." Just what does it escape? It escapes certain death at the altar! It escapes Jerusalem! Paradoxically, even though that goat escapes, it is *not* considered the luckier or more blessed of the two; scapegoats exist as repositories for our sins. They are like animals who indiscriminately eat all our garbage, and then suffer our reproach for their cleansing function.

The third interpretation regards Azazel as a contraction of *'ez el*, a goat god, a goat-like demon ruler of the wilderness. Isaiah and later Hellenistic Jewish writers preserved myths of a class of riotous, lascivious, lecherous goat-like beings who hang out in the wilderness. What's *that* doing in our atonement ceremony?! According to Maimonides, the Yom Kippur ritual was

designed to undermine the remnants of pagan beliefs among the Israelites. Sending the goat to Azazel was a way of opposing the belief in such demons; it transformed the sacrificial worship of the demon into a ceremony that, at the command of God, subjugated the sinful and evil forces represented by such demons. Some modern Bible scholars expand on this to show that the ritual was a sort of good magic to counteract bad magic. They maintain that when the he-goat returned to the wilderness, a boomerang effect was produced: Evil returned to its point of departure, to the wilderness. According to Levine, however, the biblical priests did not believe in demons; the reference to the goat demon was a symbolic usage, and the priests were employing the discarded myths for its dramatic effect in promoting belief in one, incorporeal God who allows us to expiate our sins.

I found a thoughtful contemporary interpretation by Naama Kelman. In her essay "Journey into the Wilderness," in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days*, she identifies the goat as a symbol of our "work in progress." She writes:

While all the other animals are sacrificed, this goat carries our sins to a mysterious destiny with an even more mysterious end. Is this because our collective sins cannot be "killed"? They may be cast off, released to the wilds, sent away to secret destinations....We release our sins knowing full well that next year we will need to do the same. But with each passing year comes improvement, a deeper awareness of our frailties. We transfer our sins to the he-goat, yet we understand that we share this burden. (p. 237)

I would like to share another approach. Over the centuries, Jews have noticed the similarity between Yom Kippur and Pesach. Ridding ourselves of sins and grudges before Yom Kippur is like cleaning our houses of *hametz* before Pesach. Perry Dane, writing in the previous issue of *Kerem*, sees a hint of Yom Kippur in the *bitul hametz* ceremony. *Bitul hametz* is a ritual performed after we clean our houses before the seder in order to nullify any hametz that may still be in our possession. We pronounce a legal formula, that, like Kol Nidrei, is in Aramaic:

Any and all leaven within the precincts of my home, whether I have seen or not seen it, whether I am aware of it or not aware of it, whether I have searched it out and gathered it together or whether

I have not done so, shall be considered to be null and void and as public property, even as is the dust of the earth itself.

Similarly, Kol Nidrei is a public declaration nullifying something we possess. The Kol Nidrei formula announces:

*All personal vows we are likely to make...we publicly renounce.
Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established.*

But according to Dane, what we *really* mean to nullify is our sins. It is as if we are saying:

All sins in my possession, whether I have seen them or not, which I have not seen or removed, or of which I am unaware, are hereby nullified and ownerless, as the goat sent to Azazel.

In other words, the goat disappears, vanishes, as do our sins.

But much as I'd like my sins to vanish, I know they don't. And the goat sent to Azazel is still around at Pesach time. He shows up at the end of the seder in Ashkenazic homes: there is one little goat, the *had gadya* that my father bought for two *zuzim*. That hapless creature was the first in a chain of destruction, followed by the cat, the dog, the stick, the fire, the water, the ox, the butcher, the Angel of Death, until finally God, *ha-kadosh barukh hu*, reigns victorious over all. Who is that little goat? Jewish commentators have invested him with hidden allegorical meaning. The goat is a symbol of the Jewish people, oppressed by all but protected by God and rewarded at the end of time with messianic redemption.

This kinder, gentler, and Jewish goat appears as a motif in Yiddish folk music. In the lullaby called *Unter kinds vigele (Under the Child's Cradle)*, the mother soothes her baby with a description of a little golden goat who sits prettily nearby; in other versions, the goat is white and pure. In another lullaby, a mother sings to her sleepy child about the snow white kid who is sitting under his cradle. The little goat has been to market, she tells her baby, and when Yidele grows up he, too, will go to market and trade in raisins and almonds, *rozhinkes mit mandlen*. Yidele, the little Jew, is a goat, *had gadya*. Whether he or she will be grow up to be oppressed by more powerful forces, or whether he or she grows up to engage productively in the world—it's hard to predict, but our tradition has devised a way of improving the odds.

You see, the goat which is led away from the Temple and sent to Azazel—that goat doesn't vanish; there *is* a destination in the wilderness.

That goat goes to Sinai. It leaves Jerusalem, the mountain of visions, and heads for Sinai, the mountain of hearing. In order to expiate sins, it must go back to the source, to the mountain where we learned of our obligations to each other and to God. That goat is us, the Jewish people.

When we sit in the synagogue on Yom Kippur, trying to figure out our lives and improve our chances for happiness, the ritual tells us, "Stop focusing on the outer image of things, on appearances; stop focusing even on the sacrificial offerings atop the mountain. Keep your eyes on the goat that escaped. Go back to Sinai, listen to the word of God, listen to the lessons of our people, listen to your heart. Life is short—make sure you are paying attention to the essence of things."

And so the goat sets out for Sinai. Will it ever get there? Will our self-examination degenerate into a ceaseless trek over the same territory, or will it take dangerous turns and slide into self-indulgence or self-destruction? Our introspection will be productive only if we listen to the messages transmitted from Sinai. We can take comfort from the lesson of Sukkot that during our journey through the wilderness, in our temporary and fragile dwellings, we will be protected. We learn from Pesach how to remember our travails in exile and express gratitude for our victories. If we keep on the right path, by the time we arrive at Sinai on the holiday of Shavuot, the little goat will help us celebrate the receiving of the Torah by supplying us with milk and cheese for our dairy meals.

Once we absorb the teachings of Sinai, it is time to apply them—but elsewhere, because Sinai is not a mountain where people live. "Next year in Jerusalem!" we declare at the Pesach seder. But our journey to Jerusalem travels through Sinai. En route we may feel like the *had gadya*, attacked by oppressors; nonetheless, we must act like the goat for Azazel: 'azz—evince strong determination to hear things as they really are, 'ez azal—escape from the familiar trappings of our lives in order to improve and advance, and 'ez el—counteract the evil impulses from within and without.

Hashiveinu Adonai eilekha, return us to you, O God, *ve-nashuvah*, and then we will return, *hadesh yameinu k'kedem*, renewed, reborn, delivered.

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