

D'var Torah Yom Kippur 5777

Again, this year we read in the Torah about the ritual of the Two Goats. They are identical insofar as possible – twins. Which has which role is chosen by lots, by chance? One is designated for God and is sacrificed in the Temple; the other is designated for Azazel whatever that might be (a subject for another Yom Kippur). Aaron places all the iniquities and transgressions of the children of Israel on the goat for Azazel, and he, with this burden of iniquities and transgressions, is led into the wilderness.

And that is how our ancestors purged themselves of their annual accumulation of sins. Maimonides however had reservations: “There is no doubt that sins cannot be carried away like a burden, and taken off the shoulder of one being to be laid on that of another being.” This ritual is the origin of the word “scapegoat,” the person or thing we blame for our own failings. And we have many other rituals and ceremonies that supposedly clear our record and our name. Another obvious HHD ritual is “Tashlich.” We place our sins on bread crumbs of bread and toss them into the water, and the water carries them away.

We do have a number of external rituals designed to cleanse us of our shortcomings. Do they work? We fast; we repeatedly chant the list of sins. We apologize to one another. Are all of these just other ways to get rid of our guilt?

If the rituals are not effective, why do we do them? Why do we and generations before and after us still read about the goat for Azazel? Maimonides goes on to say, “But these ceremonies are of a symbolic nature, 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.”

So, we need to ask what exactly is the symbolic nature of the goat ceremony? Why is this Yom Kippur sacrifice different from all other sacrifices? Sacrifices are normally placed on the altar. Why is this one sent to the wilderness?

The wilderness is a place untouched by humans, rugged, dangerous, and uncharted – a place where it is difficult to keep your bearings, even your life. Conditions there are at best primitive; life is hard; not a place for justice, compassion or civilization. What governs there is the law of the jungle where only the most unscrupulous thrive. Not a place of mitzvot. A primitive place like the desert or jungle would indeed be a fitting destination for our sins.

None of us here starts every day thinking how can I be callous and insensitive—oblivious of others. How does it happen then? Neuroscience may contribute to our understanding of the defeat of our best intentions. With apologies to the neuroscientists in the congregation – Rhonda and Ken, for instance -- let me try out a little popular brain talk.

There is a part of our brain named the amygdala – a primitive part, found in many other species, further down the evolutionary chain than us, sometimes referred to as the reptilian brain. For us as well as many other animals, it does serve a vital function – an early warning system. We have all seen it at work: we're walking or running along and a bug flies into our eye, but somehow our eye shuts in time. Or, we're walking in the woods, and there is a rustle in the underbrush near us' we have already jumped aside before we are conscious of the danger. That is the work of the amygdala – a hypervigilance for danger that short-circuits other cognitive function.

When we react quickly and negatively to perceived offenses, that is also the amygdala, protecting us, whether we need it or not. When we get hurt and angry and seek revenge, those are hardwired defense mechanisms. How can we overcome them? Are we genetically doomed to react negatively? If so, what's the point of Yom Kippur, the fasting, confessing, and the shofar blasts, to say nothing of the goats?

Just as the wilderness can be cleared, cultivated – made to bloom, I believe that these primitive parts of our brain can also be cultivated and civilized. Victor Frankl, Holocaust survivor and psychologist wrote in his inspiring book, "Man's Search for Meaning," that between the stimulus and

the response, there is a moment, where our freedom lies. In that moment, we can choose to use more evolved parts of our mind to observe what is happening. We can pause briefly, we can breathe and then we can choose how to RESPOND. Or not to respond at all.

When our spouse or parent or child or friend says something we think offensive, designed to – sorry -- get our goat, we can pause and think again. We can breathe, step away figuratively and deliberately and re-view what just happened. We might see it differently or not. If we do see it differently, then obviously our response will be different and probably better; if we see no other way to take the comment, we have already turned our response into something other than an angry retort. We have a little more time and space to choose how we act. Do we escalate the conflict? Do we make a joke? Do we say nothing? Who knows? It all depends on the context and the relationship, but we are choosing to use more evolved, more rational parts of our brain; we are taming the wilderness within. We are choosing to engage our God given freedom.

Perhaps this will help us understand why the goat is exiled to the wilderness, where it belongs. After we take some time to re-view our shortcomings last year, and consider other ways we might have responded or acted, then can we send them back to the wilderness from which they came, where they belong, and we do not. And then like the other twin goat, we can rededicate ourselves to the service of man and God.