

# **INTRODUCTION TO THE YOM KIPPUR TORAH READING**

**KOL SHALOM**

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**The parasha from which this morning's Torah reading is taken is called "Akharei Mot," literally after death. The death referred to is that of Aaron's two sons who "drew too close" to the Divine Presence. Although the exact nature of their offense is never made clear, their death is to serve as a reminder that coming into the Divine Presence cannot be done heedlessly or casually.**

**God tells Moses to instruct Aaron regarding the requirements for entering the Holy Altar and for the service that is to be performed once a year, on the Day of Atonement. He is to cast aside elaborate priestly garments, immerse himself in a ritual bath, and clothe himself simply in white linen. He will confess and perform sacrifices in atonement for his own sins and those of his household and then make atonement for the whole community by taking two male goats to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and casting lots upon them, marking one as a sin offering for God, and one designated for "Azazel." The sins committed by the whole community will be laid upon the head of the living goat who will be led into the wilderness and abandoned there.**

**The reading ends with the commandment to observe for all time the 10<sup>th</sup> Day of the Seventh Month as a Sabbath of complete rest and self-denial, in expiation for the sins of Israel.**

**Perhaps the most problematic section of today's reading is the final sacrifice. Generally referred to in traditional literature as the sa'ir ha-mishtalei'ach (the "sent-away goat"), its meaning and efficacy have been the subject of much discussion and argument among Jewish sages. In his "Guide to the**

**Perplexed” Maimonides expressed doubt that the sins of a whole people can be transferred. “There is no doubt,” he wrote, “ 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.”<sup>1</sup>**

**If nothing else, the ritual of the sa’ir ha-mishtalei’ach allows us to acknowledge our sins, individual and collective, to cast them away and resolve not to repeat them, to allow ourselves to begin again, to try to “get it right” this time.**

**But perhaps we need another perspective: that the sins of the community must be acknowledged as the responsibility of the individual. Speaking more than half a century ago, at another time of intense moral crisis in our national life, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said that “Few are guilty but all are responsible.” Heschel wrote: “ If we admit that the individual is in some measure conditioned or affected by the spirit of society, an individual’s crime discloses society’s corruption. In a community not indifferent to suffering, uncompromisingly impatient with cruelty and falsehood, continually concerned for God and every man, crime would be infrequent rather than common.”<sup>2</sup>**

**The community Rabbi Heschel describes does not happen by accident. It is the result of reciprocal responsibility that begins with the individual, with the willingness to hold oneself responsible not only for our own acts, but for those performed in our name, to commit to Heschel’s moral imperative that “ there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings,” and to believe, as Heschel believed, that “ indifference to evil is worse than evil itself.”**

**We must be willing to become that person “ who holds God and man in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffers harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love... ”<sup>3</sup> This is the antithesis of allowing a scapegoat to carry off our sins.**

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<sup>1</sup> David Silverberg, *Parashat Acharei Mot*, Maimonides Heritage Center

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

The reference to an “escape goat” as one on whom the guilt of others is placed came into common English usage with translations of the Christian bible in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. It took on a darker meaning as the practice came to represent placing blame on “the other” for our misfortunes and shortcomings, allowing us the delusion that we are powerful and blameless. “Scapegoating” gives us permission to despise, to mistreat, to turn away, to experience what Heschel termed “the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason.” Unless we are willing to do the work of atonement and repentance, to accept personal culpability for injustice and cruelty carried out in our name, to demand of ourselves and of our community and of our leaders that we hold “God and man in one thought at one time,” we are lost.

In the course of the annual cycle of Torah reading, today’s parasha would be read in the spring, around the time of Pesach. The juxtaposition of the season of joy and liberation with the ritual of atonement is described by the liturgical poet Ruth Brin: <sup>4</sup>

“Perhaps the Torah speaks now in the spring  
of atonement, because we know so well  
our songs of joy carry with them  
the counterpoints of tragedy

Studying the ancient ways  
we shall seek atonement  
we shall seek unity with God  
whose holiness is beyond our logic and our imagination

You who are Lord of the deep rhythms of life  
of sun and rain, of sin and forgiveness  
You who are Master of the ultimate mysteries  
of Your holiness, of our tragedy and of our joy,

We thank You, Lord  
now and in the season of our repentance  
that You have taught us atonement  
and offered us forgiveness”

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<sup>4</sup> Ruth Brin: *Harvest: Collected Poems and Prayers*

