

D'var for Yom Kippur 5771

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By Shevach Lambert

Our Torah portion this morning, consisting of the sixteenth chapter of *Vayikrah*, Leviticus, describes a ceremony which at first blush seems antithetical to the very spirit of Judaism. At its heart is a tale of two identical goats, which are brought before the Kohen Gadohl and lots are drawn. One goat is designated 'for HaShem,' and the other 'for Azazel' – the hard place, or as some see it, the source of evil. The high priest would confess the wrongdoings of the people Israel, and symbolically place all these sins on the goat destined for Azazel and let it carry them into oblivion. The idea of sin-transference, or vicarious atonement, runs counter to our ethos of individual and communal responsibility, especially when it involves an innocent animal. We don't gain absolution by proxy – that's a different tradition.

A clearer understanding of just what Azazel represents lets us reclaim this rite not as a tale of vicarious atonement but as a metaphorical description of how Yom Kippur not only provides atonement for past transgressions, but at-one-ment with our divine source. The name Azazel combines the word *Az* which means strong, hard, resistant, with *El*, a name of G-d. This led some commentators to associate Azazel with the Satan, the Adversary. Nachmanides suggests that the goat sent to Azazel was a gift of rapprochement, meant to persuade the Adversary to become an ally. On the Day of Atonement, even G-d makes peace with the Satan.

Later commentators came to associate the Satan with the *yetzer hara*, the impulse toward evil, that passion or vulnerability in us that manifests as inappropriate attachments or desires. The impulse itself is part of our nature, and cannot be eradicated. The evil *in* the impulse, however, can be transformed into good once we trace its energy back to its holy root.

Our belief in the Divine Unity teaches us that all things, including the impulse to sin, ultimately stem from G-d, and we know that nothing irredeemably evil can come from the Absolute Good. What this means is that sin is rooted in holy ground. What we come to experience as sinful behavior starts out as part of our soul seeking expression in the world, but which becomes diverted and separated from its source through its sometimes painful encounter with all the other souls trying to live out their own missions in this earthly life. The violence of those encounters can twist the energy of that soul away from mature self-expression into immature self-preservation, and lock it into behaviors learned early on as a way of coping with the vagaries of the world.

Yet as such sin plays an essential role in our own soul's contribution to the unfolding of Divine Unity. It acts as a messenger pointing out the areas in our souls and psyches that need the most attention if we are to complete our own mission. By examining the motives and behavior that lead to sin, we better understand ourselves, and how the coping mechanisms with which we handled the pain of growing up have themselves grown into behavior patterns that may have once served a purpose, but now only obstruct our path. We rediscover the hurts and pains

hiding behind the cloud of sin, and reclaim that part of ourselves lost in its mist. In confessing our sins, we soften the hard places in our souls and loosen the knots that have grown up around the wounds. We recover that part of the soul captured by the past and release it into the present through the process of atonement, and thereby transform our hurts and losses into our own unique path to redemption. The goat for Azazel is our symbolic outreach to these sources of sin, meant to redeem the holy spark that lies hidden behind hard shell.

Not with breast-beating, not with self-loathing, nor with repression or suppression, but with sincere confession and wholehearted *teshuvah* we can gently release our emotional attachment to our learned behaviors and reconnect with the original holy intention that lies behind our sinful acts. Lust can be traced back to its source in the holy desire to love. Gluttony may only be concealing a hunger for spiritual significance. Greed may be the passion for connection, twisted out of shape. Without condemnation, we can acknowledge that our learned behavior was a painful consequence of our growing up, but it need not rule our lives any more. By treating our sins with the same compassion that HaShem displays on the Day of At-One-Ment, we uncover their cleansing power.

We can now perhaps understand why atonement is signified by the word *kaper*. *Kaper* can mean to wash away, wipe clean, and yet it can also mean to besmirch, stain, or cover up. It seems to contradict itself. Yet the paradox that is *kaper* suggests that the energy that leads to sin contains within itself the key to its own redemption.

The incense described in our portion is also symbolic of the power of *teshuvah* to transform sins into *mitzvot*. The incense was kindled by the High Priest when he made the transition from the outer courtyard into the holy of holies. Continuing our metaphor, this transition reflects our release from externally imposed, learned behavior to our reconnection with the sacred purpose for which our heretofore sinful energy was originally intended. The burning of incense converts physical matter into spiritual energy, which kabbalistically speaking signifies the purging of the *kelippot*, or husks, that had covered the holy spark within. The cloud of incense that arose from the priest's pan would cover the Ark, for, as G-d assures Moshe at the beginning of our portion, "in a cloud I will appear upon the ark-cover..." The Divine is made manifest in our *teshuvah*. As we penetrate beyond the husks and shells of our fixed behavior patterns, we return to and reflect the divine light within.

The incense was made from eleven different spices, including *chelbanah*, or galbanum, which by itself is foul-smelling, but when combined in the proper proportion with the other spices becomes an essential ingredient of the sweet smell offering. The *chelbanah* can represent the most undesirable, detestable part of our selves, yet the more we repress, deny, or reject that part the more we strengthen its adversarial force. Rather, we must seek to learn what that force can accomplish when freed from its expression as aberrant behavior. As Estelle Frankel notes, the inclusion of the *chelbanah* into the incense teaches us to integrate our weaknesses and vulnerabilities into the totality of our being. Doing so allows us to add their potency and vitality to our lives.

Like the incense, the bull, goats, and ram which the High Priest sacrifices in our portion can be understood as our abandonment of our earthly, habituated behavior and its subsequent transformation into heavenly outreach. The waste products of these animals, which were burnt outside the camp, signify the past behaviors and defense mechanisms which our newly integrated selves no longer need. The white linen worn by the priest in the holy of holies reminds us that white is the color that results when all colors are re-integrated into a whole, like the pure white light of a movie projector before it is fragmented by the filters and frames of a structured cinematic story.

Finally, the setting in which our portion takes place suggests something more. We are told that G-d delivers the instructions for Yom Kippur to Moses "after the death of Aaron's two sons, when they approached HaShem, and died." The rabbis connect the deaths of Nadab and Abihu with Yom Kippur by noting that just as Yom Kippur brings atonement, so does the death of the righteous. Those of us who have lost a child, however, know that the pain of such a loss reaches into the core of our selves, beyond the reach of comfort. It can be a paradigm for the times we feel most alienated from G-d. Yet paradoxically, such an occasion can eventually bring us closer to the Divine, as we are forced to confront ultimate issues and to look not for comfort, but for meaning. We want to know not why they died, but why they, or any of us, have lived. When we fully engage our broken hearts and fractured selves into a search for our part in the ultimate meaning of existence, we encounter the power that is Yom Kippur.