

Sending Forth and Letting Go: The Temple Break and the Process of Teshuvah

The burning question about the Yom Kippur service in the Beit Hamikdash, the Temple, in days of yore is, of course: did they have a break?

Was there a little reprieve from the activities of this most exalted day in the Beit Hamikdash on Yom Kippur afternoon? If so, was it longer or shorter than the one we have?

As we know from reading the Mishnayot, or the Avodah service, or, now, listening to the popular and inspiring Ishay Ribo song about the High Priest's service in the Temple on Yom Kippur, as soon as the day's service was complete, the whole congregation of Israel accompanied the Kohen Gadol to his home where the day was completed with great joy and festivity. No break there.

Indeed, part of the feeling of the day is of constant motion and activity. Through the High Priest, although we are only onlookers, we feel the urgency of the work that needs to be done to effect our collective atonement. We get that sense from this morning's Torah reading, from its constant flow of verbs, its flurry of activities of all kinds that constitute the complex and powerful Avodah, Temple service, of Yom Kippur.

As the priest moves from thing to thing, never stopping, we feel that Kohen Gadol models for us the need to continually work towards improvement, and the sense that there is so much to attend to, so many relationships to revisit, so many moments to repair – there is simply no time for a break.

But a close reading of the verses from this morning's Torah reading, and rabbinic and medieval commentaries of the service of the day, though, suggests that there is actually a long, strange break in the middle of the action, one that changes the entire feel of the day.

And one that teaches us something essential about the work of teshuvah we are all engaged in today, and all year round.

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After confessing upon and slaughtering the bull and the other of the two goats, and having offered the incense in the Kodosh Hakodashim, the Kohen Gadol comes out and confesses the sins of all of Am Yisrael

upon the head of the *sair la-azazel*, and it was given to the designated human escort whose job it was to bring it out to the wilderness, a journey of about 12 mil, or approximately 9-10 miles.

Now you need to know that the Mishnah states an important principle about the Yom Kippur Temple service: **אם הקדים מעשה לחבירו לא עשה כלום** – if the Kohen Gadol put one action before its successive one, he has accomplished nothing. In other words, the work of the day was performed in order, serially. Each step needed to be attended to in order and completed before the next could be begun.

Now, after the scapegoat, the *sair la-azazel* was sent out, there was still much more to do. There was a Torah reading, there were still two rams to offer, and there was an incense fire-pan to retrieve from inside the Holy of Holies.

But according to this principle, none of this could be done until the sending away of the scapegoat was complete. In fact, the Mishnah makes this clear, when it states, before moving on to the next step of the Yom Kippur service, **אמרו לו לכהן גדול: הגיע שער למדבר**. “They notified the Kohen Gadol: The goat arrived in the wilderness.” Only then does the Mishnah describe the next activity.

The Mishnah debates whether “The goat arrived in the wilderness” meant it arrived at its final destination, 12 mil away, or just the end of the inhabited area and the beginning of the wilderness, 3 mil away. But either way, until that happened, it seems they couldn’t move on.

This means that from the time they sent out the scapegoat, laden with all the confessed wrongdoings of Am Yisrael, after hours of nonstop activity of confessions, offerings, prayers, prostrations, and with plenty more left to do, all of the sudden:

Everything. Stops. And they wait.

Not like the wait of the time the High Priest was in the Holy of Holies with the incense. As anxiety-provoking as that was – would the Kohen Gadol emerge alive? – that might have just been a couple of minutes.

It takes 18 minutes to walk a mil, according to the Rabbis. So if they waited only 3 mil, it was a break of just a little under an hour. If they waited 12 mil, it took over 3.5 hours until they could continue to the next activity. That’s a long break!

Not all commentaries agree with this – some say once the goat was sent off, the job of the Kohen Gadol was done, and he could move forward with the service of the day, without interruption.

But not Rashi. He says, שאינו רשאי להתחיל בעבודה אחרת עד שהגיע שער למדבר שנאמר ושלח את השעיר במדבר ואחר כך ואת חלב החטאת יקטיר המזבחה *The High Priest could not begin another activity until the goat arrived in the wilderness.*

For Rashi, the sending away was its own activity, and nothing could move forward until it was complete. Even when the goat was long out of sight, for the High Priest, and for the people, they needed to be fully immersed in the activity of ושלח, of sending it forth to the wilderness.

Why? Why does the perpetual motion of the intense Yom Kippur day of the service of atonement grind to a halt for an hour, perhaps hours, with nothing to see or do, as that lone goat is loping off into the howling, empty wasteland?

Why is the work not complete when we bid farewell to those sins? Why do we need to linger with them all the way until they get to the midbar, far, far away?

Why?

To teach us about the hard work of letting go, the more elusive second step of the two-step process of teshuvah I want to describe today, of bidding farewell to our less than best selves.

Let me explain.

The Torah, in this morning's reading, repeats the injunction to send away the goat twice: ושלח ביד איש עתי ומדבר, and then again במדבר ושלח את השעיר במדבר.

The word ושלח is a fascinating word. It is the piel form of the verb to send forth. Now the piel is often called the intensive version of the kal, describing a more rigorous, vigorous performance of the same action.

And in the piel, ושלח means not only to send, send forth, or cast away, but to let go.

I believe this piel form is used, and is repeated in two different pesukim, to highlight to us the necessity of two steps of teshuvah - sending away, and letting go.

Sending away, and letting go.

Sending away is about taking the negative parts of us that we identify as bad or unhealthy, our wrongful choices, and saying we don't want them anymore. It's what's symbolized by the Kohen Gadol confessing those sins over the goat, and then getting it out of the Temple. Out of sight.

But that's not enough. The service isn't over. Then we invest in the more complex process of letting go. Then we have this open space, this break, as the goat is going on its way, where our job is to sever all ties to it, to really let it go.

That symbolizes the work of looking at those poor choices and asking, "What is it in me that keeps coming back to them?" "What benefit, what value, is actually also being conferred upon me when I choose this poor choice?" "What need is it satisfying?" Because most of our bad choices come from some kernel of good. We have to be able to identify that, and choose to let that go.

What's so challenging in that work is that many of our wrongdoings have a core in something that feels beneficial for us or for some of the people around us -- sometimes even an expression of good values we have, that are incorrectly arrayed, or prioritized. Teasing that apart and letting go of those needs, desires and wants that lead us to those mistakes -- that's the hard part of teshuvah.

If I can let go of that need, that benefit, for the greater good of doing the right thing, then I have a chance to really stop doing it.

That, in many ways, is the harder work, the letting go.

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So what are you working on this year?

I want to be more patient this coming year. I don't want to jump to conclusions, assume the worst of the other person, so often someone close to me, and get so frustrated or even angry so quickly.

So impatience is my sin, my negative trait. I need to send it away, to confess it, put it on the scapegoat, and send it on its way -- out of this room, out of this building, off to the wilderness.

Yes, I do need to do that. That's step 1. That's *וּשְׁלַח* in the sense of send forth. But if I just renounce impatience, will I really stop being impatient? Won't that impatience just wander around Riverdale for a little while and then come ambling back, in just a few days, or maybe at best weeks?

I need to do something more than sending it away. I need to ensure that it "reaches its destination" -- that it is really gone.

How do I do this? There is another step, beyond recognizing the impatience and desiring to be rid of it. I need to do something counter-intuitive. I need to see not only why I don't like myself when I am impatient, but also to first recognize what draws me to impatience. What does it do for me? Perhaps it reflects my desire to be super-productive and efficient and move along, so I can get more done. Perhaps it reflects my very high standard for others, like for myself, to get things right the first time.

A strong work ethic and holding others to a high standard are not bad traits per se, but when I become impatient as a result of those traits, in those moments they get in the way of being my best self and truly seeing the other. So I need to let them go. That part, I believe is even harder. Because I see that being impatient is not just a bad trait. It's doing something for me. And whatever it is doing for me, I need to be willing to let go of.

This is step 2 of ושלח. Not just sending forth our sins, but letting go of even the "good things", the benefits, we get from them, which is much of why we stick with them to begin with.

I think this ושלח takes much more time. It takes much more insight and introspection. But if we can do it, we can really rid ourselves of our sins.

Maybe a broken relationship is weighing on me this Yom Kippur. I've been saying things I regret, or staying away, or, defensively blaming the other person for the problem, and, therefore, expecting them to initiate the reconciliation. And I need to send all of that away.

But it will come right back to me if I don't ask myself what the broken relationship is actually doing for me. Is it feeding my sense of rightness? Or giving me a reason to be extra compassionate with myself because I am seeing myself as a victim? These are even deeper, stickier, trickier things. We need to be willing to let go of them if we will ever be able to stick with repairing the broken relationship - at least the part in our control.

And that, I would contend, is what takes so long in the Temple on Yom Kippur, and why there was such a long break.

If all we needed to do was declare our sins and send them off, the Kohen Gadol could move on to the rest of the day as soon as the escort left the Temple courtyard with the scapegoat. Goodbye, sins! ושלח ביד איש עתי המדברה – they were sent off to the wilderness.

But the Kohen Gadol, and the people, need to do more. They need to pause from the frenzy of atonement activities and ask, why do I persist in this mistake? Why does this obstacle trip me up time and again? Not because I am a bad person. *Because it does something for me.* If I can let go of that, I can really be free. That's ושלח את השעיר במדבר – letting the goat go in the wilderness. That's stage 2, letting go.

And that takes time. And like the Mishnah's description of the scapegoat's journey, it has stations along the way. And it needs quiet, and thought, and a pause. And it's hard. *And nothing else can really happen, until it happens.*

To do that, we need a break from the constant action of the day. We need that focus all on its own time, for that hard, painful, powerful inner work. We need to think about the difference between pushing the sa'ir in the direction of the wilderness -- sending it forth -- and making sure it really arrives at its destination -- letting it go fully.

And this is not just true about wrongdoing. It's true about growth, too, from good to great. It's true about growing up. Most of becoming better people, not just fixing our mistakes, but becoming more sophisticated, mature, resilient, strong, compassionate people, most of that work is about letting go.

Letting go of the belief -- of the myth -- that we can be in control so much of the time.

Letting go of a sometimes too tight grip on our children, or those we mentor or guide, a grip that is really holding them back and preventing them from the growing and flourishing that they need to do more independently.

Letting go of our expectations about how life should look, and focusing on doing what we can with how it does look.

Letting go of the intense pressure -- and also often unrealistic, untenable, myth -- of "making the right decision", and focusing instead on the real work of "making the decision right".

That, too, requires stopping, listening inside, and letting go with all our might.

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Do you know what happened when the scapegoat reached its final destination in the wilderness? When not just the sending forth, but the letting go, was complete?

The Mishnah tells us, in R Yishmael's opinion, that a strip of red wool was tied to the Sanctuary doors.

ובשהגיע שער למדבר, היה הלשון מלבין, שנאמר: אם יהיו חטאים כשנים, כשלג ילבינו

When the goat arrived at the wilderness, that string turned white, as the verse says in Yishayahu, if your sins are like scarlet, they shall be whitened as snow.

The string turned white!

When we really let go, we can really be forgiven.

Perhaps there is a link between שלח and סלח, reinforcing this message that when we really let go, we find true forgiveness. R Hirsch suggests both verbs have to do with a sense of moving forward, of progress. When we can send out our bad parts, and then let go of the needs, the desires, the parts of our less than ideal choices that keep us coming back to those choices, and when we can let go of control, of expectations, of needs, then סלח, then we find room to give, and be granted forgiveness, and to go forward.

We're about to enter into Yizkor.

It's a break, a pause, in the hubbub of the day. A chance to capture the memories of those we have had to let go. Some relationships were simple, some were complex. Some were more loving, some we experienced as less so. As we summon them to our hearts this Yom Kippur, perhaps we also want to ask, what do we need to let go of to help that relationship, from this world to the next, flourish and grow in the best way it can. And what can we learn from that relationship to carry forward into the ones we have in this world?

May 5780 be a year of שלח ונסלח, of doing not just the work of sending away, but also of letting go, and may it bring us a year of forgiveness, strength, health and peace.