

The torah reading this morning is from Vaykirah (the book of Leviticus) Chapter 16. This portion discusses the instructions to Moses and Aaron concerning the procedure for the priestly service on Yom Kippur, enabling them to achieve atonement for Israel. This procedure involves two goats, one which is used as a sin offering, a sacrifice to God for expiation, to apologize and make up for the sins of the community and the other goat is sent to Azazel, the priest puts his hands on this goat, chronicles all the sins of the community and sends the goat off into the wilderness. The idea of atoning for our sins with a sacrifice and a scapegoat is a difficult concept for most of us to embrace.

Furthermore, the description on how to deal with each of these goats is quite detailed. Where each goat should stand, how many times the priest should sprinkle the blood of the first goat on the alter, what the fabric of his head covering must be while performing this ritual is all clearly spelled out. What reason is given in the Torah for this very detailed account of this strange ritual? Basically, God said so. It says, "This shall be to you a law for all time: to make atonement for the Israelites for all

their sins once a year.” God commands it and Moses does it. Moses does not ask God why sprinkling the blood of the goat makes the alter pure. Moses does not ask God how the people’s sins are transferred to a goat and why the goat is then sent off. Nor does he ask if the community’s sins are sent off with the second goat, why are we commanded to first sacrifice another goat for God? There are plenty of places in the Torah where Moses questions God, starting with their first conversation at the burning bush when Moses asks, Why him, when God tells him to go free the Israelites in Egypt.” But here God commands and Moses accepts.

Michael Rosenak, a noted Jewish philosopher and educator calls this form of acceptance Explicit religion. Explicit religion concerns itself with what we believe and practice a loyal adherents of a specific faith, as members of a believing community where norms prevail, norms that are incumbent on people’s actions.

Following the Torah reading, we turn to the Haftorah from the book of Isaiah in which we are given a very different message. In the haftorah reading, Isaiah rebukes those who delude themselves into

thinking that mechanical and rote atonement can be a substitute for compassion and moral concern. When the people ask Isaiah why God does not answer their prayers when they are fasting, he comments, “Because on your fast day you see to your business and oppress all your laborers!” Rosenak refers to this method as Implicit religion. Implicit religion begins not with God’s demand but with human hopes and fears, with perception rather than tradition, with the depth of questions rather than with the authority of answers.

Isaiah, in the haftorah, offers us a method for Teshuvah, repentance which very much speaks to our modern lives today. However, it is difficult for many of us to relate to the act of sacrifice in general, much less purification of a community through the sprinkling of goats blood around the temple. However, we read both of these texts today, side by side. Rosenak feels that this was a purposeful move on the part of the rabbis. His view is that whenever a text leans to far into the realm of explicit Judaism, the view that you should practice Judaism strictly according to God’s law because those are the rules of the

community, the rabbis counterbalanced this extreme text with one of Implicit Judaism, practicing Judaism that is personally meaningful to you. However we still need both texts in our tradition.

Many aspects of our lives are made up of a duality of ideas, a duality which at first glance appear contradictory, opposites, causing us to assume we must choose one direction or the other. But when examined closely we see we need both of these opposites in our lives to achieve balance. If we can learn to live with the tension, to live in its embrace, we are supported by a stronger foundation. Think of it like the strings of a hammock. Hammocks are able to support a person by the tension created from the pull of the string from opposing directions.

We need both extremes in Judaism as well. Following the laws only because the Torah, the community or God said so is dangerous, it quickly leads to extremism and close-mindedness. However there is an equal danger of only doing what feels right, what feels good, what fits neatly and easily into our present lives. We quickly descend into a world

where everything is relative, where there is no right or wrong answers, and actions are not based on a solid foundation.

I believe the Rabbis, with our pairing of readings today, were teaching us the important lesson of embracing the need for both implicit Judaism (Isaiah's teachings) and explicit Judaism (Vayikra's teachings.) We need this balance in our religious practices, when we construct our communities, when we educate our children, when we raise our families, and in living our daily lives.

If we can learn to embrace the tension in the duality Judaism offers we can find personal meaning in the ceremony we are about to hear describing the priestly service for our community's expiation. Once we embrace the tension, we will have a strong balanced foundation supporting us as individuals and as a community. Shana Tova.