

The Possibility of Transformation and Change

Yom Kippur - Kol Nidre 5781

You will see You will see How good it will be Next year...	עוד תראה, עוד תראה כמה טוב יהיה בשנה, בשנה הבאה.
---	--

When my four-year-old daughter, Tiferet, sang this song a few days ago on Rosh Hashana, she sang : “ כמה טוב תהיה” instead of יהיה.

Not that the world would be better next year, but that **you** תהיה will be better next year! Maybe that’s the way we should all begin looking at the world.

During times such as these, we are likely to ask, what will the future hold? How will the world look a year from now? How will we adapt and manage to change the world for the better? But for the world to change for the better we must change for the better. Can we? Can we really change? Is true personal transformation possible? We all make New Year's resolutions every year that we don't keep: promise ourselves to live better, to eat better, exercise, be more compassionate, more patient, be kinder to the environment, but then we fall back into our old patterns. Is there anyone of us who has not experienced this? So, I ask, can we really change or is this our fate, our destiny and do we just need to accept it?

You may be familiar with the yiddish term Shlimazal - an unlucky or accident-prone person. Like the shlemiel, things never seem to go right for the shlimazel. You have probably heard the classic joke. What is the difference between a schlemiel and a schlemazel? The schlemiel is the one

who spills his soup at a fancy dinner party and the shelemzal is the one in whose lap it lands. Have you ever thought in a difficult period, “I have no luck at all” “nothing ever works out for me”, “I was born to fail”. I am sure that if we are completely honest, every one of us has felt like a shlimazl at moments or during periods of our lives. The problem with the assumption that nothing ever goes right is that it can’t be true but it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We come to believe that we cannot change, we get so habituated in patterns of how we think and how we react. We have probably been doing this for years or our whole lives. Can we really change it?

In today’s Torah reading, we read about the “Seir L’azazel”-the goat to Azazel, which is part of the Yom Kippur atonement rituals in the book of Vayikrah. In this section, two goats are selected by lots, one to be slaughtered, that is sacrificed and the other is sent off to the midbar/the desert. Which one would you choose to be? Which one is the shlemiel and which is the shlimazal? What can we learn from the episode of the “seir l’azazel” about our abilities to actually change our destiny? Let’s look at the text.

Vayikrah 16:8

וַיִּתֵּן אֶהָרִן עַל-שְׁנֵי הַשְּׂעִירִים גּוֹרְלוֹת גּוֹרֵל אֶחָד לַיהוָה וְגּוֹרֵל אֶחָד לְעִזָּאֵזֶל:

and he [Aaron] shall place **lots** upon the two goats, one marked for the LORD and the other marked for Azazel.

וְהִקְרִיב אֶהָרִן אֶת-הַשְּׂעִיר אֲשֶׁר עָלָה עָלָיו הַגּוֹרֵל לַיהוָה וְעָשָׂהוּ חֲטָאת:

Aaron shall bring forward the goat designated by lot for the LORD, which he is to offer as a sin offering;

וְהַשְּׂעִיר אֲשֶׁר עָלָה עָלָיו הַגּוֹרֵל לְעִזָּאֵזֶל **יְעַמְד-חַי** לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְכַפֵּר עָלָיו לְשַׁלַּח אֹתוֹ לְעִזָּאֵזֶל
הַמִּדְבָּרָה:

while the goat designated by lot for Azazel shall be left standing alive $\tau\mu\gamma'$
 $\cdot\eta$ before the LORD, to make expiation [atonement] with it and to send it off
to the wilderness for Azazel. [we don't yet know what this term Azazel
means]

Let's consider the accepted translation or understanding of the goat to
Azazel which is the origin of the term scapegoat; this is how it has
traditionally been translated as far back as the Septuagint translation. The
scapegoat is the one to blame.

The *shlemazil* believes they have no luck, they will never win the lottery,
but even the *shlemazil* needs someone to blame for their failures. Everyone
seeks a scapegoat -- when things continually go wrong - we blame
ourselves, but when we get tired of beating ourselves up we blame others:
parents (or some wound from childhood), kids, spouses, bosses,, you
name it but someone always gets the blame. Sadly when we get stuck in
guilt, shame and blame - we can't change. This is how we might
understand placing our hands on the *seir l'azazel*, unloading all of Israel's
sin on its head and sending it off to the *midbar*/desert--"now it's on your
head little goat"--"you take the blame". Poor scapegoat, right? This
scapegoating hurts us and hurts the other.

Let's look at an alternative understanding of this verse:

There are two "lots" cast to determine the fate of this goat. Lots here are
called *goralot*. Goral can mean a "lot", but generally means fate or destiny.
These goats serve on the deeper level of allegory since they are also about
us, about our destiny on Yom Kippur. Do either one of the goats have any
mazal (that is luck)? Remember, the one whose lot it is to be designated as
a sin offering to God is slaughtered/sacrificed. The other is sent off into the
midbar (the wilderness/desert). I don't know about you, but I am taking my
chances with running off to the desert! While the rabbis over a 1000 years
later understood that the scapegoat was thrown over a cliff and crushed to
death; the rabbis were sure that this goat was going to take all the blame

and suffer but that is not what the Torah tells us. That is perhaps how this ritual evolved, but how was it supposed to be according to the Torah's original conception? So, what does the Torah say again?

The goat designated by lot for Azazel shall be left standing alive *עמד חי* before the LORD, to make expiation [atonement] with it and to send it off to the wilderness for Azazel.

Let's try to understand this ritual act of placing hands on the head of the goat *l'azazel* according to what we read in the Torah. The text says that he remains alive *yaamod chai* and is sent off to Azazel in the desert. This goat, according to the peshat, the simple meaning of the text and my interpretation, is not a scapegoat at all, but rather - he is the free goat! He is the winner of the lottery!...and so are we on Yom Kippur, if we embrace our newfound freedom and use it to make real change.

We can never transform our lives when we scapegoat, that is blame others, or play the scapegoat - that is play the victim-the *shlemazl*; we can't change when we are burdened by so many associated feelings like guilt, resentment, jealousy, anger or fear. This is especially true for scapegoating, blaming others for our failures, even when we are right and often we are not, it is an absolute obstacle in the way of our own success. Listen, I grew up in a family of blamers. The first question anyone ever asked whenever something bad happened was: who's fault is this? Later in life, I realised that I sometimes do this as well. So what was the first thing I did, I told my parents. "Mom, Dad, I want you to know that I am a blamer...and you know who's fault it is?!"

Remember, we blame others when we are feeling like we are not enough, when we are feeling incapable, unworthy, feeling the *shlemazl*. The *seir l'azazel* can be seen as our symbol of freedom. Yom Kippur comes not just to atone for our sins, but to set us free to take responsibility. We can then quit blaming others for our failures. Yom Kippur gives us the opportunity to

be no less than transformed, that is reborn. This begins with confession, telling the truth, admitting what we have done and who we have been. Once we face the truth, everything is possible.

If we want to see the Seir L'azazel as a metaphor for freedom rather than destruction, how can we understand the word Azazel? The precise meaning of the Hebrew, *azazel*, is not known. It is found nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible, it has been disputed since antiquity and remains uncertain. That means we don't know for sure what Azazel is - that's good because it leaves ample room for interpretation.

Though we don't know the precise meaning of the word *azazel*, we know that it has been understood by the rabbis according to the letters it contains, the two words found in it. *azaz + el*--- The rabbis understood Azazel within their own context which was either a demon or a cliff to throw the goat off of but their interpretation of the name according to letters can be understood as *OZ-El* or God's strength as in *Izuz v'Gibur*. We can think of the *seir l'azazel* as an allegory / a metaphor for all of the bad stuff in us, loading us down and now being lifted, making us lighter, more open, ready to let God's Oz (strength) back into our lives while at the same time releasing another living creature usually destined for the knife to freedom! This goat can be seen as our chance to change our fate or destiny--to be truly free, to actually change and experience transformation in our lives.

There is another occurrence of lots being cast in the Yom Kippur readings. It is in the book of Jonah (who is running away from God's mission). The sailors on the ship to Tarshish cast lots to determine who has caused the great tempest in the sea that threatens to break it apart. Jonah is indicated. Jonah 1:7

**יֹאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ לְכוּ וְנִפְּלֵה גּוֹרָלוֹת וְנִדְעָה בְּשִׁלְמֵי הָרָעָה הַזֹּאת לָנוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ גּוֹרָלוֹת
וַיִּפֹּל הַגּוֹרֵל עַל־יוֹנָה:**

The men said to one another, “Let us cast lots and find out on whose account this misfortune has come upon us.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

We could conclude that Jonah was cast off to the sea to die like the *seir l'azazel*, but we know that isn't how the story turns out. The big fish that swallowed Jonah is also a metaphor. Where do human beings find themselves immersed in water and still living? The fetus, the unborn baby. Jonah is returned to the womb to be reborn, chapter 2:11

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְדָג וַיִּקְא אֶת־יֹנָה אֶל־הַיַּבְשָׁה: (פ)

The LORD commanded the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon dry land.

Jonah was reborn to fulfill his sacred mission as a prophet, to proclaim to the people of Ninveh that the city would be destroyed, which is what he did. But they repented, each and every one hoping that they would have a second chance and God gives them that chance. Jonah didn't like that God did not enact “strict justice”, but if God always acted with strict justice, few of us would survive. Jonah doesn't seem to believe that people can change; be transformed or be reborn even though he has just experienced it himself--but God believes that we can... and so should we.

Yom Kippur is often thought of as a terrifying day, a day of self affliction and fear, but perhaps it should be a day of joy and celebration, for it is a day that comes to say that anything is possible, we can change our destiny, our fate, our גורל. The Seir L'azazel and Jonah are symbols of our ability to have a second chance; to be no less than reborn. Does a goat or anything else need to die, to be destroyed in order to get a second chance in life or do we simply need to set something free? Are we sending off the proverbial

scapegoat to the wilderness, letting go of all that stands in the way of our opportunity for rebirth as Jonah was reborn from the fish? Today is a day of rebirth and, therefore, rejoicing...now the question is how do we transform our lives from this point forward no matter what happens to us? I will talk about that tomorrow but for now I want to leave you with a little story you may already know and a metaphor to take with us into this day of infinite potential.

From the children's book, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. It's a favorite at my house. In this story, a caterpillar eats and eats until he "he wasn't hungry anymore. He built a small house, called a cocoon, around himself. He stayed inside for more than two weeks. Then he nibbled a hole in the cocoon, pushed his way out and...then he turned into a beautiful butterfly". We have been living in cocoons for quite awhile now, we have had plenty of time get ready...now it's time to fly. Shana Tova and Gmar Chatima Tova

FIN