

Parsha Acharei Mot **My Brother Esau Is An Hairy Man, But I, I am a Smooth Man**

Shabbat Shalom,

It may seem strange that the parsha right before Pesach deals, in large part, with instructions to the High Priest about how to celebrate Yom Kippur, which is about six months away. However, we should keep in mind that both holidays are New Years celebrations: Passover commemorates our exodus from Egypt and celebrates our birth as a nation, while Yom Kippur, the day Moses descended from Mount Sinai with the second set of tablets, commemorates the day the Israelites were *spiritually* set free.

On Pesach we renew our homes by routing out the leavening that symbolizes our *excesses of pride and materialism* (in other words, that which “*puffs us up*”); on Yom Kippur we rededicate our *actions and innermost personalities* by means of *teshuvah*, or *turning*.

Perhaps, as the commentary in Etz Hayim points out, today’s parsha, *Acharei Mot* (After The Death) is read at this mid-point in our sacred calendar to suggest that any season is an appropriate time for self-scrutiny and atonement.

With your permission, on this morning before our first Seder, I would like to focus on the Yom Kippur rites that are described in this parsha (mostly in the third that precedes the portion that we read this morning). What I would like to explore in particular today is “*the scapegoat that is sent into the desert for Azazel*” and offer some speculations about the possible meanings of the scapegoat, and about who, or what is Azazel. Finally, I would like to explore what meaning the ritual of the scapegoat can have for us moderns today.

I have given my talk the title: “*My Brother Esau Is An Hairy Man, But I, I am a Smooth Man*”. I hope that at least a few of you recognize this as the centerpiece of an extremely funny comedy skit by Alan Bennett of the 1960s British satirical group, “Beyond The Fringe” (also consisting of Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller, and Dudley Moore) These lines were intoned by Alan Bennett parodying an Anglican vicar sermonizing on what the cleric considered to be the most uplifting of Biblical verses. What, if anything, does my fond reminiscence¹ have to do with the subject at hand, you ask? Stay tuned!

First, some background: *Acharei Mot* opens with God speaking to Moses *after the death* of his brother Aaron’s two sons for their improper offering in the Holy of Holies, and urging Moses to warn Aaron only to enter at the appointed time, or he too will die. The parsha then goes on to explain in minute detail how the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) should purify himself before entering the Holy of Holies, how he should dress, what he needs to do to satisfy the Yom Kippur ritual, and how he should cleanse himself and his garments after performing the sacrifices.

As part of the Yom Kippur ritual, the High Priest is instructed to “take two he-goats for a sin offering”. The Talmud [Yoma 62b] stipulates that the goats must be identical in appearance, size, and value -- like twins. They must also be chosen together. Next, the High Priest selects by lot one of the identical goats and marks it “for Adonai”. He marks the other goat “for Azazel”.

The goat marked “for Adonai” will be sacrificed to Adonai to atone for the sins of the entire community. Next, Aaron is instructed to lay his two hands on the head of the goat marked “for Azazel” and to confess upon it all the inequities and rebellious transgressions of the community. That goat is then sent away into the desert (or wilderness).

Why are *TWO* goats required for the Yom Kippur ritual? What did it possibly mean to the community of Israelites to send a scapegoat bearing its sins into the desert? It could simply reflect a belief in magic. Or, it could be a dramatization of making a fresh start, and providing vicarious atonement, much like the folk customs of tashlich, *in which bread-crumbs representing our sins are cast [the literal meaning of the word “tashlich”] into the sea to be borne away*, or of kaporot, *[a custom that dates from the 9th century] in which a participant twirls a hen or rooster three times above his or her head and, while contemplating what will happen to the fowl, and prior to slaughtering it, recites the following blessing: “This is in exchange for me, this is instead of me, this is my atonement. This rooster shall go to its death, and I shall enter in and go to a good, long life and to peace.”*

However, it is possible to view the ritual of placing the sins, or shortcomings, of the community on the back of a goat chosen at random, and sent into the wilderness in other ways that may be more attractive to modern sensibilities. For instance, perhaps placing our sins on the back of a goat can serve to illustrate that sin is a separate, and not an essential, part of human nature. The fact that the goats were identical perhaps can serve to illustrate that we need to look within, to discern one’s essence.

At a season when we are supposed to perform a self-analysis and separate out the good from the evil, the identical goats can help us remember that we are not all good, but we are not all bad either. Because the so-called “good” and “bad” identical goats were chosen randomly, perhaps we can infer that life is randomly determined, rather than orchestrated by a deity. Or stated differently: the path that our lives take, and how we act, are influenced by our free will. Finally, perhaps the scapegoat ritual, along with the rituals of tashlich and kaporot, are really not about magically transferring sins at all, but are meant to sensitize us to our need to do teshuvah, demonstrating to us physically what we must do spiritually.

To me, there is yet a far more interesting possible explanation of the Scapegoat ritual – and it is predicated upon recognizing that the two goats represent none other than Jacob and Esau! Let me explain. First, it is important to know that, while many of us will sing, “*Had Gadya*”, “*One Kid*”, or “*One Little Goat*”, tonight at our seders, another Hebrew word for “goat”, and the Hebrew word for “hairy” are one and the same, “*sair*”! Recall how Jacob (... *the smooth man*) tricked his blind father, Isaac, into giving him, rather than his brother Esau (*the hairy man...*), his blessing by wrapping a hairy pelt around his arm – hence, the title of this talk. **(Interestingly, according to some Rabbinic sources [Pirke Rabbi Eliezer Xxxii; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Genesis Xxvii. 31], this deception took place on the eve of Pesach, this very day!!)**

Recall too that Jacob and Esau were twins; Jacob indeed born grabbing onto Esau’s heel, as Esau emerged first from their mother’s womb. Further, Jacob (although not without personality faults) was idealized by the Rabbis to be the epitome of wholesomeness -- spiritual, calm, and thoughtful. Esau, on the other hand was

demonized as an impulsive creature of this world only -- a man of the field, a man of instincts alone.

The two identical goats can be understood to symbolize two people who superficially appear to be similar, but who take different paths and who differ profoundly in terms of their inner essence. This is the case with Jacob and Esau who, as a midrash [Zuta Shir HaShirim 1:15] claims, were identical physically and spiritually until the age of thirteen, at which time their essential natures developed. According to the midrash [Bereshit 63:10] “they were like a myrtle and a wild rose bush growing side by side; when they attained maturity, one yielded its fragrance, and the other its thorns”.

Additionally, the Rabbis [Bereishit 62b], reflecting the political frustrations of the ancient Jews, developed a tradition of vilifying Esau as the embodiment of evil, and viewing him – dare I say, “*scapegoating him*” -- as the symbolic progenitor of the Amalekites, the Roman Empire, and all nations that attacked or tormented the Jewish people. According to rabbinic teachings [*Seder Eliahu Zuta*], the sins committed by Israel are *somehow* traceable back to Jacob, from whom we are all descended; but Jacob’s sins can *somehow* be blamed on Esau. The Rabbis go on to add [Bereshit Rabba 65:] that Esau’s “hairy” appearance marked him as a sinner and his “red” color indicated his bloodthirstiness [Bereshit Rabba 63:].

For instance, there is a midrash, more than a bit far-fetched perhaps, that claims that just as a man with a thick head of hair standing on a thrashing room floor, gets it full of chaff, so Esau is polluted with sin, whereas just as a bald man can run a hand over his head to brush off the chaff, so evil did not stick to Jacob. [Bereshit Rabba 65:15].

So far, we have established that there is a rabbinic tradition associating hairy Esau with evil, and smooth Jacob with goodness. In addition, the Hebrew language itself equates the goat with hairiness (“*sair*”).

Now, who or what was Azazel, and what is the meaning of sending a goat into the desert for Azazel? Azazel is mentioned in only one place in the Tanach, right here in this parsha! So searching the Tanach for further clues is of little help. Perhaps analyzing possible etymologies will provide a clue.

Some Rabbis interpret the word “Azazel” to be derived from “Azaz” (rugged) and “’el” (strong). From this wordplay they infer something that is not mentioned in Torah: that Azazel is the most “rugged and rough” of mountain cliffs from which the scapegoat was cast down [Yoma 67b and in other midrashim].

There are other proposed etymologies in the rabbinic literature, such as connecting Azazel with atoning for the wicked deeds of the mythological fallen angels “Uza” and “Azel” [Yoma 67b, Book of Enoch]. Seemingly embarrassed by the existence of Azazel as a supernatural being, the Rabbis sought to interpret the name as simply meaning “dismissal”, or as “goat that departs.” However, I am forced to concur with various Torah commentaries [Etz Hayim, and those by Gunther Plaut and Richard Friedman] that we just don’t really know who or what Azazel was!

These commentaries agree that the explanation that makes the most sense is that Azazel is a vestige of the first primitive notions of the spiritual world shared by the early Israelites and earlier cultures, an echo of a belief in competing gods and, indeed, goat-like daemons and jinn haunting the desert and who are responsible for the evil in

the world. “*Mi chamocho b’elim, Adonai*” (“Who is like You among all the other gods, Adonai?”), which we chanted this morning, is a vestige of this belief. (*Our prayer book translates this as ... “Who is like You among the mighty.”*)

Yom Kippur was given to the Israelites when they had just emerged from the polytheistic environment of Egypt and were not yet fully monotheistic, but instead still maintained a belief in the superiority of one God over many competitors. Such a belief runs contrary to a central Jewish concept, which I believe is expressed by the Sh’ma, of the unity of God who is the source of everything, including evil.

Within the framework of this primitive dualistic model, which allows for opposing forces of good and evil, one can more easily envision [as stated by Nachmanides] a ceremony that entailed sending a goat, representing mankind’s sins and their evil consequences, back into the desert to the abode of the evil Azazel, who is believed by the populace to be a real presence, the spirit of desolation and ruin, and the source of all impurity. This ritual is a counterbalance to the ceremony of the goat sacrificed in the Holy of Holies to *draw close* to the good and forgiving Adonai (*draw close*, incidentally is the literal meaning of the Hebrew word, *korbon*, for sacrifice).

Let’s return to the question of why the Scap egoat was sent into the desert for Azazel. A possible explanation is that the High Priest was symbolically placing upon the goat associated with Esau -- the twin driven by instincts and impulses -- the sins of the community, arising from mankind’s animal or instinctual nature that leads us astray, and which are not representative of our true nature. Complementarily, the sins arising from the misapplication of man’s intellect are placed upon the goat associated with Jacob, which will be sacrificed to God as a sin offering.

But, why is Azazel’s abode specifically in the desert? An interesting play on the Hebrew word for desert, “midbar”, is that it is derived from the root DVR, which means both “*thing*” and “*word*” in Hebrew. By adding the prefix “me” (which means “from” in Hebrew), we obtain as dual possible meanings for “midbar” “far from anything”—or Physical Wilderness, and also something like “far from the word of God”—or Spiritual Wilderness. Thus, sending the collective sins of the community into the midbar on the back of the “goat for Azazel” can be interpreted as literally sending them to a desolate and impure place far from the Word of Adonai, while the other goat, sacrificed in the Holy of Holies, draws the community closer to Adonai.

The association of *the goat meant for Azazel in the midbar* (“*far from the Word of God*”) with *Esau, the progenitor of Israel’s adversaries*, becomes an even more compelling connection when we are aware that the Torah [Genesis 32:3] tells us that the country inhabited by Esau and his descendents after Isaac’s death was called, *of all things*, Mount Sair, also known as Edom. Edom is described in the Mishna as a rocky and desolate land, home to a “warlike people”, and was used by the Rabbis to symbolize the “evil” Roman Empire [Leviticus Rabbah xiii]. (The place name “*Edom*”, incidentally, is the same as the word for “*red*” in Hebrew – after the “red stuff” that Esau gulped down in exchange for the birthright that he sold to Jacob. In Genesis 25:25 we are told that when he was born, Esau came out red all over and covered with red hair. Because Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for the red lentil stew, he was thereafter also called *Edom*.)

A nice interpretation [based primarily on a Reconstructionist Dvar by Shai Gluskin] is that the goat offered up to God represented the sins that we have already worked

through, and the goat sent into the midbar, symbolizing that desolate place far from the word of God, the abode of Azazel, are those deficiencies that continue to reverberate through us, repeating themselves in predictable yet destructive patterns. The midbar, while as noted previously can mean "far from the word of God" —or Spiritual Wilderness, is still an ideal place in which to roam and reflect, and in which to gain clarity and vision to release us from such debilitating patterns. I prefer to think of the scapegoat roaming and reflecting in the wilderness, rather than being hurled from a craggy cliff!

A final word: tonight at our Seder, when we relive the story of Jacob "going down into Egypt" and when we sing *Chad Gadya (One Little Goat)*, perhaps we can pause for a moment and also recall the two goats, so closely associated with Jacob along with his twin brother, which in the time of the Temple had starring roles in Yom Kippur observances, but will be but a memory in our contemporary observance of Yom Kippur six months away.

Happy Pesach.

The ideas and speculations that I have just presented are just a few of a number of possible explanations of the rite of the scapegoat. Does anyone have other insights about the scapegoat or Azazel, or additional thoughts of how this rite can have meaning for us today?

ⁱ *"Very many years ago, when I was about as old as some of you are now, I went mountain climbing in Scotland with a friend of mine. And there was this mountain, you see, and we decided to climb it. All day we climbed up and up and up higher and higher and higher until the valley lay very small below us, and the mists of the evening began to come down, and the sun to set. And when we reached the summit, we sat down to watch this magnificent sight of the sun going down behind the mountains. And as we watched, my friend, very suddenly, and violently, vomited.*

"Some of us think life' s a bit like that, don' t we? Bittisn' t. Life, you know, is rather like opening a tin of sardines. We all of us are looking for the key. [Some] think they' ve found the key, don' t they? They roll back the lid of the sardine tin of life. They reveal the sardines - the riches of life - therein, and they get them out, and they enjoy them. But, you know, there' s always a little bit in the corner you can' t get out. I wonder is there a little bit in the corner of your life? I know there is in mine!"