

Parshat Acharei Mot 5779

In Animal Farm, Snowball is routinely used as a scapegoat after he is expelled by Napoleon. “Whenever anything went wrong it became usual to attribute it to Snowball”. Here the scapegoat has negative connotations. But how is the goat for Azazel (i.e. the scapegoat) different from the abhorrent scapegoat of Animal Farm?

The word scapegoat came into usage in 1530 when William Tyndale produced the first English translation of the Hebrew Bible. Seeking to translate the word *Azazel* into English, he called it ‘the escapegoat’ i.e. the goat (ez) that was sent away (azal). In the course of time, the first letter was dropped, and the word ‘scapegoat’ was born.

During the Yom Kippur Temple service, set out in Acharei Mot (Vayikra 16: 7-22) the Kohen Gadol – after confessing his own sins and those of his household – undertook a ritual to achieve amends for the most serious sins of the community. He took two goats, identical in appearance, and cast lots over them. One was sacrificed ‘for G-d’ as a sin offering. Over the other he made confession for the sins of the people and the goat was sent into the wilderness, to ‘Azazel’ where it plunged to its death. *“The goat will thus carry all the sins away to a desolate area when it is sent to the desert (16:22).*

Philologos (an [etymology](#) column which ran for 24 years in ‘*The Forward*’ and written anonymously-ED) feels that there is something illogical about the scapegoat story. Why, if the biblical scapegoat was the goat set free by the high priest, did “scapegoat” come to mean an unjustly chosen victim? Should it not be the other way around?

Perhaps when the contemporary meaning of “scapegoat” first entered English, the archaic verb “scape” was no longer recognised to be a form of “escape,” or else it was taken to refer not to the goat but to the children of Israel, who “escaped” punishment by means of the goat. In other European languages, too, the goat that was sent away — *bouc emissaire* in French, *kozel otpushchenya* in Russian — has come to be the modern “scapegoat.” Still other languages, however, like Dutch *zondebok* and German, *Sundenbock* or “sin goat” have as their ‘scapegoat’ the goat that was slaughtered as a sin-offering.

But what is “Azazel”? According to Rashi it meant “a steep, rocky or hard place”, in other words a description of its destination. Rabbi Pesach Wolicki (Former Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Yesodei HaTorah) suggests that this is a striking image and a powerful message for Yom Kippur. So we can choose the way that is ‘for G-d’ by the way of the korban of the first goat. On the other hand, we may choose a path of the Azazel that leads not to G-d but out into a desolate land – a desert being a place of no order, no potential and no life.

Suggested cryptically by Ibn Ezra and explicitly by Nachmanides, the Azazel was the name of a spirit or demon, one of the fallen angels referred to in Bereshit 6:2.

Talmud Yoma 67b states: *“And my statutes you shall Keep”* (Vayikra 18.4) – these are things that Satan laughs at:and the dispatching of the Azazel goat. Last you say they are nonsense, it is therefore written, “I am the L-rd your G-d.” I have commanded it; you have no right to question.”

While the Talmud classifies the goat of Azazel as a ‘*chok*’ - a G-d given statute that defies human logic - medieval rabbis, such as Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides, have offered a most unconventional understanding of Jewish practice; that the Azazel goat was actually a bribe.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks expounds further. “The Israelites were categorically forbidden to worship such a force. Nonetheless, some sages did believe that there were negative forces that were part of the heavenly retinue, like Satan, who brought accusations against humans or tempted them into sin. The goat sent into the wilderness to Azazel was a way of conciliating or propitiating such forces so that the prayers of Israel could rise to Heaven without, as it were, any dissenting voices.”

It is important to note that the goat of Azazel only atoned if it was accompanied by a deep and genuine acknowledgement of sin by the people. The goat was symbolic and not an actual vehicle for the removal of sin. Additionally, the Kohen Gadol had to verbally confess each transgression - even those that only a minority of the community may have committed - similar to the *Al Chet* we perform on Yom Kippur today.

The biblical scapegoat is different from scapegoat rites in other cultures where a person functioning as the scapegoat accepts punishment in place of the deserving parties enabling them to deflect responsibility, absolve themselves of guilt, and escape culpability. The concept of the scapegoat is not so simple, but the symbolism of the goat is powerful. It helps us to atone and to take responsibility for our actions.

The Azazel practice ceased when prayer replaced sacrifice, after the destruction of the second Temple. However, the model of symbolically ridding oneself of sins remains in place today in the traditional Yom Kippur liturgy, Kappara where a live chicken, or more commonly, money, is waved over the head of each member of the family to absorb his or her sins and with the practice of casting away one’s sins at Tashlich.

The notion of a scapegoat became significant in the history of medieval and modern antisemitism. It is an historical irony that the concept of a “scapegoat” itself originates with the ritual of the high priest in the holy Temple.