

“THE GOATS AND US”
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West End Synagogue

Today’s Torah reading describes the process by which Aaron, the high priest, was to obtain atonement for himself and for the entire Jewish people on Yom Kippur.

God tells Aaron to take from the entire Israelite community two male goats, *shnei seirei izim*, for a sin-offering. Aaron is to bring these two goats in front of the Tabernacle, and place lots on each of them, marking one goat for God and one for Azazel.

The goat designated for God (*ha-seir la-Adonai*) is sacrificed as a sin-offering, its blood used to purify the communal shrine from the community's sins. The goat designated for Azazel (*ha-seir la-Azazel*), Aaron is told to lay his hands upon its head and to confess over it all of the community's transgressions, symbolically transferring that guilt to the goat. Then the goat is set free in the wilderness, to carry all of the transgressions to the wilderness. This second goat, of course, is the famous scapegoat, the vicarious bearer of society’s sins.

Each of these two sacrificial goat has a specific and essential role in teshuvah, the process of repentance. The *seir la-Adonai*, the goat designated for God, symbolically affirms that life is meaningful and worthwhile. But this goat is insufficient. We also need to resolve our hurts, angers, disappointments, and regrets.

By transferring their errors onto the second goat for Azazel and sending it off to the wilderness, our ancestors symbolically released that which prevented them from living life fully, joyfully, and purposefully. The goat for Azazel purges us of all those moments of waste, of cowardice, of indecision. To renew ourselves for a new year, we need both goats: we need the goat for God which reasserts our commitment to life, and we need the goat for Azazel, by which we release the toxins which poison us emotionally and spiritually.

But today the Torah describes one more step in the Yom Kippur purification ritual. After the scapegoat has been banished to the wilderness, Aaron is to bring two additional sacrifices, an olah for himself and an olah for the community. An olah is a burnt-offering, an animal that is to be entirely consumed by fire. These last sacrifices remind us that after affirming of life and rejecting death, we must acknowledge that we do not live only for ourselves. To imbue life with purpose, we must look beyond ourselves, we must practice tzedakah by generously judging and giving of ourselves.

Each of the three concepts I have spoken about from *unetaneh tokef* – *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* -- corresponds to one of the sacrifices in today’s Torah reading. *Tefillah* or prayer affirms our belief in something greater than ourselves. Today, our prayer represents our goat for God. Through *teshuvah*, repentance, we seek to leave behind the hurts and failings of the past. Today, our sincere remorse for

our failures represents our goat for Azazel. And through *tzedakah*, we concretize our connection to the world around us. Today, *tzedakah* represents our *olah*, our sacrifice.

For a small religious community, we can be proud of what we do to help others in need. But I believe that because for us *tzedakah* for us is a matter of justice, not love, our mitzvah work should not comfort or satisfy us; it should anger us. Our actions, which usually address the symptoms of injustice instead of its root causes, bring us face to face with broad social problems which also demand our attention.

Each time we cook for a homebound person, each time we contribute clothing, each time we feed a homeless person, we should not be satisfied or even proud -- we should be appalled that in a society as affluent as ours, hunger and homelessness exist at all. We must feed the hungry person in front of us; but we must also ask why that person is hungry in the first place.

Maimonides teaches that the highest form of *tzedakah* enables a poor person to become self-sufficient. This *tzedakah* is best because it addresses the injustice of one human being depending upon another; other forms of *tzedakah* ameliorate but also perpetuate the problem. The mitzvah of *tzedakah* obligates us to do what we can to eliminate the need for *tzedakah* at all.

If we feed the homeless but do not speak out on local and national housing policy, our *tzedakah* is incomplete. If we collect food for the hungry but do not address larger food policy issues, our *tzedakah* falls short. If we support each other when we are ill, but are silent on national health policy, our *tzedakah* is deficient.

One of the Torah's most powerful passages says: "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* -- justice, justice shall you pursue" (Deut. 16:20). According to the medieval Bible commentator Bachya, the word *tzedek* is repeated to teach that the text means justice under any circumstances, whether involving profit or loss, whether in word or deed, whether to Jew or non-Jew. And the verse continues: "*Iema'an tichiyeh ve-yarashta et ha-aretz asher Adonai elohecha noten lach* -- in order that you will live and occupy the Land which Adonai your God is giving you." Said Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the founder of modern Orthodoxy: this teaches that our very physical and spiritual existence depends upon the pursuit of justice. Our lives depend upon *tzedakah*.

The Torah portion we're about to hear describes the process of human renewal in terms that are archaic but which remain relevant for us today. It says we must each bring a *seir la-Adonai*, a goat for God; we must affirm that life is good, that life has meaning. We each must bring a *seir la-Azazel*; we each need a way to exorcise our pain, guilt and regrets. But to inscribe and seal ourselves in the Book of Life, to infuse our lives with sacred purpose, we must also bring an *olah*, a full burnt-offering. We must build and nurture the connection between ourselves and our human family through commitment to *tzedakah*, through dedication to building a world not just of shalom, but of *tzedek* -- a world of justice.