

לג ויִכַּפֵּר אֶת־מִקְדָּשׁ הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֶת־אֹתָן הַלְלוּ מוֹעֵד וְאֶת־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ יִכַּפֵּר וְעַל הַכֹּהֲנִים וְעַל־כָּל־עַם הַקְהָל יִכַּפֵּר:

Leviticus 16:33

And he shall make atonement for the most holy place, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar; and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly.

פרקי דרבי אליעזר פרק מו

אמר סמאל לפני הקב"ה רבון כל העולמים על כל אומות העולם נתת לי רשות ועל ישראל אין אתה נותן לי, אמר לו הרי יש לך רשות עליהם ביום הכפורים אם יש להם חטא, ואם לאו אין לך רשות עליהם... ראה סמאל שלא נמצא בהם ביום הכפורים חטא אמ' לפניו רבון כל העולמים יש לך עם אחד כמלאכי השרת שבשמים מה מלאכי השרת אין בהם אכילה ושתייה כן ישראל אין להם אכילה ושתייה ביום הכפורים... מה מלאכי השרת אין להם קפיצה כן ישראל עומדים על רגליהם ביום הכפורים, מה מלאכי השרת שלום ביניהם כן ישראל שלום ביניהם ביום הכפורים, מה מלאכי השרת נקיים מכל חטא כך ישראל נקיים מכל חטא ביום הכפורים. והקב"ה שומע עתירתן של ישראל מן הקטיגור שלהם ומכפר על המזבח ועל המקום ועל הכהנים ועל כל הקהל מקטון ועד גדול ועל כל עונותיהם של ישראל ועל כל העם,

*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* Chapter 46

Samael (the prosecuting angel) said before the Holy One, "Sovereign of the Universe! You have given me power over all of the nations of the world, but over Israel you have not given me power." God answered him saying: "Behold you have power over them on Yom Kippur, if they have any sin, but if they do not, you have no power over them" . . . Samael saw that there was no sin to be found among them on Yom Kippur. Samael said, "Sovereign of the Universe! You have one people that are like the ministering angels in the heavens. Just as the angels don't eat or drink, so Israel does not eat or drink on Yom Kippur. Just as angels have no joints (here referring to the knees), so too Israel stands on their feet on Yom Kippur. Just as the angels have peace among them, so too Israel has peace among them on Yom Kippur. Just as the angels are innocent of all sin, so too Israel is innocent of all sins on Yom Kippur." And the Holy One Blessed Be He hears the entreaty of Israel from their accuser and makes atonement for the altar, and over the place, and the priests and all the assembly from the small to the great, and all the sins of Israel and over the entire nation.

I find this midrash to be both comforting and instructive on Yom Kippur. The comfort comes from knowing that, despite the language of harsh decrees and judgment on Yom Kippur, God is depicted here as wanting us to succeed. After all, God's concession to Samael is offered only on a day when God can count on us to be on our best behavior. This not only disarms Samael in his pursuit of leading Israel astray, but also turns our greatest prosecutor into our defense counsel. So much so that it is based on Samael's testimony that we are granted atonement.

What seems instructive is this very change in Samael. The midrash suggests that we can quiet even our most ardent critics by displaying exemplary behavior. It is true that there will be those who pursue us simply out of baseless hatred or jealousy, but we should not supply them with ammunition. By acting on our best impulses, we have the power to soften the hearts of those who would view us critically, and can change our adversaries into our advocates.

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# Torah from JTS

Yom Kippur 5772

Leviticus 16:1–16:34 and Numbers 29:7–29:11

October 8, 2011

10 Tishrei 5772

## Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Marc Wolf, vice chancellor and chief development officer, JTS.

About a year ago, I had a conversation with a friend in which he described the way he had experienced his life to that point. He said it felt as if he were a passenger on a train, and that being on a train meant there was a set destination and stops along the way, and absolutely no deviation from the proscribed course. It wasn't that he was unhappy with the direction; it wasn't that he regretted any stop he had made along the way. What bothered him was a particular moment of realization: he wasn't sure what was driving the engines or even if he wanted to continue on that particular track.

Whenever we hear someone addressing their fundamental challenges in life, we cannot help but personalize it on some level. For me, I imagined the moment when Wile E. Coyote discovers he is about 15 feet off the edge of a cliff and still running as if he were on solid ground. The thing about this image is that it not only made me nostalgic for my childhood, it struck a chord deep inside. And it made me feel anxious and, on some level, uncomfortable.

In her Yom Kippur sermon last year, my colleague, teacher, and friend Rabbi Abby Treu introduced me to the work of Kathryn Schultz, the author of *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*. Schultz writes about this feeling, and makes a distinction between being wrong and the moment when you recognize that you are actually wrong. Being wrong is easy, she says: most of the time when we are wrong, we don't actually realize it. We tend to live in the present—we actually prefer to live in the present. We spend much of our time calendaring the present, planning for it, and feeling just fine and right about what we are doing. We live in the present not only individually, but collectively.

What Schultz describes is the Wile E. Coyote moment—when we discover that we have made an error and begin to plummet to the canyon floor—that changes our attitudes and makes us realize that we are not running on solid ground anymore.

The Yamim Nora'im are filled with these moments, and the Torah readings and liturgy inspire us to step outside of ourselves and recognize when we are not on solid ground.

During the Avodah service on Yom Kippur, the high priest—atoning first for his personal sins, for the ones of his family, and finally for the entire people—uses a sacrificial goat to bear the burden of the sins of the people. The high priest confesses those sins over the head of the goat and then sends it off into the wilderness where,

channeling Wile E. Coyote, it walks over the edge of a cliff. This temple ritual that led to the expiation from sin is one that brought great joy at the end of the day to the people of Israel. They completed the rite to every last detail and were forgiven by God. For reassurance, a crimson thread turned white so that the people knew that God had accepted their sacrifice. However, by sending the goat to the wilderness, the people never watched it go over the edge. They never saw that it—and they—are not on solid ground, and they did not actually confront the harsh reality of being wrong. What we read in the Torah portion is the celebration that follows, sending the goat away—not the *teshuvah* that should accompany the experience of recognizing their mistakes.

The liturgy of the Yamim Nora'im is more deliberate and less gentle with us. With its grand metaphors and humbling language, we cannot help but respond with angst.

Nowhere is this more palpable than in the *Unetaneh Tokef*. We begin by speaking of the power of the days—their awe and power intentionally alarm us. We first stand as the accused on trial, confronted with anything we—willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly—have done. As sheep being examined by our shepherd, we are left even without a voice to defend our behavior. We are reviewed, numbered, and counted, judged according to our worth. If that were not enough to get us to look down and examine our footing, the laundry list of fates that strike fear in our hearts, minds, and souls certainly are. Through a cycle of metaphors, the key liturgical piece of the Yamim Nora'im explicitly tells us we are not on solid ground.

So what do we do when we are confronted with the reality that the ground has vanished beneath us?

The Slonimer Rebbe Shalom Noah Berezovsky addresses this directly in his opening commentary on the Yamim Nora'im. First, the Slonimer raises the question of how Rosh Hashanah became Yom ha-Din, the Day of Judgment. He asks why we take a holiday that is, on its textual level, a happy occasion and fill it with such dread. The Slonimer responds that God's sovereignty and imagery of the creation of the world intentionally elicit feelings of anxiety and dread. Notably, the refrain in our 'Amidah throughout the Yamim Nora'im directly references the fear and awe we should feel on these days.

Adonai our God, instill Your awe in all You have made, and fear of You in all You have created, so that all You have fashioned revere You, all You have created bow in recognition, and all be bound together, carrying out Your will wholeheartedly (*Mahzor Lev Shalem* 321).

The liturgical emphasis on anxiety is intentional, the Slonimer states. And the purpose of the language and metaphors is what we read in the last line: that we should carry out God's Will wholeheartedly. This focus on God's Will is designed to make us look down to see if we are still standing on solid ground.

The Yamim Nora'im intentionally push us over the edge. At this time of renewal and introspection, we are forced to see that the ground below us is gone. At this moment—vulnerable, uncomfortable, and anxious—we are inspired to renew our sense of purpose.

May we embrace the anxiety that the Yamim Nora'im elicits in us, and, renewing our sense of purpose, return quickly to solid ground.

*The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.*

## A Taste of Torah

### A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

This coming Shabbat culminates the period of Aseret Yemei Teshuvah, the Ten Days of Repentance, as we commemorate Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It is the Sabbath of Sabbaths, during which we seek to successfully complete our journey toward making amends and recall the ritual of purification that unfolded in biblical times. This particular ritual is detailed during the Yom Kippur *Musaf* service. We read that the High Priest would set aside his elegant garments and don the garb of a regular priest as he entered the Holy of Holies. There he would atone for his own sins, the transgressions of his family, and the sins of all Israel. Subsequently, two goats were selected—one for God and the other designated for Azazel. While the first goat would be offered as a sacrifice, the second animal would be led into the desert wilderness to this place called Azazel. What was this mysterious place, and how can we better understand this intriguing ritual of the “scapegoat”?

The 13th century-Spanish commentator Nahmanides (a.k.a. Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman or Ramban) sheds light on the significance of the goat and of Azazel. Regarding the latter, Ramban surveys the beliefs of other commentators: “This was a high mountain—a flinty precipitous peak, as it is said, ‘a land which is cut off’ (Lev. 16:22). This is the language of Rashi. Others say this means the ‘hardest’ place in the mountains . . . Accordingly, the meaning of the word *la'azazel* is to a hard place [the root of the word *azazel* being *az* (strong)], with the letter *zayin* doubled just like *izuz* (strong and mighty) (Ps. 24:8)” (Chavel, Ramban: Commentary on the Torah, 217).

Nahmanides, however, remains unconvinced, rejecting these interpretations. He argues, rather, that the goat and Azazel must be understood within a context of idolatrous Near Eastern cultures. The *se'ir* (goat) sent to Azazel is meant to recall a goatlike spirit that represented desolation and destruction. The Israelite nation, then, seeks to reframe this previously idolatrous practice, symbolizing both a break from pagan practice and a break with their wayward past. The act of expelling sins to a place of desolation diminishes and removes the power of transgression from their presence.

While, today, we may lament the fate of the innocent scapegoat, the power and significance of this ritual resonates with us. All too often, sin, as represented by habitual, harmful behavior (idolatry of another sort!), takes hold of us. A downward spiral ensues as we find ourselves embroiled in chaos and desolation. The challenge for each of us is reclaiming a path of discipline in our individual and communal lives. To do so, such destructive habits need to be exiled. The very controlled and complex ritual of confession and expulsion, as represented by the scapegoat, becomes a powerful model for atonement. Discipline expels disorder and chaos. We journey a step farther from the chaos of the wilderness as we endeavor to bring the Promised Land within reach. *Ken yehi ratzon!* So it may it be for all of us in this High Holiday season!

*The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.*