

REHABILITATING THE SCAPEGOAT

Judaism is the most cerebral and abstract of religions. Yet even Judaism cannot resist the dramatization of a pivotal moment: In this case, the casting away of a year's worth of sins. Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the entire Jewish world is exhorted to reflect on, renounce and repent its individual and collective sins of the past year and start afresh with a clean slate. But what happens to the old year's crop of misdeeds?

Do they lie on the floor in a stinking mess for the Gabbai to sweep up after Havdallah? Do they form a yellow pile of dust like the caffeine removed from the beans in a coffee factory?

No. According to ancient Jewish liturgy, Leviticus 16, our second-hand sins were originally packaged up by no less than High Priest Aaron himself in an elaborate ceremony, placed on a young goat, and sent to the deepest wilderness to a place called called Azazel, never to return to plague us.

As in many Torah stories, the details are somewhat mysterious. For example, why were two goats initially chosen? One to be "turned to smoke" in a traditional sacrifice, and one to carry the sins to the wilderness? Maybe to mollify the powerful animal-sacrificial wing of the religion. Why did the High Priest need to draw lots to pick the Azazel goat? Maybe to avoid intimidating task, even for a priest, of deciding which of two blameless living creatures would live and which would die.

Then too, how were sins of the community collected? Did the minyan president send out forms to be filled out returned before Kol Nidre? How were these sins transmitted? In writing, videotape, Utube? And how could they be packaged on one little goat? The answer to that last one is clear. Maimonides says that the sins were to be metaphysically transferred by the priest by laying his hands on the goat's head.

Then the journey to Azazel began. Considering Aaron was still alive, the people were still on their journey from Egypt, so the way to Azazel may have been different every year. But a man was designated to lead the goat for most of the

journey, and way stations were established to report the goat's daily progress. When Azazel was reached, a communal cheer arose from Kol Yisroel.

Then what? I've seen elaborate versions of what happened in Azazel. A terribly steep descent, multiple broken bones, ultimately fatal wounds? Or simply as the Torah says, "and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness." As per the note in Etz Hayim, "The Bible does not provide any information on what was done with the scapegoat in the wilderness." Maybe they lived and reproduced. (Though that would be hard, since they were always male).

Which nonetheless conjurs up a fantasy herd of wild goats, like those beautiful escaped Spanish stallions in the American Southwest. But all with sins on their heads.

But I need to end on a serious note, for the meaning of the scape goat has been perverted in our modern culture. In its origin the scapegoat was a dumb innocent creature, whose only role was to transmit our sins to oblivion. But that is not how the term has evolved. The modern dictionary and common meaning of scapegoat has come to focus on blame. Attributing communal sins to one individual's fault—the scapegoat.

In this baseball playoff season, one famous example comes to mind. 1986. World Series. Mets-Red Sox. Game 6. Bill Buckner. The Ground Ball. Through his legs. Sox lose. Full length picture of Buckner on the back page of the tabloid. 10 Point headline: "SCAPEGOAT!"

It often feels today that our attribution of blame for sin has become more important than the underlying sin itself. But remember. the original scapegoat was just a vehicle, a messenger. The actual sinners were every one of Kol Yisroel.

As the gates of repentance close this afternoon, we should remember the paraphrased famous caption from the cartoon Pogo: "We have met the sinners, and they are us!"

Shanah Tova.