

## **Yom Kippur morning 2020/5781**

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One of the common ways to frame the d'rash on Rosh HaShanah is to ask why we read the particular Torah portion on that holiday. Indeed, at least one synagogue in Washington this year changed the Torah portions on Rosh HaShanah. At first blush, there's no reason to ask such a question on Yom Kippur morning. The answer seems obvious – we read this portion because it's about Yom Kippur; it describes the ancient rites, and enjoins us to observe the holiday forever.

But on further thought, it's not so clear why we read this portion. The Torah has plenty of passages that relate to the themes of Yom Kippur – why read verses that are so time-bound, so archaic and sometimes so obscure. (We haven't known what or who "Azazel" is for millennia.) Even the rabbis seem to have acknowledged the issue by pairing the portion with the timeless, humane and uplifting reading from Isaiah. Still, though, the rabbis retained this reading, and we even recapitulate aspects of the prescribed ancient ritual in the Avodah service later in the day. Why?

I'm going to focus on one possible answer – but first an aside. Much of the Torah portion is concerned with purifying the sanctuary – not something that usually garners that much of my attention. But this year, as we worship from home, using the same devices on which we commit many of our daily sins, that aspect of the reading seems more potent. Probably none of us would get much out of sprinkling our computers with blood seven times, but we do seek a way to turn our daily surroundings into a space appropriate for prayer. How do we create and purify and renew a place to make it holy, and suitable for contemplating our deepest concerns? That's something we may need to figure out just as much as our ancestors did.

But as I said, that's an aside. What most got my attention in the portion this year is the way it embodies a fundamental aspect of our Yom Kippur practice and theology – one that we may take so much for granted that we don't fully consider its implications. What I'm thinking of is that our ritual is a public, collective confession of private, individual sins. It's obviously not a private confession – admitting something to clergy, or an official, or a friend or family member. But it's also not a collective, communal confession – it's not about what we've done as a group. It's about collecting (and recollecting) our individual sins; it's not about collective sin. That's true of the ceremony the High Priest performed, and it's true of the Al Chets (even if they are phrased in the first person plural). The ritual is a public recitation so that we can all get past, together, our individual sins. That's how the Torah envisions healing the community and allowing it to start afresh.

We may have more trouble than we think accepting this concept today. We think in terms of separate public and private spheres – a concept that didn't exist when the Torah or our prayers were composed, a concept that dates from the Renaissance or even later, during the Enlightenment. In worrying about the state of our community, we often feel more comfortable thinking, and certainly more comfortable talking about, our failures as citizens rather than as private individuals. We even sometimes – as this year – add lines to the Al Chet that enumerate very specific failings as citizens. While that is appropriate and meaningful in many ways, it can also have a certain swagger to it – because as we're correcting ourselves we're also often critiquing our fellow citizens.

But in the view of the Torah and our Machzor, all our sins, all our failings and shortcomings – private and public – shape our community and our society. That’s why all those individual sins need to be acknowledged before the whole community – whether on the head of a goat or in the words of the Viddui – if we want to start anew. The portion says, “Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it *all* the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, *whatever their sins...*”.

There are many comforts we derive from this very Jewish practice of confessing our individual sins together. But the Torah portion reminds us that the practice also has a perhaps discomfiting aspect – it’s a reminder that all our individual sins (just like our individual strengths) have an impact on the community as a whole.

As we ponder our fervent hopes for the coming year, the Torah reading can perhaps be a reminder that we need to consider how *all* our behavior shapes our community, our society, our nation and the world.