

Yom Kippur morning d'rash – 2013

Usually, when I read the Yom Kippur morning portion, what strikes me first is how archaic it is. Yes, it has metaphorical power, but the rituals are arcane, the wording is obscure – in two key places words are used that appear nowhere else in the Torah and their full meaning is unknown – and the whole thing can easily be dismissed as antique mumbo-jumbo.

But this year when I read it, my first reaction instead was, “Wouldn’t this be great?!” Wouldn’t it be great if we could transfer our individual and communal sins onto the head of a goat and watch as they were led off to an “inaccessible place” – to use the Torah’s wonderful phrase? It would be so simple, so tangible, so absolute, so complete. Indeed, in some ways it seems that all of Yom Kippur is an effort to figure out how to accomplish in a different world what the scapegoat ceremony did so directly.

It occurred to me that the image of the scapegoat ceremony is, appropriately enough, the opposite of the picture drawn at the opening of Dante’s *Inferno*. That poem begins, “In the middle of life’s journey, I found myself in a dark wood, the right road lost.” With the scapegoat, we’re “out of the woods” – we are unburdened, and it’s the scapegoat that’s left to wander in the wilderness.

But we’ve lost the ability to have the scapegoat work for us. Our ideas of G_d and sin and ritual and magic – and maybe even of goats – have changed, and the ceremony has lost its power. The most we can do is think wistfully about what it might have been like to believe in it.

It seems that the scapegoat ritual had already lost its power even before the Torah was written. Near the end of today’s portion, the Torah abruptly takes a totally different tack. It drops all talk of scapegoats and most reference to ritual of any kind, and instead focuses intensely on time.

The shift starts (p. 536) with a phrase the Torah uses periodically that always stops me in my tracks: “This shall be a law unto you for all time.” This has to be either the greatest leap of human imagination or the greatest lack of human imagination imaginable. To be writing some 2,500 years ago and dictating how we should live today, and beyond – and to some extent succeed – it’s extraordinary.

One reason for that success is the psychological acuity behind the mandates, particularly in this parsha. The phrase “This shall be a law unto you for all time” is used three times in rapid succession here – three times in just a few lines – all attached to directives to set aside Yom Kippur as a special day (although the specifics vary).

I take two things from this repetition. First, that Yom Kippur was seen as especially vital to the community; that, indeed, the life of the community to some extent depended on it. The human need for expiation, to be able to start again, to create a clean slate for ourselves and others is just basic and overwhelming, fundamental to our collective survival. Second, that despite that, the holiday was likely to be ignored or violated. (The Torah is, in its own way, generally terse. You don't say three times in a row that something is a perpetual law if you're sure people are going to follow it.)

Isn't this the heart of the human predicament – not doing what we know should be done, even if we need and want it to be done, even if it can give us pleasure, at least at completion? This can be seen as the very definition of sin. When we are thinking of the coming year, these are the things that we might decide first to actually do – in some ways, the easy stuff – things we at some level want and need and even enjoy. Our frequent tendency to fall short even in this is captured implicitly but starkly in the repetition of the mandates in the lines at the end of this parsha.

But above all, the laws here are intended to underscore the importance of time; they all come down to setting aside a day for atoning. Judaism, as Heschel pointed out, is about sanctifying time; we make ourselves holy by making time holy. We are to achieve atonement, in large part, by cessation from work, by taking ourselves out of the hurly-burly and focusing – by stopping and remembering and considering.

This is harder and harder to do today. It's not just a matter of being busy – people always had competing activities; those goats needed tending – and it's not even just about the magnetic attraction of being on-line. It's that the Digital Age is as contemptuous of divisions of time as it is of divisions of space. The very notion that time matters, that it might be governed by something outside our immediate needs and gadgets, that there are boundaries, that one time may have a different significance from the next are all being challenged by the way we live now. The way time moves and what it means seem to be shifting fundamentally. (This is a challenge for all sorts of observances, including the anniversaries John mentioned earlier in the Torah service.)

So here's the question I want to leave you with: what if our sense of time changes so fundamentally that the idea of a Day of Atonement loses its power the way the scapegoat has? After all, presumably the scapegoat ceremony didn't disappear because it was rejected in some conscious way; its power seeped away as all the ideas that created a context for it eroded. And time is, if anything, a more arbitrary concept than the scapegoat; it derives its meaning for most of us nowadays from whatever we impute to it.

So if we lose our ability to gain expiation and solace and communal healing from trying to hallow a day, what takes its place? Is there another way to satisfy our need for community and individual atonement? Or, conversely, what keeps us coming here and observing the day now, especially those of us who have few if any other links to Jewish practice?

I want to close with a poem by Marge Piercy that nicely captures the way in which a sense of time can sculpt our lives, about what we derive from grounding our need for atonement in the calendar. It's called "[Coming Up on September](#)":

Shana Tovah.

NOTE: In the end, for various reasons, I dealt only in passing with the first idea I was playing with when I began preparing this d'rash – which is how foreign the notion of laying down a law “for all time” is to us. Do we have the boldness (and foolishness) to do such a thing, or to admit doing such a thing? Is our inability/unwillingness to do so itself some kind of sin? Is the parsha implicitly rebuking us for not being able to think in terms of perpetual laws?

There are lots of reasons we shy away from thinking in terms of eternal statutes, many of them good reasons. We are aware of how much the world can change (a sense intensified by the Digital Age in which everything seems ephemeral); we think in terms of seeing values as relative and want to avoid being “judgmental;” we are heirs, perhaps especially in the U.S., to a liberal tradition that wants to be open to changing ideas and circumstances and believes in “progress.” Think of Jefferson’s words – which are on the walls of the Jefferson Memorial – about how sticking with outmoded laws is like a man trying to wear the clothes that fit him as a boy (although Jefferson still had a belief in an abiding “natural law” with its self-evident truths).

So this is no simple matter. But have we lost a healthy tension between change and continuity that now leaves us without the necessary resource of thinking about laws for all time? Something else to ponder.