



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Acharei Mot 5771

By Rachel Farbiarz

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This week, we are pleased to welcome guest writer, Dvar Tzedek alumna Rachel Farbiarz.

Parshat Acharei Mot details the elaborate rituals performed by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. Among the several segments of strange choreography, perhaps none is more bewildering than that of the two he-goats, donated by the Israelite community as sin offerings.

Lots were cast to determine the goats' fates, with chance selecting one goat "for the Lord" and the other "for Azazel."¹ The Lord's goat was slaughtered and sacrificed, while the other was consigned to a more elusive fate. The High Priest laid his hands on the buck, confessing "over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins."² The animal was then led "off to the wilderness for Azazel."³ "Thus," the *parshah* explains, did the goat "carry on it all [Israel's] iniquities to an inaccessible region."⁴

The identity of the mysterious "Azazel"—mentioned in Scripture only here—has rankled commentators both ancient and modern. Defined variously as a specific location in the desert, a more general geographical descriptor or the incarnation of a supernatural, demonic being, Azazel in all its renderings denotes a destination beyond the pale of the good and the ordered world. The terminus of "Azazel" is a state of forbidding uncultivation, a menacing realm that lurks outside the boundaries of acceptable human society.⁵

Traditionally, the text's spare account of the animal's dedication to Azazel is fleshed out with detail gleaned from Talmudic sources. The goat is led, the Sages elaborate, to a desolate cliff in the wilderness and is pushed from the precipice by its erstwhile shepherd. As it tumbles down the slope, the unlucky buck is dashed to pieces.⁶ And with the goat's demise, Israel's sins are likewise crushed—mangled beyond recognition, dashed to pieces themselves.

There is, however, a less common tale told of the goat's fate. In this account the animal is led to a remote corner of the desert and is simply set free.⁷ The sin-laden beast's dedication is accomplished not by its destruction, but by its abandonment to a life in the unknown beyond. Unlike its counterpart that is sacrificed to atone for Israel's sins, the goat "for Azazel" achieves Israel's expiation by being "left standing alive before the Lord."⁸

¹ Leviticus 16:8.

² Leviticus 16:21.

³ Leviticus 16:9.

⁴ Leviticus 16:21.

⁵ For a good summary of Azazel's various interpretations, see: Pinker, Aaron. "A Goat To Go To Azazel." *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* vol. 7, 2007: 2-25. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/50933414/Azazel>.

⁶ Bialik, H.N. and Y.H. Rawnitzky (eds.). *The Book of Legends*. New York: Schocken, 1992. p. 180. Digesting Tractate Yoma chapters 1-7.

⁷ Rashbam on Leviticus 16:10.

⁸ Leviticus 16:10.

It is from this quieter account, I would propose, that a fuller, more nuanced portrait of the process of atonement emerges—one in which sin is at once both obliterated and sustained. The sacrifice of the goat “for the Lord” speaks to an aspiration to purge ourselves completely of wrongdoing, to excise it like a tumor from a healthy body. The abandonment of the goat “for Azazel,” by contrast, speaks to a different reality: Sin stays with us. Our past failures coexist with our present efforts to undo them. Our wrongdoings live in parallel to us, a persistent reminder of the perilous and porous border that separates the wilderness of sin from the good and ordered life to which we aspire.

Coexistence with our sins enables us, of course, to learn from them. They serve as signposts of our prejudices and insecurities, markers of how we can always do better. But the presence of our sins, embodied in the wandering goat, serves more than just a cautionary function. The abandoned animal attests as well to the possibility of a good life that can be achieved alongside the persistence of sin. A righteous life, in this conception, is not one that is blameless or flawless. It is not one that demands moral perfection. It is, rather, one that assumes our failures, and expects transcendence both in spite of, and alongside, them. This is a moral life in which the inaccessibility of perfection serves not to paralyze, but to prod and ultimately empower.

Too often we sabotage the emergence of our better selves by narrowly focusing on the limiting nature of our flaws. Too often we fail to do the right thing out of a fatalistic sense that our transgressions necessarily undo our nobler efforts. Indeed, we recognize the grip of this destructive reasoning in the barriers many perceive to adopting ethical consumption practices. Why shun diamonds that help fuel brutal conflicts when one has not committed to purchasing coffee that is fairly-traded? How can one insist on using wood that is a product of sustainably-managed forests when one’s rug may very well have been made with child labor? What is the value in doing good, such thinking goes, when one is so mired in past and present failures and omissions?

Azazel’s wandering goat helps us internalize that these are not either-or choices. The ability to accept the presence of our sins even as we atone for them can prove to be a liberation—empowering us to reject the paralyzing allure of perfection and replace it instead with the messier inconsistencies of a life of good works and righteous action.



Rachel Farbiarz is a graduate of Harvard College and Yale Law School, as well as of an Orthodox yeshivah high school. After clerking for a federal appellate judge in San Francisco, Rachel practiced law focusing on the civil rights and humane treatment of prisoners. In this role, she helped to improve the basic living conditions on California's death row at San Quentin. Rachel currently lives with her husband in Washington, D.C., where she works on her own writing and art. Rachel can be reached at rachel.ajws@gmail.com.

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