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The Scapegoat

by Rabbi Noson Weisz

"The goat will bear upon itself all their iniquities..." (Leviticus 16:22)

Our Parsha begins with the discussion of one of the most perplexing ceremonies in the Torah; the offering of a "scapegoat" to atone for our sins - the goat that is pushed over the cliff on the Day of Atonement and carries away all the sins of the Jewish people on its back.

Maimonides tells us that the "scapegoat":

...[Has the capacity to] atone for all the sins in the Torah, whether they be light or grave, whether the transgression was committed unintentionally or with deliberation, whether the sin is known to the perpetrator or whether it is not ... (Laws of Repentance 1:2)

By way of explanation the Midrash offers the following idea:

This goat [the scapegoat, called *sair* in Hebrew] refers to Esau, as it is written: *"but my brother Esau is a hairy [written as soir in Hebrew] man"* (Genesis 27:11) [The Hebrew words *sair*, "goat," and *soir*, "hairy" are spelled identically.]

[It is further written]: *"The goat will bear upon itself all their inequities (avonotam)." In Hebrew the word avonotam can be split into two words avonot tam, meaning "the inequities of the innocent." This is a reference to Jacob about whom it is written: "Jacob was a wholesome (tam) man" (Genesis 25:27). The word tam in Hebrew means wholesome or innocent. (Bereishis Rabba 65:15)*

The scapegoat represents Esau, and the Midrash suggests that this explains how it works; the sins committed by Israel are somehow traceable back to Jacob, as we are all his descendants. Jacob's sins can somehow be blamed on Esau, and therefore it makes sense that the goat, which represents Esau, carries away all of Israel's sins. Is there any way we can bring these seemingly strange concepts a little closer to earth?

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HUMAN SCAPEGOATS

This week's Torah portion opens with an incident involving human deaths that is reminiscent of the scapegoat concept:

"God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, who brought an [unauthorized] offering before God and they died." (Leviticus 16:1)

As we might recall from Parshat Shmini (Leviticus, Chap. 10) Aaron's sons were consumed by fire when they entered the Holy of Holies unbidden in an attempt to bring an unauthorized incense offering.

Moses offered Aaron the following words of consolation:

"Of this did God speak, saying: 'I will be sanctified through those who are nearest Me, thus I will be honored before the entire people.' And Aaron was silent." (Leviticus 10:3)

The Talmud interprets the meaning of this verse with the help of a Midrash:

Moses told Aaron: "Aaron, my brother, I knew that the Temple would be sanctified through someone very holy and close to God. I thought it had to be either you or me ... but now I see that they, Nadav and Avihu, are greater than we are [as they were selected]." (Talmud, Zevachim 115b)

Moses consoles Aaron with the thought that the deaths of Aaron's two sons were required to sanctify the Temple. Apparently two of the holiest Jews alive had to die in order for the Temple to be properly sanctified. Moses thought that he and Aaron would be selected, and he was somewhat surprised when Aaron's two sons were chosen instead. If so, Nadav and Avihu were also scapegoats of a sort; their deaths were required to inaugurate the Temple for the rest of us.

Although bringing the unauthorized incense is explicitly stated as the reason for their deaths, the Talmud is suggesting that it was not the ultimate reason. While Nadav and Avihu would not have died had they done nothing wrong, the punishment of their sin took into account the fact that their deaths would have secondary effect; there was something still missing in the Temple and their deaths were needed to supply the missing factor.

How can people's deaths do that? What was missing? Doesn't the Torah abhor the very idea of human sacrifice?!

The scapegoat concept is integral to atonement. To understand it better, we must understand atonement better. Atonement is the conclusion of a long process that begins with repentance. To understand atonement better we must do a little work on repentance first.

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REPENTANCE AS A PROCESS

Atonement is conditional upon repentance, and repentance has definite rules. At the very beginning of the Laws of Repentance, when he is discussing the rules of repentance, Maimonides explains that repentance requires confession, and that confession contains three elements:

1. Admitting to having committed the sin.
2. Expressing sincere regret for having committed it.
3. Making a firm commitment never to do it again.

Without a confession that contains all these elements, complete atonement is impossible to attain no matter how sincere the sinner may be in his heart concerning his or her repentance.

Maimonides discusses the issue of repentance specifically in the context of the Day of Atonement in the second Chapter (ibid.):

The Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, is a time of repentance for everyone - for the individual as well as the congregation. It marks the final stage of forgiveness and pardon for Israel and therefore, everyone is commanded to repent and confess on Yom Kippur ... The confession that Israel has adopted to say on Yom Kippur is: But we have sinned, and this is the essence of confession. (Laws of Repentance 2:7-8)

It is perplexing to note that two of the three elements Maimonides himself earlier stressed as being essential requirements of confession are missing from the Yom Kippur confession he cites – the expression of regret over having sinned, and the commitment never to repeat the sin. If Israel as a nation adopts a standard form confession to recite in order to fulfill the repentance requirement of the day of Atonement and incorporates it into the public prayer all Jews are told to recite, how is it possible that the more important aspects of confession are missing from it?

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