

Rabbi Daniel Berman
Kol Nidrei 2022

Gmar Chatimah Tovah.

This entire *yom tov*, this sacred time that we enter into tonight, began with a goat. Two, actually.

We're much more familiar with the rituals of prayer, fasting and restrictions on comfort that we take on. That's the Yom Kippur we know and live.

But the Yom Kippur origin story begins with goats.

Two identical goats are brought to Aaron, the High Priest in Ancient Israel, who then conducts a lottery. One goat will be dedicated to God. It will be slaughtered and brought as a sacrifice in the Temple. We dramatize this sacrificial service during our prayers on Yom Kippur afternoon.

The second goat, however, is where Yom Kippur begins to come alive. The second goat is sent away to a place called Azazel. As it walks towards this barren, lifeless world, it carries on its back all the transgressions of the people.

This story is kind of heartbreaking. I remember the first time I understood it as a child. I had thought the whole point of this religious project of ours was to *bring in* - not to *send away*. I secretly decided I would not fast on Yom Kippur in protest of the ancient ritual, and in solidarity with the poor animal who must carry the people's burdens of heart all the way to its death.

But it is not a gratuitous ritual - this symbolic transfer of the *burdens of heart* that the people have been carrying all year that actually creates real change for each person, and for the community

We are exactly where the ancient people were, carrying heaviness in our hearts and in our chests, sometimes until our bodies hurt. The weight comes from fractures in relationships, people we've turned away from - or who have turned away from us.

It comes from the much smaller microfractures of misunderstood intentions, miscommunications and sharp reactions that happen every day.

But mostly, that heaviness comes from the recognition, here on Yom Kippur, that we have failed, again, to become the person we pledged to be. Once again this year, we need Kol Nidrei to disavow all those self-promises we made and we need Yom Kippur to remind us, there is so much hard work - and heart work - to do.

What's so powerful about the ancient rituals is that they are completely communal. The second goat doesn't take a separate trip from each *individual* back and forth to the wilderness - *it carries, at once, the weight of the entire community.* Imagine how heavy that is. It's thousands of people. This is the meaning of the ritual - to lighten the heart pains of the *community as a whole*, which has its own energy, its own feel, its own integrity. There is no experience of "I" in Yom Kippur - it is entirely focused on the "we."

What would it look like to bring some lightness to the heaviness held in the Reyim community?

We've been through a hard time in recent years. What would it look like to give over some of the

weight we are holding and begin a process of just letting go? The weight doesn't disappear, of course, it's not magic, but it seems to me we need something to help us all breathe easier again.

There's another element, another texture, of this ancient origin story of goats, however, that is not as well known, but, I think, even more urgent. It has become more and more clear to me over the last few years that if we want Yom Kippur to be real for us, we need to *empathize* with the goat - to understand its journey to Azazel and the last moments in its life.

The first thing to understand is that the goat was not alone as it walked in the wilderness carrying the weight of the community. A person accompanied the goat to its end. The person was called an *ish ti* - a designated person. He was unnamed and mostly unnoticed. He was not a priest or prophet. He was a *ben adam*, a mere person, who would leave his family and friends to go on a dangerous journey with a goat, with no specific benefit to him. He went because he believed it is a sacred mission - first, to begin to repair the brokenness of the community, and second, to shepherd the goat, who, he believed, should not walk alone.

The priests and the people set up ten booths throughout the wilderness. Prominent members of the community would accompany the *ish ti* and the goat from booth to booth and at every booth they gave him food and water until the very last station, the peak of the cliff, when they would stand at a distance and watch the *ish ti* carefully thread the goat to a rock on the edge of the this lifeless, barren world, and then throw it backwards, off the cliff.

Now this is the part of the story that is most poignant. Our tradition imagines the inner thoughts of the goat *as it stands at the very edge of the cliff*. The goat seems to both understand and *not* understand its fate. On one hand, it looks down at the rugged, rough, treacherous fall, and realizes, peacefully, "I've come to the end." But it then glances back at the *ish ti*, who lovingly tended to the goat as it walked through the wilderness so it wouldn't be alone. The goat, now threaded to a rock on the edge of the cliff, doesn't understand. "What happens now?" it asks earnestly. And as the *ish ti* pushes it off, it falls, feeling both a final acceptance and the harshness of abandonment.

These feelings of knowing acceptance and sadness- and their unbearable tension - is Yom Kippur.

Starting tonight - right now - we are asked to see ourselves standing at the edge, trying to maintain our balance, feeling unsteady, overlooking a steep fall, and we begin to wonder, excitedly, in anticipation, "ok, what happens now?" and we're asked to acknowledge, in despair, "this may be the end." And we pray: *b'rosh hashanah yikateyvu uv'yom tzom kippur yechatemu* - on Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: Will we - and people we love so much - live this year? Will we die? Will we be sick? Will we heal? We look down the mountain and we look back at those who have accompanied us, and we don't know. We don't know.

There are so many moments in Torah of standing at the edge, all of which introduce a new concept into the world.

It begins with Avraham. After having challenged God in protest over God's intention to destroy *Sodom and Gomorrah*, Avraham goes to the *edge* of the cities, looks down and sees destruction - smoke rising like the smoke of a kiln. Our rabbis in the Talmud teach us that this moment standing at the edge and seeing earth on fire is the *first moment of Jewish prayer*.

Then there is Jochebed and Miriam, the mother and older sister of Moses. In defiance of pharaoh's mandate that all newborn Israelite boys must be killed, they put Moses in a basket and place him at the *edge* of the Nile. Together with the Hebrew midwives who let the boys live, this is *the first act of life-saving civil protest*.

And Torah ends with Moses standing at the edge of Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel. God has already told Moses that he will not cross over into Israel - that he will die on this side of the Jordan River. Moses pleads with God, crying, praying that God allow him, too, to enter into the land that he has dreamed about all these years, a place so full of hope and faith. God refuses, instead telling Moses to go to the *top of the mountain* of Pisgah, and look around him, in a full circle, in every direction. And then God reaffirms, "Moses, you see this land, you will not go in."

It's such a painful moment. I can imagine Moses looking at the land, hoping, praying, thinking, "ok, I've arrived. God won't let me die yet. So what happens now?" And then looking back at God in knowing acceptance, "I've come to the end."

Standing on the edge with God, with the force of Avraham's protest, of Miriam's courage, of Moses' prayer and despair, this is what we are doing now. What connects them all, however, is not just the

experience of standing at the edge with acceptance and despair, but also *a resounding sense of hope*.

Hope in a renewed world after looking down at destruction; hope in the lasting impact of civil protest in the face of moral failure; hope in the possibility that the next generation will prosper and be at peace in the land we couldn't reach.

This *hope* is what unites all of our ancient prophets - and our modern ones - and us.

In his final speech, Dr. Martin Luther King described the state of civil rights and equality.

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live – a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."^[1]

Tonight, we, too, stand at the *edge* of the mountaintop and we, too, live in that tension, *such sadness* that we were not able to love the way we thought we would love, and we have not been able to forgive the way we always thought we would forgive, but also, I believe, we are *so full of hope*.

Because from the edge of the mountain you can see the promised land..

What does it look like?

It looks like the continuity of the roots we have spent our lives growing.

It looks like efforts towards peace and equality; people caring for each other not only with compassion but also with the force of the prophets: unrelenting pursuit of the dignity and honor of every person, of the integrity of the institutions that create and support these sacred truths.

It looks like love that we have shared with our children, being given now to their children.

It looks like people comforting one another when their loved ones must be let go.

It looks like the haunting melody of Kol Nidrei and the ancient rhythms of kaddish, and the Torah scroll that was read by our grandparents who survived the camps, and the sounds of thousands of people across the world all pounding their chests as they pray tonight on this holiest day of the year.

We stand at the edge of the mountaintop. But don't be confused - the edge is not a place.

The edge is an experience of grace and fear, sadness and *hope*, where, when we stop to consider it, is where Jews have always lived.

But unlike the goat, who will fall, tomorrow night we will blow a final shofar, and we get to return.

To family, to community, to God.

This is the meaning of *teshuvah*, to return.

This is Yom Kippur.

Gmar chatimah tovah.