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Dvar Torah for Parshat Acharei Mot

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Of Angels and Humans

Jaclyn Rubin '02 | BronfmanTorah | Acharei Mot 2016

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When I reflect on my mistakes or things I would have liked to happen differently in my life, particularly around Yom Kippur, I find myself asking whether or not it is possible to wipe away sins completely, to repair relationships or fix missteps as good as new. And if this is possible, would I really want these moments wiped away for good, or would I rather move forward having learned something from them? Although these questions about repentance and atonement rear their heads particularly as the High Holidays near, I find myself thinking about these same questions about this week's *parshah*, *Parashat Acharei Mot*.

The *parshah* is primarily about the rituals of Yom Kippur in the Temple, however, the topic is introduced in an interesting way. The opening lines, giving

the *parshah* its name, remind us of the death of Aaron's two sons, who were consumed with fire when bringing an unauthorized offering to God:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, אַחֲרֵי מוֹת, שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן--בְּקָרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי-ה', וַיָּמָתוּ.

God spoke to Moses, after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before God, and died (16:1).

While there is a variety of answers suggested for what, if anything, these two young men did wrong (ranging for example, from being drunk while bringing an offering to bringing a “strange offering” that was not commanded), the Yerushalmi suggests one possible answer:

אמר רבי חייה בר בא בני אהרן באחד בניסן מתו ולמה הוא מזכיר מיתתן ביום הכיפורים ללמדך שכשם שיום הכיפורים מכפר על ישר' כך מיתתן של צדיקים מכפרת על ישראל (ירושלמי יומא פ"א ה"א)

R. Hiya bar Abba said, “Aaron's sons died on the first of *Nisan*. Why is there death mentioned on Yom Kippur? To teach that just as Yom Kippur atones for Israel, so too the death of righteous people atones for Israel.”

In other words, they didn't do anything wrong, but the people did, enough to warrant the death of these two righteous priests.

Interestingly, there is another important pair that appears in this *parshah*: the two goats sacrificed on behalf of Israel. This chapter describes the process of selecting by lots one goat for God and one for Azazel. The goat for God is offered as a sin-offering on behalf of Israel, while the goat for Azazel is kept alive. Aaron confesses the sins of the people on this latter goat, and the goat is sent away “to the wilderness.” There is some debate as to what it means that this goat is “for Azazel,” and, in rabbinic literature, the goat is not actually left alive but is killed in a fall off a particular cliff deep in the wilderness. However, another interpretation is

that Azazel is a demon, one who, according to the apocryphal [Book of Enoch](#), is among a group of angels punished for inciting evil among humans:

And further the Lord said [after declaring a deluge from which only Lamech and offspring should be saved] to Raphael, "Bind Azazel by his hands and his feet, and throw him into the darkness. And split open the desert which is in Dudael, and throw him there. And throw on him jagged and sharp stones, and cover him with darkness; and let him stay there for ever, and cover his face, that he may not see light, and that on the great day of judgement he may be hurled into the fire. And restore the earth which the angels have ruined..."

(1 Enoch 10:9-20, from H.F.D. Sparks, ed. *The Apocryphal Old Testament* [1984]).

Here, Azazel is not only a demon, but one who is sent away to a desolate desert as a judgement for past sins, an outcome which allows God to restore the earth which, in this telling, not humans but angels have ruined.

This is not the only apocryphal book to speak of Azazel. I recently came across by chance the [Apocalypse of Abraham](#), as well as an [article](#) discussing Abraham and Azazel, who meet in this book, to the two goats of Yom Kippur. In it, the angel showing Abraham around heaven tries to shoo away Azazel. Azazel receives a similar description as that given in the book of Enoch, but what is particularly interesting about this description is that Abraham's "lot is in heaven, but [Azazel's is] upon the earth." Much like the goats we read about in our *parshah*, one of which is offered up to God, the other of which is relegated to a desolate part of the earth, carrying the sins confessed upon its head by the *kohen gadol*, the high priest.

Which brings us back to the case of Nadav and Avihu. Like the goat for Azazel, the death of Aaron's sons atone for Israel's sins, at least according to the Yerushalmi. Nadav comes from the word for donation or generosity, and Avihu—אבי הוּא—He is my Father (referring, as I am reading it, to God). I am tempted to draw the parallel even further, to suggest that Nadav is the goat for Azazel—not only because what a staggering act of generosity to take the fall for the sins of one's people—although I won't go that far, as it seems too much, whether forced or overly-callous to do so.

The dichotomies set out in all of these contrasts—of Nadav and Avihu as righteous martyrs or punished sinners, of Nadav and Avihu with zeal for the worship of God in contrast to Israel who needs atoning for their sins through the death of righteous people, of the goat for God and the goat for Azazel, of burning one sacrifice to go up to God in the heavens and banishing the other to forlorn areas of the earth, of Abraham and Azazel, of angels and humans—leads me to the questions with which I opened this *d'var Torah*: can our sins, our regrets, our past ever be wiped away as if they never happened, to make a fresh start? Even if that is possible, would we want to revise my past, to wipe the slate clean, if it meant no longer having learned the lessons that accompanied these incidents in our lives?

The Temple creates an unparalleled space of either-or, of creating a world with precise distinctions and categories that cannot tolerate the messiness of life with which we live each day. People are very rarely purely righteous or evil, our past mistakes become a part of us as much as our past successes. We are not angels, but, then again, according to the Book of Enoch, that wouldn't save us from failure anyway. So we can aspire to one element of the contrasts laid out, as long as we hold the tension given us in the contrasts. Nadav and Avihu may have been blameless, or they may not have, but their death is as much a part of the story of Yom Kippur as the goats we offer to atone for our sins.



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