

Yom Kippur

Don Capelin September 14, 2013

In late June the phone rang. Everyone around the dinner table looked at everyone else, trying to figure out who could be calling.

The kids all have cell phones and
Our friends know that we don't want to talk to them.

It was someone from the Ritual Committee, asking me if I'd accept the honor of delivering the D'var Torah on the morning of Yom Kippur. I replied the only way I possibly could.....

I calmly informed him that he'd reached a *non-working number*.

I advised him to *hang up, check the number and dial again*.

He was still on the line, having anticipated some verbal dodge ball.

When asked to help in some way I pride myself in at least giving it some thought, assuming it does not involve the repair of anything with either moving or stationary parts. When asked to deliver a meaningful message to 1,200 hungry, caffeine-deprived Semites perched on astoundingly uncomfortable chairs, I was quick to leap at the opportunity.

This morning:

- I will briefly summarize the parshah,
- I will highlight the importance of both our
 - Strong sense of community and
 - Our strong moral code
- I'll describe how the power of this day permits the coexistence of those two elements, both of which are essential to our survival
- I will conclude by bringing this to a personal level, hopefully for all of us, for this is a communal but also a very personal day.

The parshah picks up after the death of Aaron's two eldest sons, with instructions to Aaron on the proper procedure for entering the Holy of Holies and how to atone for his personal sins and those of his household. Two goats are brought forth. Lots are used to determine which will be a sin offering to Adonai. The other is to be sent to Azazel, the desert wilderness. The demise of the Azazel Goat is certainly likely, though not explicitly stated.

Aaron confesses on behalf of his tribe. For the final confession - for the sins committed by all of Israel, he places his hands on the head of the Azazel goat and confesses on it all of the Israelites' sins, rebellious acts and inadvertent misdeeds. The goat is sent or escorted into the desert, carrying the sins of the people with it. Perhaps the intent here is to return sin to the wilderness from which it must have come.

I confess (I suppose today is the day for that) that I find many of our traditional observances puzzling at best. The ceremony of the goats, central to this day, is one of those practices.

I felt vindicated in my confusion over the goats when I read that:

12th Century Rabbi Mordecai Ibn Ezra found this Azazel ritual a mystery, perhaps associated with a pagan practice of making offerings to goat-demons, which was prohibited by the Torah.

Maimonides taught that the scapegoat is an allegory meant "to impress the mind of the sinner that his sins must lead him to a wasteland." When those who've transgressed see that their sins are leaving the community, it is hoped that they'll break from their sinful ways.

As a side note.....I would like to point out that there is absolutely no correlation between:

The High Priest's putting his hands upon the head of the goat soon to be sent to Azazel to meet its imminent demise,

and

The practice of our Rabbi when he places his hands on the head of our young ones near the conclusion of the B'nai Mitzvah service as he speaks words of encouragement and prayer and sends the youth into the wilderness of adulthood.

Central to this day is the communal aspect of the proceedings. We have a tremendous sense of community that is not defined by local or even national boundaries. Our code of ethics and morals has been handed down over the millennia. Those who have sought to destroy us by

destroying our Temple, killing us, and burning our homes and business also knew they'd have to prevent us from learning.....from passing on this moral code by which we live. They'd have to prevent us from gathering.

About the Jewish people, Tolstoy wrote:

“What is the Jew? What kind of unique creature is this whom all the rulers of all the nations of the world have disgraced and crushed and expelled and destroyed - persecuted, burned and drowned, and who, despite their anger and their fury, continues to live and to flourish.

The Jew is the symbol of eternity... He is the one who for so long has guarded the prophetic message and transmitted it to all mankind. A people such as this can never disappear.”

So, we have a strong sense of community and a strict moral and ethical code. This is wonderful, but this sense of community and ethics comes with the almost impossible task of upholding it. We're not perfect. We may not “sin” as is translated for us in the prayer book, but we will often miss the mark. The most common Hebrew word for “sin” in our Jewish tradition is *chet*: as in *al chet sh'chatanu* / for the sin we committed. The word comes from archery. *Chet* means ‘missing the mark’, missing the target. A *Chet* is not an evil deed, a sinister or immoral intentional transgression. *Chet* is a failure of vision, or the result of distraction. We sight the target, aim the arrow, intending to hit the mark—but something distracts us, our mind wanders, our focus is elsewhere—and we miss. *Chet* is an error, an oversight, and we all make them.

The Yom Kippur Amidah incorporates a lengthy confession of sins. With each sin that we confess we knock our fist against our chest—the domicile of the heart, the seat of our passions and impulses. Our intentions were okay, but our passions and impulses caused the arrow to miss its mark.

Throughout the year we do many things as a community. On this day we ask for forgiveness the same way. Our communal recitation of the sins spares the individual embarrassment. It also makes it easier to say the words aloud, symbolically removing the transgression with the flow of air from the body as the ancient Israelites saw their transgressions leave their community and return to the wilderness.

Animal instincts from the wilderness caused these errors, so back to the wilderness they must return. If we need proof of the life saving importance of community, recall that it can take centuries to form one. Or, community can be created in an instant, such as when bombs exploded on Boylston Street in Boston five months ago.

I want to share with you my personal experience of this day, and ask you about yours. To do that, I need to tell you about a brief incident that occurred at work many years ago. One particularly challenging day, my frustration grew to the point that I felt the need to express it aloud. However, not wanting to be Mr. Negative, I spoke in Hebrew - so no one would understand. I shook my head and asked no one in particular,

“Lama ahnee po?” *Why am I here?*

I figured my words would go undetected. I figured wrong. My co-workers had never heard such words before. What strange tongue was this? They were curious. I translated. Soon many of them adopted the phrase and people of a multitude of ethnicities were muttering, “Lama ahnee po” as they went about their day. It’s a question that has served me well over the years. Today I ask it of you.

Lamma ata po? *Why are you here?*

Are you here as an example to your children? Are you here out of habit, or because you’d feel strange being anywhere else? Are you here to see what so-and-so is wearing? I’ll tell you why I’m here. On Rosh Hashanah Rabbi Bronstein reminded us of the importance of being able to say “Heneini! I am here.” This hit home for me because this was the first word I was taught in Hebrew School roughly 50 years ago. I’ve never forgotten it.

Heneini.

I am here out of respect and appreciation for my parents who taught me that it is important for me to be here.

I am here to remind myself of both my flaws and my potential.

I am here to remind myself that imperfection is fine. Even my better half (who is Never Ever Wrong) is not perfect, although she is really, really close.

You have time to think about it. To paraphrase Robert Frost, you have miles to go before you sleep. To perhaps assist you in answering the Lama Ata Po question, I’d like to leave you with the parable of the Two Buddhist Monks....

Two Buddhist Monks were on a journey.

One was a senior monk, the other a junior monk.

During their journey they approached a raging river.

On the riverbank stood a young lady.

She was clearly concerned about how she would get to the other side of the river without drowning.

The junior monk walked straight past her without giving it a thought

The senior monk picked up the woman and carried her across.

He placed her down. They parted ways with the woman and on they went with the journey.

As the journey continued, the senior monk could see some concern on the junior monk's mind. He asked what was wrong.

The junior monk replied, "How could you carry her like that? You know we can't touch women, it's against our way of life".

The senior monk answered,

"I left the woman at the river's edge a long way back.

Why are you still carrying her?"

Perhaps you will use the powerful tool of Yom Kippur to help you leave some things at the river's edge and continue unburdened. I wish you success on your journey.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah