What the… ?
On the Yom Kippur Scapegoat Service

Michal Kohane
Class of 2020

In the heart of the Yom Kippur service, we read about a strange and gruesome practice: that of "the scapegoat". The concept, which first appears in Leviticus, tells the priest to designate a goat to be cast into the desert to carry away the sins of the community:

וְנָתַן אַהֲרֹן עַל שְׁנֵי הַשְּׂעִירִם, גֹּרָלוֹת--גּוֹרָל אֶחָד לַה' וְגוֹרָל אֶחָד לַעֲזָאזֵל.

"And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats: one lot for the LORD, and the other lot for Azazel". (Leviticus 16:8)

First, the High Priest sacrificed a bull as a sin offering to atone for sins he may have committed unintentionally throughout the year. Then, he took two hairy he-goats and presented them at the door of the tabernacle. The two goats were chosen by a *goral,* a sort of lottery: one to be for Hashem, which was offered as a sin offering (*chatat*), and the other to be the scapegoat to be sent away with a messenger (*ish iti*) into the wilderness. The High Priest confessed the intentional sins of the Israelites to God, placing them figuratively on the head of the other goat, the Azazel scapegoat, who would symbolically "take them away".

According to the Gemara in Tractate Yoma (66b-67), the messenger would leave the Temple area on a sort of bridge, so he wouldn't have to fight through the great crowds coming to see the holy day's worship. He would head most likely east (researchers debate the exact site), about 7.5 miles outside of Jerusalem, and along the way, in intervals of 1 km, be met by a hut with food and water. The dwellers of those huts would escort him to the next spot, until the last one, who would just watch from afar. The messenger would then cut a *zaharurit*, a braided rope of color red, tying one half to the goat's horns and one half to the rock nearby. According to our sages, the goat was thrown off a high cliff and its body smashed down the mountain, until it was broken into separate limbs. Tradition holds that a miracle would occur and the rope would then turn white, symbolizing that the sins had been purified. The messenger would then return to the last hut and wait there till the holy day was over. At that time, the messenger would meet the High Priest and let him know that the mission was accomplished.

It seems like everything about this ordeal irks us: we already struggle with the idea of sacrifices, and now top that with the idea of lots? Isn't Yom Kippur a day when we are meant to pray, speak of intention, be focused and atone? How can all this be possible through lots? Isn't the drawing of lots a form of coincidence and happenstance which stands in contradiction to what this holy day is about? Or perhaps, worse yet, isn't a form of duality creeping into our holiest day? Had the text said, "one lot for the altar, and one for Azazel", *nu, meila*, maybe we could have lived with it, but by saying, "one for Hashem, and one for Azazel", is the Torah implying that Azazel is something outside of Hashem? And what about letting the High Priest know after the chag? What if the messenger didn't come back? What if the mission was not accomplished? Would the day be all for naught?

www.yeshivatmaharat.org
718-796-0590

Criticism of this mitzvah was already addressed in the Talmud (Bavli Yoma 67b, Steinsaltz translation, William Davidson edition, at Sefaria.org):

> *את חוקותי תשמרו דברים שהשטן משיב עליהן ואלו הן אכילת חזיר ולבישת שעטנז וחליצת יבמה וטהרת מצורע ושעיר המשתלח ושמא תאמר מעשה תוהו הם ת"ל (ויקרא יח, ל) אני ה' אני ה' חקקתיו ואין לך רשות להרהר בהן*
>
> The phrase: **And you shall keep my statutes,** is a reference to **matters that Satan** and the nations of the world **challenge** because the reason for these mitzvot are not known. **They are:** The prohibitions against **eating pork; wearing** garments that are made from **diverse kinds** of material, i.e., wool and linen; performing the **ḥalitza** ceremony with **a yevama,** a widow who must participate in a levirate marriage or ḥalitza; **the purification** ceremony **of the leper; and the scapegoat. And lest you say these** have no reason and **are meaningless acts,** therefore **the verse states: "I am the Lord"** (Leviticus 18:4), to indicate: **I am the Lord, I decreed these** statutes **and you have no right to doubt them.**

Let's begin by trying to figure out, what is Azazel? The sages have offered a number of explanations: The Talmud (Yoma 67) implies a rough spot in the mountains (from *az* – powerful) and maybe one particular mountain's name. Rashi elaborates on the term "*eretz gzera*", literally, a land of decree, but also a land that's cut (from the root g.z.r.), namely a place of cliffs. Rambam says that "cut" refers to cut from the public, i.e. the sins that are no longer done. Ibn Ezra refuses to explain and says there's a great secret here not to be revealed. Or Hachayim thinks it has to do with the place of lesser forces (*zal* like *zol*, cheap). Rashbam explains that *zal* comes from the Aramaic "to go", and says that since this goat was not chosen to be sacrificed, it was sent back to wherever it wanted to go to, possibly even to its original herd -- quite different, and maybe much more comforting, from the smashed goat others describe!

Much is also agreed on: the goats must be alike in their color, size and value; they should be bought together, making the ceremony completely invalidated by the absence of one of them. The most critical aspect, though, is that they must be chosen by lot. This is the one aspect which, if not done, cancels out the whole Yom Kippur service. Why would the High Priest be instructed to give an important decision to lots?

This word *goral*, "lot", appears in one other story:

> בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן הוּא־חֹדֶשׁ נִיסָן בִּשְׁנַת שְׁתֵּים עֶשְׂרֵה לַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הִפִּיל פּוּר הוּא הַגּוֹרָל לִפְנֵי הָמָן…
>
> In the first month, that is, the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, *pur*—which means "the lot"—was cast before Haman… (Esther 3:7)

Haman here, when devising a mega plan for the kingdom's wellbeing, does not open a calendar to schedule the day in the most optimal manner, but leaves this to happenstance, allowing his action to take on a supernatural power, beyond the simple, controllable reality. Indeed, there are moments in life when, faced with a greater reality than we can comprehend, we turn to a higher Power.

www.yeshivatmaharat.org
718-796-0590

It's told about the Baal Shem Tov that once he and his coachman chanced upon a long, narrow bridge which was exactly the width of the wagon. The coachman stopped, terrified of what could happen: any slightest deviation, which is impossible to avoid, would send them crashing down the abyss! The Baal Shem Tov said, "you're right, this is not something a human can do, but Hashem can!" He then pulled out a handkerchief, tied it over the coachman's eyes, and said, "now go"!

In the place where our human ability ends, that's where we can finally let God in; let things happen which are beyond our original plan. Yes, we can and are encouraged to make decisions, assume responsibility, repair the world. But once a year, we are invited to step out of the illusion of our power. We're at best partners with God. We know so little. In the words of the Psalmist we are asked:

הַרְפּוּ וּדְעוּ כִּי־אָנֹכִי אֱלֹקִים...

"Let go and know that I am G-d… (Psalms 46:11)

This is the heart of Yom Kippur.

As evidenced by this Teshuva, it appears that there is no technical reason to treat women's observance of shofar differently from their observance of sukka, lulav, and other positive timebound mitzvot from which they are exempt. However, communal practice appears to have evolved in a way that encourages women's observance of shofar more so than is the case for sukka and lulav.

It is interesting to speculate on why this difference in practice may have developed. One possibility may be the different nature of these mitzvot. Shofar is different from sukka and lulav in that the activity required by the woman is essentially passive -- she can fulfill the mitzva by listening as opposed to actively doing something like shaking a lulav or eating (and sleeping) in a sukka. Perhaps this is a reason women may have felt more comfortable taking on this mitzva, and communities may have been more willing to support their observance. Alternatively, the difference in practice may have an economic basis. In less affluent times, communities may not have had enough sukkot or lulavim to accommodate all the men, so it would have been far less likely to even consider including women in performance of these mitzvot. By contrast, a single shofar would have been sufficient for the entire community who came to listen to the shofar blasts, and the inclusion of women would not have interfered with the observance by men.

Regardless of the historical reasons for women's greater observance of shofar than of sukka and lulav, it is likely that our contemporary communal practice of encouraging and enabling women's observation of shofar more than these other mitzvot is a reflection of the long-standing historical practice of women making a greater effort to observe the mitzva of shofar.

About Yeshivat Maharat

Yeshivat Maharat is the first institution to train Orthodox women as Spiritual Leaders and Halakhic authorities, and envisions a world in which Judaism is relevant, Jewish communities are educated, and diverse leaders guide individuals to live spiritually engaged lives. Yeshivat Maharat's mission is to educate, ordain and invest in passionate and committed Orthodox women who model a dynamic Judaism to inspire and support individuals and communities.

Yeshivat Maharat was founded in 2009 as the first yeshiva to ordain women to serve in the Orthodox clergy, after the ordination of Rabba Sara Hurwitz by Rabbi Avi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber. The word Maharat is a Hebrew acronym for *manhiga hilkhatit rukhanit toranit*, one who is a teacher of Jewish law and spirituality. By providing a credentialed pathway for women to serve as clergy, through rigorous study of Talmud, halakhah, pastoral counseling and leadership development, we increase the community's ability to attract the best and brightest into the ranks of its clergy. In addition, by expanding the leadership to include women, we seek to enliven the community at large with a wider array of voices, thoughts, and perspectives.

Now in its 10th year, Yeshivat Maharat has graduated 26 women who are serving in clergy roles in synagogues, schools, hospitals, universities and Jewish communal institutions. There are 31 more students in the pipeline, preparing to change the landscape of Orthodox Judaism and the community at large.

www.yeshivatmaharat.org

718-796-0590