

Acharei Mot-Kedoshim 5783: The Scapegoat and the Cookie Jar

I remember a song from childhood, and now you can even see it on YouTube, or buy the book of it online, complete with illustrations.

It starts, “Who took the cookies from the cookie jar?” “Suzie took the cookies from the cookie jar!” “Who me?” “Yes, you!” “Not me!” “Then who?” the sing-song question repeats, followed by accusation, denial, and repeats again and again.

It’s a cute song, and illustrates (and I worry – teaches) an unavoidable part of our flawed human condition, which is the tendency to make mistakes, and attach the fault or blame, onto another. We know someone or maybe even everyone took cookies, but no one wants to fess up to it. Indeed, it is human to want to avoid the feeling of being unworthy after making a mistake, and therefore, it is human to blame. We have a word for this. Attaching the fault of one’s own mistake to another is called “scapegoating”.

The first recorded use of the term “scapegoat” was in reference to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and the biblical practice of exiling a goat in a symbolic casting off of one’s sins.

The original scapegoat, an English translation of the Hebrew *azazel*, loosely meaning “the goat that departs”, is a biblical reference that first appears in Leviticus, in this week’s parashah, as an animal who is symbolically burdened with the people’s sins before being cast out into the desert.

On Yom Kippur, two goats were brought to the temple, and during a ritual with high drama, the High Priest would cast lots on the two identical goats. The lots bore the words, “to the Lord,” and the other lot, “to *Azazel*.” The one on which the lot saying, “to the Lord” was offered as a blood sacrifice and the other, “to *Azazel*,” was designated the “scapegoat”. The High Priest confessed the sins of the people upon the goat designated “to *Azazel*,” figuratively attaching the nation’s sins onto the animal, and then the goat was taken away into the desert outside Jerusalem and plunged to its death.

We don’t exactly know what *azazel* means. Rashi and the Sages explained that it meant a steep, rocky, hard place, indicating it’s destination. Later commentators, including Nachmanides, and Ibn Ezra thought *azazel* was the name of a spirit or

demon, a negative force. Sending the goat to *azazel* was thought to be a way of appeasing the demon. The thought however, of a demonic force that would be distinct from God, is not consistent with Jewish thought.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l offers an additional interpretation, meaning of *azazel*:

The third interpretation, and the simplest, is that *Azazel* is a compound noun meaning "the goat [ez] that was sent away [azal]." This led to the addition of a new word to the English language. In 1530 William Tyndale produced the first English translation of the Hebrew Bible, an act then illegal and for which he paid with his life. Seeking to translate *Azazel* into English, he called it "the scapegoat," i.e. the goat that was sent away and released. In the course of time, the first letter was dropped, and the word "scapegoat" was born.¹

As I mentioned with the childhood song, Who took the cookies from the cookie jar, scapegoating is alive and well in our world today, as it has been for millennia. Unlike the children's song, real scapegoating says more about the person, entity, or nation that does it, and is harmful and sometimes deadly to the person or people who carry the sin of others, like the goat sent out to die in the desert.

In our Jewish tradition, what we do on Yom Kippur, is actually much more than the modern equivalent of sending off our sins. We are taught to reflect, consider, remember, and address our mistakes directly by doing the work of repentance, apologizing to the person or persons we hurt, saying what we did, repairing what we can, and not repeating the mistake. We do all this, and ask forgiveness from others, but even still there would be the lingering feeling that our work was and perhaps is, incomplete. The feeling of shame for our sins, as individuals, and as a community, can linger. Hence, the need for dramatic ritual.

The goat for *azazel*, the scapegoat, was the ancient ritual that carried off, in dramatic visual and public form, the sins of everyone in the community. This ritual addressed the lingering condition of wrongdoing of the whole community, as we are a community that is bound by mutual responsibility, and to avoid wrongdoing. The visual of this drama was essential, for all those that the High Priest prayed for, would imagine the goat was actually carrying away all their sins and all the feelings that accompany making mistakes. Further, Dr. Erica Brown, in her

¹ <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/acharei-mot/the-scapegoat/>

Thoughts on *Parshat Achrei Mot-Kedoshim*, “Leadership and the Scapegoat,” teaches that this only works when the whole community was committed to change. Paradoxically, this whole process requiring personal and communal responsibility is completely opposite of what the word “scapegoat” now means.

This personal and communal work towards restoration of our full humanity, striving towards unburdening from wrongdoing, is now recognized in two confessional prayers in our High Holy Day liturgy, *Al Cheyt* (for our sins), and *Ashamnu* (we have trespassed).

One of my favorite teachings is that we enter into the High Holy Days, knowing that our High Holy Day liturgy will guide us from the burden of sin, missing the mark in our lives, towards forgiveness, and a sense of renewal and hope. Our rituals of repentance and atonement are filled with hope.

As I think back to the child’s song, “Who took the cookies from the cookie jar?”, I think it has a teaching quality to it – the song takes a common thing that human beings do, and as children sing it around the room, each child who is “accused” gets to feel what that’s like. Perhaps that encourages us not to do that to others. Also, what is charming about the song is that the singers believe the denial of each child accused. It’s just a song. That is not the case in our world today.

Every day our news, on TV, in the paper, and every kind of media highlights and magnifies blame. Blame sticks to people, whether they have responsibility in the matter or not. Blame is not a child’s game. When we learn to take responsibility for our own mistakes, and not assign the cause or blame on others, that is when we have truly grown up. We become responsible when we admit we have made mistakes, and, we gain a sense of cause in our lives, and in doing this, we will truly make our world a better place.

Who took the cookies from the cookie jar? - I took two cookies – they were delicious! I did too! And I want more! - Great, let’s bake some more together!

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Lisa