

FUCHSBERG JERUSALEM CENTER CONSERVATIVE YESHIVA

TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Achrei Mot

May 4, 2024 | 26 Nissan 5784

Torah: Leviticus 16:1–18:30 **Triennial:** Leviticus 17:1–18:30

Haftorah: Amos 9:7–15

We believe that in times of great strife, words of Torah can provide stability and comfort in our lives.

We know that you join us in praying for the safety of our soldiers and citizens, and that together we mourn the terrible losses already suffered.

We stand together for a strong and secure Israel.

The Same is For Everybody

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

Parashah

The language of sending a goat to Azazel is disturbing. We read of the ritual that there is one *goral* for God and one *goral* for Azazel. In Biblical Hebrew, *goral* means lot, as in “to cast lots.” The meaning is clear: one goat gets sacrificed to God and the other gets sent out of the camp. But the meaning of words is not fixed. *Goral* will come to mean fate, which would render our verse: one fate for God and one fate for Azazel.

It is this meaning that the midrash in **Vayikra Rabbah 20:1** will pick up on. It opens with the difficult verse from **Ecclesiastes**, questioning the

purpose of doing anything in life when everyone dies. We read: “the same is for everybody. One fate for the righteous, and for the wicked; for the good and pure, and for the impure; for him who sacrifices, and for him who does not; for him who is pleasing, and for him who is displeasing; and for him who swears, and for him who shuns oaths.”

In the context of the goat, it means sometimes it’s better not to be a goat. The goat sacrificed to God and the goat sent to Azazel both die. What does it matter when? What does it matter for what? What does it matter if one dies pure and one dies laden with sins of our entire community? In the end, they are both dead.

Death hangs over our parashah. The ritual of the goats appears immediately after we are reminded of the deaths of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu. After their deaths, Aaron is commanded to go make meaning, to go make holiness, to separate, to judge, to live. But his sons are dead and either way, both goats will die. The same is for everybody. Why should Aaron bother with purity and sacrifices when such a route led to the death of his sons?

The verse is even stronger than that. We are invited to read not just Aaron’s sons in place of the goat, but God himself and Azazel. Why should God and Azazel share the same fate? Why should this Azazel get a goat just as God does?

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These questions are complicated by our lack of knowledge about what or who Azazel is. Perhaps it is a place name. Perhaps it means goat of removal (אזאזל) Perhaps it means God's rage/fierceness (אזאזל) Or perhaps it is referring to Aziz, a contemporary deity, saying, Aziz is El (אזאזל).

Whatever Azazel is, Azazel shares a fate with God as surely as we all share a fate with each other. But despite all that, despite the death of his sons, despite Kohelet's musings on meaninglessness, Aaron does what he is asked. Moses does what he is commanded. We continue to dance the dance of life despite the death that waits for all of us. We choose to seek righteousness and purity. When confronted with the similarity of an unknowable God and an inconceivable Azazel, we still choose God. We come back from the abyss and send a goat into it in our stead.