

Parashat Pinchas

A New Vision of the Scapegoat

by Ri Turner on Friday July 18, 2008

15 Tammuz

Numbers 25:10-30:1

When people write *drashot* about *Parashat Pinchas*, they often write about the amazing story of a murderer who is rewarded by G-d. However, *Parashat Pinchas* offers almost five entire chapters of additional riches.

Numbers 28 and 29 contain rules for many regularly required “feedings” of G-d, or sacrifices that occurred in conjunction with the solar and lunar cycles and the agricultural calendar. These included daily sacrifices, weekly sacrifices (e.g., Shabbat), monthly sacrifices (e.g., *Rosh Chodesh*), seasonal sacrifices related to agriculture (e.g., *Sukkot*), and annual sacrifices (e.g., *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*).

The text of this *parasha* as it concerns the topic of “sacrifice” is dense, detailed, repetitive and seems unrelated to the activities of our lives as queer Jews in diaspora. But there is something hidden in there that I think is interesting. As with many passages in Torah that are obsessed with sacrificial details, most of the sacrifices in this passage include the sacrifice of a young male goat—called a sin offering. In fact, one such goat is supposed to be sacrificed every day of *Sukkot*.

In a sleight-of-hand often practiced by the itinerant preachers of Eastern Europe (that were called *maggidim* in classical Chassidism), I’ve chosen to use Leviticus 16 and the familiar story of the scapegoat that was read earlier this year as part of *Parashat Acharei Mot* to enrich our understanding of the sin offerings in Pinchas (Numbers 28 and 29). Each portion involves the sacrifice of a goat on Yom Kippur, but Leviticus 16 adds detail to the description of the sin-offering ritual. In addition to the goat that is sacrificed, a second goat is sent into the wilderness to atone for the people. This is the original scapegoat, the goat that escapes death by the knife (likely to run into the arms of death by predation or starvation—this is a domestic animal we’re talking about).

Leviticus 16:8 reads “*goral echad la’[Hashem], v’goral echad la’Az’azel,*” which means “one lot for G-d and one lot for Azazel,” referring to the priest’s role in casting lots to determine which goat is killed (the one designated for G-d) and which sent out of the camp (the one designated

for Azazel). In 1530, William Tyndale, a Biblical translator, read Az'azel as "ez ozel"—the goat that departs—giving us the English word "scapegoat." (This translation of Az'azel is now widely thought to be in error—Az'azel in fact most likely refers to a fallen angel or a pagan demon: variants of the name Az'azel actually translate to "angel of death.")

Whether killed by the knife or abandoned in the woods, the sin-offering goat is a potent symbol. What does it mean to release our sins—or relieve our worries about being held accountable—not by repairing the damage we have caused, but rather by enacting further violence upon an innocent third party? The "scapegoat" is an image with which queer Jews—and in fact members of any marginalized group—are likely to identify. In fact, I think that I first learned the word "scapegoat" in connection with learning about the Holocaust—perhaps even from Aranka Siegal's relevantly-titled *Upon the Head of the Goat*, a Holocaust memoir. With regard to the Holocaust, the idea is, of course, that the Nazi regime scapegoated Jews, queers, and many other marginalized groups, diverting the tension of an impoverished, recently defeated (in World War I) Germany into hatred and violence. By offering people a target for their worries and promising that eliminating that target would relieve their worries for once and for all ("the Final Solution"), Hitler skillfully made fascism an option attractive to a struggling people.

Jews are familiar with scapegoating, and not only in the context of the Holocaust. The stereotype of the rich, miserly Jew has its roots in the fact that, given that usury was considered a sin under Christianity, the role of moneylending was relegated to European Jews during pre-modern times. In this way, Christian societies could still benefit from the infrastructural value of banking, but Jews could take on all the anger of debtors and the all disgust of other Christians who feared (and benefited from) the growing materialism of Western society.

Queers are also familiar with scapegoating. The last four years of US politics have offered a prime example. The neo-conservative right wing has managed to maintain electoral strength based on a platform of "moral values"—i.e., preventing gay marriage and limiting abortion rights and stem cell research, to name a few things—while the actual moral effects of neo-conservative leadership have resulted in and contributed to many deaths: death of thousands of US and US coalition soldiers abroad, in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere; death of more than a million Afghani and Iraqi citizens; death of workers abroad being killed directly or indirectly by US global economic policy; death of workers at home from job-loss related to outsourcing and diminishing public assistance; death of people of color at home as racial injustice remains insufficiently addressed; and let's not forget death of queers—crimes motivated by anti-queer sentiments are still not considered hate crimes under national law (the Matthew Shepard Act came close to changing this last September, but the Senate voted to remove the provision under threat of veto from Bush).



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All this is true, and yet the right wing is still able to run under a claim of “protecting moral values”—because they successfully divert attention—and moderate/left wing energies—from all of these incriminating statistics by creating a furor over a few hot-button “moral” issues such as gay marriage. Queers lose across the board: liberals who are fighting anti-gay-marriage provisions are not winning a lot of gay marriage, and many people, organizations, and funds are diverted from working on other issues that are important (arguably more important) to the survival and well-being of a majority of queers—workplace and housing discrimination, homelessness, immigration rights, healthcare, and, of course, hate crimes legislation. This is classic scapegoating.

So, where’s the happy take-home message? Be disturbed, be very disturbed. Oh, wait, that’s not happy. Let me try again. It’s almost election-time? Hmm...well, let’s hope that turns out to be happy. In all seriousness, though, I think the Torah offers us a nice loophole in the scapegoat practice. The goat for Azazel is a scapegoat. It does escape. And now, I know I said before that it was likely to die in the wilderness, and if you believe Azazel is a demon, maybe it’s likely to get eaten by Azazel. But hey, lots of the things that the Torah at least occasionally considers demonic (such as women and snakes, for two) are actually sources of great divine power in other traditions. In fact, according to Wikipedia, anyway, Azazel himself was considered by pre-Christian pagans to be a craftsman, spiritual mentor, and, best of all, an upholder of justice. Maybe that goat, sent into the woods to die by people disturbed by their own inability to repair the world, will find itself taken in and nurtured by Azazel, become part of Azazel’s resistance team, do its part for the struggle for justice. Maybe the scapegoat is not a hapless victim, but the bravest visionary. Maybe the true meaning of the scapegoat story is that we cannot wait for mainstream society to create justice—we must be willing to go forth, find our own teachers, and ourselves learn to build the just and affirming world in which we want to live.

The Talmudic sage Mar, son of Rabina, gave us one of the passages traditionally used to close the *Amidah*, which contains the words, “As for all that design evil against me, annul their counsel and frustrate their designs!” As we as individuals and as communities continue to be scapegoated locally, nationally, and globally, may we find ourselves under the protection and guidance of Azazel as we learn to work together to create our communal vision of justice.



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