



Leadership and the Scapegoat • Parshat Achrei Mot-Kedoshim

One of the most unusual rituals in the entire book of Leviticus is found in this week's Torah reading, *Achrei Mot-Kedoshim*. Aaron is commanded to take two male goats and place lots upon them as a means of expiation. One goat was to be sacrificed, and the other, the mysterious Azazel, was to be sent off into the wilderness.

Aaron shall take the two he-goats and let them stand before God at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; and he shall place lots upon the two goats, one marked for God and the other marked for Azazel. Aaron shall bring forward the goat designated by lot for God, which he is to offer as a sin offering; while the goat designated by lot for Azazel shall be left standing alive before God, to make expiation with it and to send it off to the wilderness for Azazel. (Lev. 16:7-10)

The word 'ez' in Hebrew is a goat, and 'azal' is to be gone, making the goat in this conjunction an animal that has been banished. Rashi explains that the word 'Azazal' is a compound of the Hebrew for strong and mighty. He also cites the Talmud, which states that the word means a 'precipitous and flinty rock' (BT *Yoma* 67b), implying that the goat should meet its death by being cast off a rough, mountainous cliff. The sages of the Talmud interpret our verses to mean that the goats should be as equal in size and appearance as possible (BT *Hullin* 11a).

Maimonides, in his "Laws of Repentance," explains that on Yom Kippur, the High Priest confessed for the sins of all of Israel on this goat, the severe

and non-severe transgressions, those that are intentional and those that are not intentional and then sent the goat away (1:2). Maimonides also adds an important qualifier: this ritual only worked to atone for certain wrongdoings if the people themselves repented. This unusual goat could not magically carry away sins if those committing them felt neither agency nor determination to change.

This ancient rite had important and potent symbolism for those cleansing themselves of sin. The effects of sin can be crippling. It can lead people to internalize that they are only the sum total of the wrongs they have ever done. Wrongdoing can make people label themselves as unworthy and lead to a downward psychic spiral of behavior. Externalizing sin and having it be symbolically marched far away into the wilderness may have had a liberating impact, allowing people to begin truly healing themselves. Wilderness is the perfect location for the goat; it represents a tangle of uncertainty, fear, danger, loss, and risk. Wilderness is a place of both disequilibrium and freedom. Sending this goat into the physical wilderness may have allowed the High Priest and those he prayed for to imagine that all the internal chaos of sin fled far away, leaving them cleansed with a sense of returned order and a renewed sense of their own goodness.

This fascinating ritual also gave birth to the word 'scapegoat' – someone who is blamed for the mistakes or faults of others, often unfairly, to relieve others of responsibility. When we blame

others, we remove the burden of accountability from ourselves. Yet its use today in common parlance is the exact opposite of its ancient meaning, according to Maimonides. The goat was there to help make sin visible and pronounced to all of Israel; it worked as a symbol only when the community was committed to change.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas*, describes the perils of a scapegoat mentality: "It happens whenever a society feels that something is badly amiss, when there is a profound cognitive dissonance between the way things are and the way people think they ought to be. People are then faced with two possibilities. They can either ask, 'What did we do wrong?' and start to put it right, or they can ask, 'Who did this to us?' and search for a scapegoat."

The scapegoat is a common hazard in leadership. Leaders who don't want to take responsibility for problems within their organizations commonly look around for people and conditions to blame. Suket Gandhi, in his blog "Beware the Rise of Scapegoat Leaders" (April 17, 2016) writes that "Scapegoat Leaders" are quick to blame others for their own shortcomings and their inability to achieve expected outcomes. "These leaders have the mindset of finding a scapegoat for everything that has not gone well so that they can protect themselves." He claims the tribe of scapegoats keep growing and says that the expression 'scapegoat leader' is itself an oxymoron: "A scapegoat is a victim, and a leader cannot have a victim complex."

Leaders can also become scapegoats for much deeper systemic issues that boards or administrators do not want to acknowledge or treat. Roberto Motta in "Are You a Leader or a Scapegoat?" (*Medium*, Sept. 19, 2015), describes what happens when companies identify a scapegoat for their problems: "The catharsis achieved by firing the unsuccessful company executive serves the important function of bringing relief to the people who remain in the organization, as well as hope that things will

improve." It also reinforces "everyone's belief in individual action." These people were fired because they did not do enough. If you work harder and better, you will not be fired. But, in reality, those who are truly guilty for the health and well-being of an organization are not identified or punished. They can then seize control of the chaos for their own ends. The factors contributing to organizations' problems are ignored.

The scapegoat of the Hebrew Bible was meant to achieve the very opposite of what scapegoating does today. It was the High Priest himself who was charged with confessing on the day and sending the goat away. In full view of his community, the High Priest took responsibility for his sins, those of his household, and for those of all of Israel. When he intoned the words, he understood his responsibility as the leader to own his sins and those of his flock.

So, who and what have you blamed for your mistakes?