

YITZHAK AND YISHMAEL: The Arbitrariness of Our Fate

Rabbi Micha'el Rosenberg

The Torah readings for the days of the High Holidays could hardly be more different.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read of a barren woman blessed by God and given a child (Genesis 21). This story is followed by a narrative of two women competing for pride of place in the household, with one machinating to get the other thrown out of the home; and then a heartrending and dramatic telling of that exiled mother, giving up hope not only for herself, but also for her infant child, only to, once again, be answered by God directly. For the second day, the Torah ups its game, introducing a seemingly tyrannical God demanding the slaughter of Sarah's long-awaited child, a faithful Avraham submitting to the divine decree, a heroic Yitzhak going along with the plan, and then a last-minute rescue as an angel steps in, provides a ram, and releases the human sacrifice at the last possible moment (Genesis 22).

You come back on Yom Kippur expecting a similarly majestic, complicated, dramatic narrative—and you get Leviticus 16. And not the ethical monotheism of the second half of Leviticus, but the heart of the sacrificial cult: real, bloody, ritualistic Leviticus, an extraordinarily detailed description of what should happen in the *mishkan* so as to clean it of its accumulated ritual impurity. The High Priest comes into the Holy of Holies with precisely one bull and one ram—the former becomes an expiation offering, a *hatat*, and the latter a burnt offering, an *olah*. He has to bathe, and then put on a particular set of clothing. Then he takes two communally owned goats, and he

marks one off to be exiled, the prototypical scapegoat, the *se'ir la-azazel*, and the other to be offered as another expiation offering to God. And so on, and so forth, complete with sprinklings of blood and specific changes of clothes.

Why the sudden genre shift from the narratives of Rosh Hashanah to the sacrifices of Yom Kippur? Something deeper is at work in this Torah reading, something external to the actual details of what the High Priest is supposed to do on this day, something that ties back to the Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah, and gives us a vital lesson for the internal, penitential work of this period.

The Mishnah clarifies the requirements for the two goats, one for God and one for Azazel:

משנה יומא ו:א

שני שעירי יום הכפורים מצותן שיהיו שניהן שוין
במראה ובקומה ובדמים ובלקיחתן כאחד

Mishnah Yoma 6:1

The two goats selected for this ritual should be identical in every way—they must look exactly alike, they must cost the same amount; you even have to purchase them at the exact same time.

Why is the identity of these two goats so important?

Two identical goats, but with two very different designations, and two astonishingly distinct fates. One is for God, and one is for Azazel; one is a divine offering,

and the other is its almost demonic inversion. One is offered on the holy altar, in the heart of God's home on earth, while the other is left to live, but a wandering, meandering, seemingly pointless existence on the margins, sent out to the wilderness, out of the community, out of the world as we know it.¹

In the Torah, there is only one other time when something or someone is sent into the wilderness—and that is Yishmael, Abraham's firstborn son, child of Hagar, in the reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Abraham took Hagar and her son Yishmael, and he sent them out (*va-yeshalheha*), out into the wilderness of Be'er Sheva (Genesis 21:14). In a very basic sense, then, Yishmael is an iteration of the scapegoat of Yom Kippur. Yishmael was the first offering to be sent out into the wilderness; when we see the ritual of the scapegoat on Yom Kippur, we are meant to see it with that lens.

Of course, the scapegoat in the Torah, though it holds a powerful place in our cultural vernacular, is only one half of an offering; its identical twin, the goat for God, gets offered up on the altar. And here, too, we find a kind of prefiguring in Genesis, because just as Yishmael is sent out into the wilderness, so, too, Yitzhak gets brought up on the altar. This takes place on Har Ha-Moriyah, which is, according to tradition, the Temple Mount, in the center of God's domain.² True, Yitzhak does not actually get sacrificed, but a number of traditions hint at the chilling idea that Abraham went through with the ritual murder,³ a telling of the tale that some biblical scholars argue you can actually see hidden in the text of the Torah itself.⁴

The interdependent relationship between the scapegoat and the offering for God is not a new

convention first appearing in Leviticus; rather, it is the ritual commemoration of the first paired offering, the brothers Yitzhak and Yishmael, one offered up and one sent out, one to remain in God's domicile, and the other exiled to the margins. And this is why the offerings in the Temple must be identical. Despite their very different ends, Yishmael and Yitzhak are, fundamentally, identical. Consider this *midrash*:

רש"י בראשית כב:

את בנך - אמר לו שני בנים יש לי, אמר לו את יחידך,
אמר לו זה יחיד לאמו וזה יחיד לאמו, אמר לו אשר
אהבת, אמר לו שניהם אני אוהב, אמר לו את יצחק.

Rashi on Genesis 22:2⁵

"Your son"—[Abraham] said to [God]: I have two sons! [God] said to him: "Your beloved." He said to Him: Each of them is beloved to his mother! He said to him: "That you love." He said to Him: I love both of them! He said to him: "Yitzhak."

God's need to identify the victim with greater and greater specificity—all to no avail—can end only when God claims Yitzhak by name, because, ultimately, each of these children is the same in their father's eyes. A rose by any other name might smell as sweet, but if the only thing that can separate between Yishmael and Yitzhak is their respective names, then what truly marks Yitzhak as worthy to be the offering for God and not for Azazel?

Indeed, on further reflection, the banished son is the one with the far more auspicious, theologically meaningful, Jewish name: Yishmael, "God will hear," a proper theophoric name, that is, a name with God's name included within it. By contrast, Yitzhak—the chosen son—has a name that does not mention God

1 According to the Mishnah, this goat is also killed, by being pushed off of a cliff (Mishnah Yoma 6.6). Leviticus' description, however, describes this goat as "going free" (Leviticus 16:22). A friend who grew up on a ranch once suggested to me that the Mishnah's interpretation may reflect practical concerns: a goat released from its home would likely wander back to that home, ruining the symbolism of sending the goat, bearing our sins, away.

2 See, for example, Rashi on Genesis 22:14.

3 See references to "Yitzhak's ashes"—implying that there was indeed some kind of sacrifice here—in Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 16a, its earlier parallels, e.g. Sifra BeHukkotai Chapter 8. Regardless, the point of the story is that Yitzhak *could—and maybe should!—have been sacrificed*, if it weren't for God's direct intervention.

4 See, e.g., Tzemah Yoreh, *Genesis: Israel's Origins* (Kernel to Canon Vol. 14, 2014).

5 Rashi is citing Bereishit Rabbah 55:7.

at all, that, according to the Torah, recalls Sarah's *lack* of faith, the inauspicious beginnings of this second Jewish patriarch as his mother laughed at the possibility of her giving birth (Genesis 18:12).

The upshot, both in the Torah and in the *midrash*, highlights the interchangeability of Avraham's two sons. This is specifically to deny the claim that we *want* to make: that Yitzhak somehow deserves the birthright that he receives and which is denied to his brother.

And so, just as Avraham's two sons are identical, so, too, says the Mishnah, must the two goats offered on Yom Kippur be identical. To teach us this: Yishmael's fate, and that of Yitzhak—and *each of our own* fates—is in many respects, deeply, fundamentally, random. Yishmael is exiled, Yitzhak is chosen, not through some divinely ordained justice but rather by the chances of their births, no less arbitrary than the choice of a name or the drawing of lots.

Yishmael's lot in life is random—it has to be. Think about what happens to the scapegoat: the High Priest places his hands on it, literally transferring the sins of the Jewish people onto this animal. This goat, the Torah tells us, then carries *our* sins off into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:21-22). That's what a scapegoat does—it's a place-filler. By rights, we deserve such-and-such consequence for our actions, but by placing the guilt onto another party, we get let off. We watch that goat wander off into the desert, and we say to ourselves, "There but for the grace of God go I." This is what makes the ritual work. If the participants don't identify with the scapegoat, then the whole thing becomes a morally reckless endeavor in avoiding responsibility. It's only through the recognition that *we are the scapegoat* that the ritual both brings home the severity of our sins, while also lightening our metaphysical load, allowing us to go on, rather than being crushed by the weight of our guilt.

And so it is with Yishmael. Yishmael is not less deserving, and in truth, Yitzhak is not—or, better, is not *yet*—more deserving. Only the act of selection, God's choosing Yitzhak to be Avraham's inheritor, bestows on Yitzhak the privilege of being the ancestor of the

Jewish people. Yitzhak could have been Yishmael. Any one of us could have been Yishmael.

The Temple ritual of Yom Kippur, then—the exiling of a goat *selected by lot* to be excluded, and the inverse selection of an identical animal to be God's choice—demands that we come to terms with the very arbitrariness that has brought us to this moment, for better and for worse. Each of us has been constrained in all sorts of ways by the happenstance of our birth: denied the generous inheritance that a neighbor received last year; limited by a mediocre vertical leap to be never more than a mediocre basketball player; burdened by the emotionally abusive parents who did not support their child's dreams. These and many more are not our fault—they are as quirky and idiosyncratic as the name our parents imposed on us, a fluke of history.

The inverse is, of course, true as well. There is *nothing* that any one of us has achieved that we have earned solely through the sweat of our own, individual brows. Many of us have been fortunate enough to benefit from comfortable lives, good school systems, parents who encouraged us to pursue our educations and set high goals for us. And many of us whose upbringings and personal journeys do not fit the standard storylines of middle- and upper-class American Jewish life did not benefit from that comfort; some of us have borne the fate of Yishmael more often than that of Yitzhak. The benefits that we have been privileged to receive cannot be graded on a binary scale—are you privileged or not?—but rather, come in countless shades, and in a hundred different varieties. We are all, each of us, privileged in some ways and not in others. The point, it seems to me, is not to assert or deny our dependence on our pasts in achieving whatever it is we may have accomplished, but rather, to accept the truth that those very accomplishments—as well as our failings—are not our unique, personal possessions.

The story that the Yom Kippur Torah reading tells us is essentially this: appreciate the contingency that has brought you to this moment. Even as you should recognize your effort and work which have brought you to this point, you must acknowledge as well the

good fortune that not one of us in any way earned.⁶

Our task on Yom Kippur, then, is to come to terms with this reality. It must affect both how we judge others—recognizing the ways in which those who have hurt us or offended us, *even as they maintain their moral culpability*, are themselves the products of a set of circumstances beyond their control. And it must also affect how we view ourselves, allowing for the forgiveness that comes from appreciating the hurdles we've had to leap, and also limiting the pride and self-aggrandizement that lead us, too often, into looking out at our own accomplishments as a Pharaoh, and saying, "My power and the strength of my hand have made this."⁷ ♦

⁶ This is the meaning behind the pithy, if perhaps unnuanced phrase, "check your privilege."

⁷ See Ezekiel 29:9: "And they shall know that I am God—because [Pharaoh] boasted, 'The Nile is mine, and I made it.'"