

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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Posted July 14, 2010, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

THE ROLLING STONES: "YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT"

THE YERUSHALMI: "YOU CAN ALWAYS WANT WHAT YOU GET" © Judith Z. Abrams, 2010

As the seasons begin turning and our spiritual eyes begin to tend toward the High Holidays, I was reading Y. Yoma and a question occurred to me: two ghosts stand before the High Priest. They must have been specially picked to start with since they play such a large role in the ceremony. By chance, decided by a randomizing device, i.e., the Urrim and the Tummim, one is assigned to be a sacrifice and the other is consigned to Azazel.

Azazel is a fallen angel, a desert genie. Azazel is ferociously strong. Anything from civilization that goes out there to Azazel will be utterly destroyed by this ferociously strong entity. That, of course, is what the priests want: they want the sin that the goat carries to never, ever come back. (This is essentially what we do with Tashlich: we send our sins to the fishes, who eat them and carry them away.)

Both goats die, but one dies alone by violence and the other dies as part of a beautiful ceremony. How do the priests commit to this random choice? Here's what the Yerushalmi says:

Said Rav Avin: If the Holy One, blessed be He, had not made each place charming to those who live there, the Land of Israel would never have been divided up out of jealousy.

And so it has been taught: There are three kinds of unique charm: a woman to the eye of her husband; a place to the eye of its inhabitants; a purchase to the eye of the purchaser. (Y. Yoma 4:1)

In other words, once you've adopted something—a place, a person, a thing—as your own, it becomes more attractive to you. I think the Yerushalmi's onto a powerful idea here.

Discussion Questions:

1. I think that the Yerushalmi is right: once something becomes yours it is dearer to you. How does this function in our lives? Can you think of examples? (For example, once you adopt a child or a student, you truly care about them more than some other child.) Is there a "scientific" or "psychiatric" explanation for this phenomenon?
2. Why is it a goat that carries all the sins and impurities sent into the wilderness? The Yom Kippur ceremonies are laden with all the fanciness possible: golden-handled implements, the High Priest resplendent in the finest

clothes money could buy (we're talking a piece of clothing that, in today's terms, would have cost at least \$100,000). A bull is sacrificed in the Temple. So one wonders, why not drive an ox or a bull off the cliff? Is a bull too tough to wrangle off a cliff? Is a goat the biggest animal you can get that you can easily throw off a cliff?

3. Is it because a goat is omnivorous, greedy, bringing one sphere into another...i.e., defiling, that it is chosen for this task? On a cousin's farm in Pennsylvania, we occasionally did seasonal work (mostly bringing hay bales from the field to the barn and correctly stacking them into the barn for the winter). He had a herd of goats and I distinctly remember them nibbling at my shirt that wasn't tucked into my shorts. Does anyone have adult knowledge of these things that they can share?