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Sermon delivered at Congregation Kehillath Israel
Yom Kippur 5772, 8 October 2011

On the Boundary

The Torah reading for Rosh Hashana dropped us right into some of the most dramatic moments in our tradition, culminating in the extraordinary tension and emotional release of the *akedah*, the binding of Isaac. But today on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, it seems we are left to wrestle with a litany of goats and bulls, purification and expiation. If you zoned out during the details of the offerings, not to worry – we will revisit them in the *avodah* service this afternoon, when we re-enact Yom Kippur with the *cohen gadol* in the Holy of Holies.

Why give so much sacred air time to these ancient practices? Because the sacrifices of Yom Kippur invite us into a drama of their own. Or, more precisely, they open up for us the dramas that are at the core of our lives.

Up there with the *cohen gadol*, the central players in the Yom Kippur ritual are two little goats. As we just heard: Aaron shall take two goats and let them stand before God at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. וַיָּתֵן אֹהֶלֶן עַל שְׁנֵי הַשְּׁעִירִים גּוֹרְלוֹת גּוֹרֵל אֶחָד לַיהוָה וְגּוֹרֵל אֶחָד לְעִזָּאֵזֶל. Aaron 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 purification offering. וְהַשְּׁעִיר אֲשֶׁר עָלָה עָלָיו הַגּוֹרֵל לְעִזָּאֵזֶל יַעֲמִיד חַי לְפָנַי יִקְוֶה לְכַפֵּר עָלָיו לְשַׁלַּח אֹתוֹ לְעִזָּאֵזֶל הַמִּדְבָּרָה. The goat designated by lot for *Azazel* shall be left standing alive before God, to atone through it by sending it off to the wilderness for *Azazel*.

In the *Avodah* service, we will follow Aaron and the sacrificial goat back to the altar. That goat will bring atonement for the sins of the entire people. But I want to invite us for a moment to wander off after the goat headed for the wilderness, off to *Azazel*. Where is it going? Rashi proposes that the goat is sent off to a mountain, a place of power and difficulty, towards a high cliff. Later commentators are divided about whether the goat is thrown off the cliff to be torn to shreds by the rocks, or whether it simply wanders off to join the wild flocks in the wilderness. Torah specifies that the goat stands alive. But the place of wilderness is unknown, open. The goat's fate is not sealed. This goat's uncertain destiny is much like our own.

A man brings the goat towards the wilderness. Not the *cohen gadol* or even any ordinary *cohen*, but someone called the *איש עתי* – who could be any of us, really. The commentators puzzle over his alias – why an *איש עתי*? From the word *עת*, having something to do with time. A slow man? A man of the moment? Someone who shows up at the right time for the job? A midrash reads the *איש עתי* as a man whose time has come, someone who knows that he will die in the coming year. This journey into the wilderness where we, too, now follow that goat, is shaped by awareness of our own mortality. To truly enter the wilderness is to know we might not survive it.

This consciousness is not the sole provenance of the *איש עתי* but pervades the entire community. After all, our *parasha* opened with loss: אחרי מות שני בני אהרן, after the death of two of Aaron's sons. Aaron enters the rituals of the year's most sacred day with an acute awareness of where

he has just been. He is a father who has just lost two of his sons. And so when Aaron stands before the two goats, drawing lots to determine the fate of each one, one to send off to the wilderness and one to sacrifice for God, he cannot help but see the two other beings he cradled in his arms, their paths now so dramatically severed from his own.

We too gather here today, each of us very much alive, and each of us attuned to who and what we have lost in the year past. Even our joys are tempered by knowing that each choice taken, every path walked, means another was not chosen, lost forever. And we stand at the edge of the unknown, the coming year opening before us as a strange wilderness. The past year has become a familiar track – we’ve walked its paths and run our fingers along its rocky walls. We know the rough spots along the trails, where the tree roots grabbed at our uncertain feet. Where we tripped and fell. And we know where we found water sources and nourishing oases. We know the company we had for the journey. But the year ahead is completely unknown. Will we safely navigate the precipices and ravines? Will we find joy in the scenery along the trail? Will we have what we need to complete the journey? Will we have good company for the way?

Today we follow that goat headed for *Azazel* a few steps out along its journey. We are open and vulnerable; we do not know what lies ahead. We shake ourselves awake to the precarious balancing acts of life and death that are our daily existence. We steel ourselves to enter the uncertainty of the coming year of living.

In the ancient world, the ailing איש עתי knew he would likely not live out the year. In our times, the boundaries of our lives are a bit more permeable. Sometimes we find ourselves at the brink and are blessed to return to the living.

This past winter, my dad had a stem cell transplant, a treatment for his Hodgkin’s disease. In practical terms, the medical procedure involved removing from my dad some of the cells that generate his blood and immune function and giving him a high enough dose of chemotherapy to eliminate his immune system. When he hit bottom, they reintroduced the stem cells, hoping to generate for my dad a new, healthy, cancer-free immune system. But for my dad, the stem cell transplant was much more than a physical process. He experienced it as being brought to the edge of death and then coming back to life again.

My dad allowed himself to understand, and invited us to understand with him, the total vulnerability of taking away an essential part of his life in this world. At his most vulnerable moment, my dad offered up his hopes for himself, for his family, for the people he knows and loves, and for all being – that we could find freedom from suffering and ways to happiness, and that we could all be awake. With those intentions, my dad welcomed back his stem cells, and with them, slowly, over days, weeks, and months, the return of his vitality. Returning to community, to family, friendships, work in the world, spiritual practice, baking, pruning, raking, changing the oil in the car. And for our family and friends, a little bit more consciousness of what it is like to leave all of that behind, if only for a short while.

For each of us, Yom Kippur is like that stem cell transplant. A day when we taste death and find ourselves, we hope, brought back to new life. We take ourselves out of the activities that sustain life – we refrain from eating and drinking, seeking out basic nourishment. We don’t

bathe, for the dead have no need to clean themselves. We refrain from our most intimate expressions of human affection. Today our *kittels* and *tallesim* are not just white garments, reflecting divine light, but they are also our burial shrouds. We leave off our leather shoes or even go barefoot – the dead have no need of shoes. An early medieval scholar observed כל ישראל לובשים לבנים כמלאכי שרת ועומדים יחפין כמתים On Yom Kippur, all Israel wears white like the angels and stands barefoot like the dead. We don't have to wait for a medical crisis; Yom Kippur builds a near death experience into our lives every year.

Our brush with death is not meant to scare us, but to wake us up. Steve Jobs, a teacher of our generation, reflected: "Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart." Our lives, all of ours, are limited. What are our priorities while we are still here?

Lawrence Kushner puts it like this:

Atonement, *shmatonment*! Yom Kippur is a day of death—the death of the old year, the death of the old sins, and the death of the old ego. But it is not morbid. Indeed, it is predicated on the hope (and a prayer) that a new year and, above all, a new ego will be born the exact moment that final *t'kiah g'dolah* shofar blast is sounded. It is a day of death— so that there can be new life. *You want that a better and purified you should emerge from the encrusted shell that a year of sinful acting has made you?* There's only one way: The old you has to go! Your "something" must become "Nothing."

The Yom Kippur wilderness that we walk out into with that goat is not just a barren space, a place of the dead, a place of loss. It is at the same time a place of the nothingness of total potential. On Yom Kippur, we lose ourselves in that place. We enter a timeless dimension. We pray with our *tallesim* at night and pick back up again in the morning. We're here all day – we lose count of how many times we said אל חטא or *davenned* the *amidah*. We have all the time in the world and yet our words tumble out, urgently trying to say everything all at the same moment. We step into the wilderness, lose ourselves and mourn, and yet we begin to imagine what might emerge. The nothingness of what comes after is the same nothingness that comes before.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslav offers a parable that invites us into that very space:

Once a ship sailed on the sea. A great storm came up, and the ship was dashed to the rocks. The ship was destroyed, but the people were saved. They found their way to a tower, which contained food and drink and clothing – everything that was good. They sat together in the tower and, to pass the time, they said, "Let us each tell the story of our oldest memory, and we shall see whose memory is longest." They started the stories with the oldest among them, finishing with the youngest. The oldest told her story: "I remember when the apple was cut from the bough," and all agreed that this was a very ancient memory. And the next told his: "I remember the candle that burned." They thought that this must actually be an older story than the first one, and were surprised that a younger person remembered an older story. And so it went with the third: "I remember when the fruit first began to grow," and with each story they

heard and told that day: "I remember when the seed was brought that was to be planted in the fruit," "I remember the sage who thought of the seed," "I remember the taste of the fruit before the taste went into the fruit," "I remember the scent of the fruit before the fruit had a scent," "I remember the appearance of the fruit before the fruit could be seen." And then the youngest of all told her story: "I remember all those things, and I remember the thing that is nothing," and all gathered there knew that this was the oldest story of them all.

At that moment, an eagle swooped into the tower to interpret the tales:

"I can explain all the tales that have been told; for the one who remembered when the apple was cut from the bough remembered how at her birth she was cut from her mother; the candle that burned was the babe in the womb, for it is written in the *gemara* that while the child is in the womb a candle burns over his head; and the one that remembers when the fruit began to grow remembers how his limbs first began to form in his mother's womb; the one that recalls the bringing of the seed remembers how he was conceived; and the one that knows the wisdom that created the seed remembers when conception was but in the mind; the taste that preceded the fruit is the memory of Being; the scent is Spirit; and vision is the Soul; but the child that remembers Nothing is greater than them all, for she remembers that which existed before Being, Spirit or Soul; she remembers the life that hovered on the threshold of eternity."

Today we stand on that threshold. Our consciousness hovers in that space well beyond where we live our daily lives. The nothingness of ending meets the nothingness of beginning and we step into the wilderness of considering our lives. What do we know of that nothingness? How do the deepest layers of our consciousness come out into ideas, and where do our ideas find real fruit? What must we cut loose to unleash our potential? Today we invite ourselves to contemplate, even to experience that space, the space of the nothingness of loss and total potential, the basic materials of our human existence. We taste death so that we might live more fully in its presence.

"Life and death," writes Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "are aspects of a greater mystery, the mystery of being, the mystery of creation. Over and above the preciousness of particular existence stands the marvel of its being related to the infinite mystery of being or creation. Death, then, is not simply man's coming to an end. It is also entering a beginning."

In just a few minutes, we will stand together as a community for *yizkor*. In those moments, we remember the loved ones who shared so much of our lives but are now gone. Some of us remember parents, already decades gone. Others remember the children we brought into the world and wanted to see grow, or the partners with whom we built rich and full lives. Some of us feel the absence of siblings, playmates and fellow travellers through this life. Others remember grandparents, cousins, dear friends, who were so precious to our lives in this world. We take note of the residue that each left behind in who we have become, in our communities and in the world we have loved together.

Yizkor is more than just remembering. Standing together, we notice a permeable boundary between our worlds, the room more full than it seemed a moment before. For just a breath of a moment, we might feel the embrace we have so missed, hear a whisper of the voice that sounds

like home, feel a child's hand reaching out for ours, the warm presence of a beloved friend as if we could share another cup of tea. In remembering, we step for a slip of a moment into a reality that sits just next to our own, and we invite the ones we love to join us there.

Spending these 25 hours at the threshold, we are not lonely. All of us will ultimately return to that space of nothingness and total potential. Today we feel acutely how that links us to those who have come before us and to the many who will follow. Today we touch that space but do not enter it fully – it is not yet for us.

Isaac Bashevis Singer tells the story of a boy named Menashe, whose parents and grandparents had died. Menashe was always curious about mysterious aspects of life – What is beyond the edge of the world? Why are people born? Why do they die? One day, he fell asleep in a forest and woke up to find himself in a castle, watching his parents and grandparents, all of his relatives dressed in white, holding their *mahzorim*, gathered together in a room that he could see only through a window. He knocked and knocked and begged to be let in, but his grandfather told him, "One day you will live with us here, but the time has not yet come." Menashe begged for just a few minutes with his family in the mysterious castle. His grandfather took him from room to room, where he saw all the clothing he had ever worn, every toy he had ever played with, all the bubbles he had ever blown. He heard the voices of all the people he loved, encountered the characters of all his favorite stories, saw again all the dreams he had ever dreamed. In the final room, Menashe saw people and images that were totally unfamiliar. His grandfather told him, "These are the events of your future," and then insisted that it was time for Menashe to go. "Menashe's parents seemed to want him both to remain and to leave as quickly as possible." He received their kisses, and then all of a sudden the castle disappeared, and Mensashe was back in the blueberry bushes of the forest, woken up by a girl with a braid, pulling him home by the hand. He knew he'd never met her before, but she seemed so familiar from one of the rooms of the castle...

We invite our reality on Yom Kippur to be a bit porous, letting in slivers of the people we've lost and those yet to be, even the people we ourselves might become. And then at some point, as the day comes to an end, we have to step back into the world. If on Yom Kippur we taste death, we must also return to the world of the living. The castle is not yet our place; our place is still in the forest and back in the village.

The poet Khalil Gibran writes in *The Prophet*:

You would know the secret of death.

But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?

The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery of light.

If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.

It might feel like the long day of fasting still stretches out before us, but this time out of time will pass away quickly. We dive today into the nothingness we came from and to which we will one day return; our task tonight is to carry a taste of this consciousness back into our lives.

We have the chance to see ourselves as the *איש עתה*. We become the people of the hour, not knowing how much longer we will live in this world, but conscious that the task is ours while we are here. We might accept the invitation of this day-long visit to the other side – To return with our whole selves to the world of the living, rich and full of potential; to be awake to what we are here to do; and to be grateful for the gift of each moment.

In the hours ahead, may we allow ourselves to open to the unknown wildernesses of the coming year, strengthened by knowing that last year's worn track was also once wilderness. And may we find ourselves nourished for abundant living in the year ahead.
G'mar chatima tova, may we all be sealed for a year of health and strength, vibrancy and compassion.