Part 1

Poet Miller Williams wrote: “ritual is important to us as human beings. It ties us to our traditions and our histories.”\(^1\) Whether we realize it or not, ritual is an important part of our lives. From our morning routine, to how and when we eat, to the time we spend with our families, rituals fill our day. Ritual also pervades religious life and culture. It links us to the past and connects us to the present. At the same time, it also sets us apart as a culture and as a people.

In 1956, anthropologist Horace Miner wrote an article in the journal *American Anthropologist* called *Body Ritual Among the Nacirema*. He describes the Nacirema people as being founded by a man named Notgnihsaw, living in a territory between Canada and Mexico and having a culture that is primarily dedicated to economic goals. He then proceeds to describe some of their rituals, most of which revolve around the body and trying to avoid disease and old age. For starters, he explains, every family has at least one shrine in their house which is built into a wall and contains charms and potions given by medicine men who require large gifts in return. The Nacirema also have a “fascination with the mouth.” Once a year they also seek out a “holy mouth man” who inflicts tremendous pain using sharp tools. Yet, strangely enough, every year the Nacirema return to him or her for this ritual. Many Nacirema people also frequently visit a “listener”- someone who sits and just listens while they unburden themselves. Finally, Horace Miner explains that Nacirema men and women have other self-harm rituals. The men scrape their face with a sharp instrument daily while the women periodically bake their heads in small ovens for about an hour.

Does any of this sound familiar? When I first read the article, it took me a while to catch on, but Miner was in fact writing about us. Nacirema is American spelled backwards. The founder

\(^1\) [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment-jan-june96-williams_1-16/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment-jan-june96-williams_1-16/)
Notgnihsaw, is Washington, spelled backwards. The shrine/box with charms is the medicine cabinet. The holy mouth man is a dentist. The listener is a psychologist. And the baking heads in ovens are salon hair dryers. How many people were able to figure all of that out?

Miner’s point is that from an outsider’s perspective, our rituals sound and look just as bizarre and foreign as the next. To us they are commonplace and represent the everyday, but to an alien from a different galaxy they would seem unique and could even be described as arcane and perhaps even crazy. Not to be outdone by the Nacirema, we as Jews, a people grounded firmly in tradition, have our fair share of seemingly odd rituals. From circumcision on the 8th day of life, to kissing doorposts upon entering a room, to binding ourselves with tefillin, to lifting people high on chairs while dancing the hora, I would like to see what Miner would have written about the Hsiwej people (that’s Jewish spelled backwards).

And today, on Yom Kippur, we read in our Torah reading about perhaps the most unusual ritual of all. Our Torah reading this morning, from chapter 16 of Leviticus, primarily consists of instructions for the service of atonement performed by the High priest on Yom Kippur. As we will read, it involves the High Priest dressed in special priestly garb, several wardrobe changes, the entering the Holy of Holies, the sprinkling of blood, and finally, two goats. Aaron the High Priest places lots on the heads of the two goats and one is designated for God while the other is marked for Azazel, an unknown place in the wilderness; a place devoid of human or animal existence and therefore understood by some to be a place inhabited by demonic forces. Aaron confesses the sins of the entire Israelite community on the goat and it is sent off to Azazel.

And you thought the ritual of holy mouth men sounded bizarre. This was the Biblical Yom Kippur rite. It has been nearly 2,000 years since we observed Yom Kippur in this way, yet we continue to read about it, and we will even reenact it with the Avodah service later today. What meaning can we find in these strange rituals and how can we accomplish their goals of atonement today?
Aliyah 3

As we discussed, we are currently reading about how Yom Kippur was observed according to the book of Leviticus and in particular, how the entire community’s sins were placed by the High Priest on a goat who was then sent out to Azazel, the wilderness. Talk about an ultimate scapegoat! As a matter of fact, I am relatively certain that this episode was the genesis for the birth of the term scapegoat. Yet, what are we to make of this Biblical practice today? We know this ritual is no longer in practice, or is it? We certainly have Tashlikh, which we did on Rosh Hashana when we symbolically threw our sins, in the form of bread crumbs, away into a natural body of water. A few years ago I stumbled across a website called the eScapegoat. Perhaps you have heard of it, and if not, you should definitely check it out after Yom Tov. The tagline of the website reads: “the eScapegoat is roaming the internet collecting sins before Yom Kippur.” It then tells the story of the two goats that we are currently reading about from the Torah and then it says: “in preparation for Yom Kippur, *atone with eScapegoat.” The word atone is accompanied by an asterisk which at the bottom of the page clarifies that “no actual halakhic atonement is implied,” just in case people get confused. The way it works is you type out whatever transgression you want to atone for, you hit the submit button, and the eScapegoat carries it away into cyberspace. So, what exactly are we all doing here?!

Apparently, all we need to do is just send our apologies off into cyberspace and we will be cleansed. Yes, I know, it doesn’t work that way. However, I want to share with you a few anonymous submissions the website received. They run the gamut from serious to cute to funny. Some lighthearted ones include:

- I brushed my teeth with my friend’s toothbrush and then lied to her about it.
- I sometimes put the phone down while talking to my Mom. She chats away and doesn’t know that I’m not listening.
- I skipped classes during school so that I could stay home and have a Netflix marathon
- I’m going to Las Vegas on Yom Kippur. That cannot be good.
Then there are the more serious ones:

- I was never in love with my fiancé and should have told her.
- I cheated on the only person who ever truly loved me.
- I am sorry I did not spend more time with my kids.
- I’m sorry that I could not put my family back together.
- I’m sorry I complained so much even though my life is excellent
- I’m sorry I give into despair instead of taking action.

In a Wall Street Journal news article entitled, *Atoning on Yom Kippur, There’s an App for That*, the website producer, Sarah Lipton said that tens of thousands of confessions have been laid on the “e-goat” and she has been surprised by how seriously so many people have taken the activity. It is certainly an interesting way to prepare for Yom Kippur, but just as we know that our shortcomings are not swept away at Tashlikh, they are also not absolved by an illustrated cartoon goat either.

Besides for cyberspace, we no longer use goats and the Yom Kippur ritual of the book of Leviticus is a thing of the past. Yet ritual still plays an important role in our lives. While rituals evolve over time, the emotions behind the rituals remain the same. In ancient times when people felt guilty, they offered a guilt offering or in the case of Yom Kippur, they placed their transgressions on the head of a goat. Today, we pray, we strike our chests, and we fast. Thousands of years ago when people felt joy they offered a thanksgiving sacrifice. Today we sing Hallel and offer prayers of gratitude. Rituals help to ground us and they help us express our feelings. The two primary rituals of Yom Kippur are now prayer and fasting. Why do we fast on Yom Kippur? The simplest answer is that the Torah tells us to do so. In the sixth aliyah, which we will read shortly, in Leviticus 16:29, we are instructed that on tenth day of the seventh month, i.e. Yom Kippur, *t’anu et-nafshoteichem*, we are to afflict ourselves. This has been generally interpreted to mean that we should refrain from food and drink as well as other worldly pleasures. While many rationale have been offered as to why we

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2 Rebecca Meiser, *Atoning on Yom Kippur, There’s an App for That*
fast on Yom Kippur, in short, we fast today to focus on our spiritual needs rather than our physical needs.

So, as the Torah tells us today on Yom Kippur we fulfill our spiritual needs through rituals. By being here, fasting and reciting the prayers, we all pass the ritual test with flying colors. But then, a voice calls out: “not so fast!” It is the voice of the prophet Isaiah, to whom this morning’s Haftarah is attributed. The Isaiah of this Haftarah lived in the 6th century and prophesized to the community soon after the return from exile in the second half of the century. He speaks to a people who had developed a stratified social structure in which the wealthy exploited the poor. Fasting had become a ritualistic activity- a day of mere pageantry with no self-reflection, no introspection, and no genuine change. Isaiah proclaims that our spiritual lives are not just fulfilled by fasting, but also by helping others. As we will read in the Haftarah, Isaiah cries out in the name of God:

Is such the fast I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day when the Lord is favorable? No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke; to let the oppressed go free and to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home. When you see the naked, to offer clothing, and to not ignore your own kin. (Isaiah 58:5-7)

What is Isaiah’s message? What does Isaiah add to our understanding of the Yom Kippur rituals of prayer and fasting?
As we have pointed out, our Torah reading this morning has been all about ritual, and today we observe the ritual of fasting, which reminds me of a joke:

A story is told about a young man who walked up to his rabbi on Yom Kippur afternoon.

"Rabbi, you must help me...I know that we're supposed to fast today day, but I am so thirsty. I must be allowed to have something to drink!"

The rabbi quietly but firmly responded, "I am sorry, but the fast can only be broken for health reasons."

"But, you don't understand," whined the young man, "if I don't get something soon, I am going to faint from thirst." Eventually, the rabbi relented and instructed that the man be brought a glass of water.

The young man quickly downed the liquid, whereupon he gasped, "That's the last time I have lox and herring for breakfast on Yom Kippur."

I'm not sure lox and herring are what Isaiah had in mind when he rebuked the community and said this is not the fast that God desires. However, our Haftarah this morning comes to correct the people’s severe misimpression of fast days. They saw the technical observance of the fast, namely debasing oneself and abstaining from eating, as the be all and end all of its observance. While meticulously following the ritual technicalities of fasting, they were oppressing their workers – even having them work on the fast itself! – and they failed to assist those less fortunate.

A true fast, the prophet insists, is more than merely abstaining from food and drink or dressing in sackcloth. It also must be a day of freeing the imprisoned and taking care of the poor, needy, and homeless. It is a day of uprooting injustice and wickedness from our midst and of eradicating the forces of oppression. Were this to transpire on a fast day, the prophet tells us, God would unquestionably respond to the prayers of the Jewish people and alleviate their suffering.

Rabbi Brad Artson, the Dean of the Ziegler Rabbinical school in Los Angeles writes that

*The act of fasting, according to Isaiah, is not merely an act of self-denial meant to punish nor an emulation of angels, it is an act of solidarity with the suffering of the Jewish people. Through fasting we are drawn closer to all who live lives of deprivation, and we are called on to help turn that deprivation into sustenance. The way to get closer to God is to get closer to other people, to all*
people. Unless we stand for justice and righteousness, unless we reveal the inherent holiness of caring for one another and renew ourselves as God’s partner in creating a better world, our service to God is not complete. Fasting by itself is meaningless, the prophet tells us; for fasting to have meaning, it has to result in changed behavior. True fasting is an acknowledgement of the demand for social justice and a plea for compassion towards others.\(^3\)

In other words, fasting must also be about looking at the human beings around us who are created in the image of God just like we are and who have problems just like we do and who have families and emotions just like we do and who are suffering from poverty and oppression, and saying “I am NOT better than you are. I am not more entitled to blessing than you are. I have no right to exploit or mistreat you. And I will not stand idly by while you suffer.”

In Judaism, the question is not whether ritual or moral responsibility is more important. It is not a question of which mitzvot, ethical or ritual, are more important. Rather, Judaism says that the rituals are meant to attune us to the moral obligations. Rituals are a call to action. Being here today, fasting for 25 hours, praying – they are all important ritual mitzvot. But they are important because they inspire us to action. Our observance is meant to drive us to create a more just and compassionate world. We cannot stop at the ritual of prayer, we cannot stop at the ritual of fasting – these only represent half of the challenge of Yom Kippur. Rituals compel us to higher principles. Our prayers ought to inspire our actions. Our fast ought to cause us to think about those who have nothing to eat or who are in need of help in other ways – and to then, to do something about it. Many of us began that process last night by bringing food to donate to the Jewish Family & Children's Services Betsy & Peter Fischer Food Pantries, yet there is still so much work to do. It has been a difficult year. A difficult year for our people, for our country, and for the world. From natural disasters to divisive politics and leadership, to acts of anti-Semitism, hatred, and violence, there are so many people in need of our support and our help. Our rituals attune

\(^3\) Rabbi Brad Artson, *Walking with the Jewish Calendar*, pgs. 36-37
us daily to hear the cries of others because if we don’t have those reminders, in the fast-paced world that we live in, we might miss the opportunities to help.

Our task on Yom Kippur then, is for each of us to try to discern what the world needs us for, and to remind ourselves of the obligation to fulfill that task. There are no goats or bread crumbs to help us today. Rather we have the words of our sacred texts and the reminder of our rituals that call us to action. May our ritual observances today attune us to the work we need to do in the world this year, and may this be the year that God proclaims: “Yes! this is the fast that I desire.”