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Good morning and Shabbat Shalom. First, I would just like to thank Jon-Jay and the Congregation for giving me the opportunity to speak this morning. Thank you.

Acharie mot; after the death…a grim title for this week's parsha to be sure. It recalls the death of Aaron's Sons in parsha sh'mini, who we are told here were killed because they "drew too close to the presence of the L-rd." Now that's harsh. The earlier parsha tells us that G-d kills the brothers because they "offered before the L-rd *alien* fire, which G-d had not enjoined upon them." Still, that's pretty harsh. Especially when you consider that what follows in this parsha are instructions for the Yom Kippur liturgy where an even *more* alien act is described, the dedication of a goat to Azazel.

Azazel; simply to speak the name is said to evoke the entity to which it belongs. This is, of course, to follow the tradition that Azazel is a goat-demon or fallen divinity and not simply another name for the wilderness or a particularly rough mountain where the scapegoat was pushed to its death.

In the apocryphal book of Enoch, G-d commands that Azazel be bound by his hands and feet and thrown into the desert. "Throw on him jagged and sharp stones, and cover him with darkness; and let him stay there forever, and cover his face, that he may not see light, and that on the great day of judgment he may be hurled into the fire." Now that's *really* harsh.

His crime? Slightly worse perhaps than drawing too close to the L-rd but still not, I think, deserving of such a grim fate; Azazel is said to have "taught men to make swords, daggers, shields and breastplates." After which came "bracelets, ornaments, the art of making up the eyes and beautifying the eyelids, and the most precious and choice stones, and all kinds of colored dyes." In other words Azazel brought with him sex and violence.

Reading the condemnation of this poor creature evokes for me another passage more familiar, from Kabbalat Shabbat, "In the wilderness they tried and tested Me" Psalm 95 recalls, concluding "therefore in indignation did I vow they would *never* reach My land of peace and rest." Just like Azazel, condemned to the harsh wilderness of desert is the first generation of Israelites for trying the patients of G-d.

I've always found this passage so disturbing to read that I skip over it in my personal prayers. To be utterly denied peace and rest for trying G-d's patients just seems so cruel, especially when you consider the trauma that this generation experienced while slaves in Egypt and during their exodus therefrom.

In light of this passage one might reinterpret Azazel's gifts to humanity in a less negative light. Rather than as sex and violence, instead Azazel brings culture, aids in procreation, and provides a means of self-defense in the harsh wilderness to which the Israelites had been condemned.

In the Zohar, the central book of the Kabbalistic mystical tradition, it is mentioned in discussing Azazel that everything that exists is required, "both good and bad," even the Angel of Death. Which brings up another disturbing story that relates to the Holiday we are about to celebrate, Pesach, where the Egyptian firstborn are killed at G-d's behest. Their crime? Being the children of Egypt? What possible crime could infants commit to deserve such a grim fate? Moreover, what possible crime could their parents have committed to deserve such horrific violence? Even their participation in the state instituted slavery, as cruel and harsh as it was, isn't sufficient to warrant the death of innocent infants. No crime is.

The Zohar, in its initial discussion of this parsha remarks, "What does Hashem your Elohim require of you, but to fear." If this is the case that fear is the primary emotion that should be felt in reference to G-d then these stories make it easy to be obedient. Who in their right mind wouldn't fear this G-d? We *should* be afraid because this G-d is pretty darn scary. Just ask Azazel.

Of course we are called not only to fear G-d but to love G-d as well. Not only to love, but to love with all that we are; with our heart, our body, and spirit. And yet how can we achieve such love if fear is the foundational emotion? In my experience fear doesn't yield love, it, as Yoda warns, leads to anger and eventually to hatred.

On Yom Kippur we read that Hashem is good and does good to all, sinner and saint alike. Depicted is a G-d with eternal patience for all G-d's children, always calling those who have gone astray to repentance and reconciliation. *This* is a G-d I can love with all of my being.

But what then are we to make of the first vision of G-d, the cruel, the impatient, and the grimly violent deity? I would suggest that we must look at who is giving an account of this G-d, the community whose text this great work of scripture belongs and consider what in their experience would lead them to such a theology.

The psychoanalyst Greg Mogenson, in his work *G-d Is a Trauma*, insists that a "traumatized soul is a theologizing soul," a statement to which I can personally attest. And it cannot be denied that the Israelites fleeing the harsh slavery of Egypt were indeed traumatized by their experience. Moreover, the Exodus and subsequent trials of the wilderness were additional sources of trauma where the community was under constant threat of annihilation; first from Pharaoh, then from dehydration and starvation and from

other hostile forces along the way. This was a people that genuinely suffered in ways that many of us probably find difficult to truly imagine.

It is precisely in *their* imaginings of G-d that we get a glimpse into what their suffering must have been like. We see projected onto the supreme G-d all of the inexplicable horrors and sufferings inflicted upon this generation as a means of containing and explaining their misfortunes. Allowing G-d to be the source of their suffering meant that it could be understood within a meaningful and comprehendible structure. G-d, who ultimately loved and was guiding the Israelites to a good end had a reason for allowing centuries of Israelite slavery, had good reasons to harden Pharaoh against them, had good reason to condemn the first generation to the wilderness even if these reasons are unfathomable; at least they give meaning and sense to otherwise senseless suffering.

This theological way of thinking isn't confined to Biblical times either. Even today there are those who seek to speculate on what Japan must have done to deserve such a horrific natural disaster and the devastation it has left. The impetus for such distasteful speculation comes from a desire to control the threat, to give meaning to otherwise incomprehensible suffering and provide a false sense of security—that if *we* just act properly it won't happen to *us*.

What is so bad, you might ask, about giving meaning to suffering, of putting everything into the hands of G-d? Isn't this better than no answer at all? The problem is that if G-d's hands are so blood-soaked then we cannot responsibly hope to be held by them in love. We must be like that stiff-necked generation who cry out to G-d concerning the injustice we experience. We must demand to know why G-d's providence must be brought about by the abuse and torture of our children. What answer could we possibly accept to

that question? What divine plan could possibly make meaningful the suffering we experience? Any answer to this question must invariably fall silent before the cries of the abused. To have faith in such a G-d is inhuman (and perhaps all too human). To do so is an affront to our suffering and the suffering of our neighbor.

And yet, if we can uncover and remove the projections of violence put upon G-d then we can get at two important things. First, we can get to the actual hurt experienced by the community. Passages like those we've already discussed, or perhaps the best example that comes to mind, the curses of Deuteronomy upon those who disobey G-d's mitzvot, reveal a community that has suffered extreme violence. They put the violence they have actually experienced, the horrors they have actually witnessed—the experience of a violent and community-shattering exile—and turned them into Divine threats. This serves as a means of explaining the otherwise unexplainable suffering they have endured and gives hope that if only the next generation changes its ways it won't be condemned to the same violence or restlessness in the wilderness.

Second, when we strip away the violent projections we find the true loving G-d who suffers with us in our suffering and who calls humanity back to G-dself to live in a world of peace and rest. We get to the G-d who is good and does good to all. We get to the G-d we can love with all our being without fear and anger getting in the way.

The truth is that violence can happen to anyone. No one is safe. Not even the devoted sons of Aaron, Brother of Moses, as they worshiped their G-d. We are not safe or saved by the grace of G-d. We, living after the Shoah, know this to be certain truth.

Now some might interject here and insist that the rise of the state of Israel after the Shoah makes meaningful Jewish suffering; that it serves as proof of G-d's providence. *I* would insist, however, that not even the Kingdom of Heaven itself would tip the scales the slightest in the face of a single moment of one Jewish infant burned alive in the Nazi ovens.

All of this is not to say that we are abandoned by G-d to a world of suffering. We aren't. Or that we are not led or lured by G-d to right relationship with G-d and the world. We are. But that lure requires compliance of creation to be effective. Torah can only be salvific if we accept and follow it. In the absence of such compliance on our part *and* the part of others, and sometimes even with compliance, we are all vulnerable to the smallest and greatest of sufferings.

When we have stripped away the projections of violence, instead of fearing what G-d might do to us, we can instead focus on compassion with our neighbor who suffers. We can acknowledge the meaninglessness of the suffering—the should-never-have-beenness of it—and we can, through acts of Tikkun Olam, work towards *as if* it had not occurred. As long as we remain overwhelmed by the unacceptability of suffering, for it is unacceptable, we will always be tempted to do bad theology or to simply shut down. But if we can face the unacceptable, meaningless suffering with courage and integrity, and do the impossible of accepting the unacceptable, then we can set aside bad theology and move forward to building a world with less suffering.

Thank you, and Shabbat Shalom.