

Atonement and Compensation

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As many of you know, I was a lawyer before I was a minister, and a good deal of my energies in that part of my life were taken up with defending individuals accused of crimes. At the extreme of my criminal representation were several murder cases, and the extreme of those was one case which I took on after the client had been convicted and sentenced to death, that sentence was vacated and the case was tried a second time on the penalty only and a second jury imposed the death sentence. The case was so gruesome that no attorneys in the county where it occurred were willing to take it, and so the request came to me in a neighboring county.

I was active in the ACLU and have been an outspoken opponent of the death penalty for my entire adult life, so when a call came for me to actually represent someone on death row, I thought that I should take it, because it would test my political and religious convictions. They say that liberals love humanity but don't love people. So I took on the representation and worked for fourteen years on trying to save his life.

It was plenty frustrating to represent John, but I never gave up. In the end, I didn't succeed in saving his life. During the course of my representation of him, I had decided to become a minister, and yet I had done so much work on this case that the client's interests may have been harmed if I were to simply pass it off to another attorney. So, while I shut down my law practice as to most of my cases, I kept that and one other case, and also took on as co-counsel an old friend, a

second attorney in whom I had great trust. Thus it was that in the spring of 1998, in my third year of seminary, I went down to South Carolina to the death house of the prison system to sit with John while the State of South Carolina put poison in his veins until he died.

On that occasion, John was allowed to read a final statement, and I will remember until the day I die how it ended: his last words to me and my co-counsel were "I love you guys." And we told him we loved him too. I realized that that was true, I had come to love him despite his flaws. I was still a liberal, but there were humans whom I had come to love passionately. At that point, I made myself a promise: I wanted to find out what evil was, and how a liberal and rational religion, such as I thought Unitarian Universalism was, should deal with evil.

The topic is huge and very complex, and I have spoken about it at GA workshops and once at the Parliament of World Religions. I also will have the occasional Sunday sermon about some topic connected with this great one.

You see, I think the Universalists had the best idea about evil: whatever you think about divine punishment as orthodox Christianity describes it, it is a barbaric system that would allow most of the human race to suffer until the end of time in the torments of hell because of something they have done in their lifetimes. And the orthodox version of the doctrine of Original Sin, see St. Augustine, goes even further and asserts that if the person is pure as the driven snow, if he or she dies while still in infancy, he or she can also end up in eternal torment, because of Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden. Yes, the Universalists were correct to dismiss this religious idea as unworthy of a loving God, but what were they, or more concretely what are we going to put in its place?

And if there is no Hell on earth or in the hereafter, how would bad things we might have done in our lifetimes be punished after our deaths. Or how should they be punished during our lifetimes?

This is one of the things that fascinates me about Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. It lays out a response to bad deeds which does not take place in the afterlife (and doesn't assert that there is an afterlife, either) but rather takes place, or can take place, in our ordinary lives. If you want to practice Yom Kippur, you can do it even if you're not Jewish.

I used to hear ministers say that the word "atonement" was derived from the words "at one." Where a wrong has been committed, we may be at odds with an individual or the leadership of a community. Before the wrong entered our world, we were "at one." We hope by using the Yom Kippur techniques that we can get back to at-one-ment.

I used to think this was a false etymology, but most of the dictionaries I have consulted say it really does derive from "at-one."

A person who is observing Yom Kippur has two different kinds of wrongs to atone for: wrongs against God and wrongs against our fellow humans. The classic way in Ancient Israel to atone for an offense against God was to offer a sacrifice. The classic way to atone to another human was to offer compensation and ask forgiveness.

This morning we heard a passage from the Hebrew Bible book of Leviticus by which God told Moses how he was to conduct the ritual for Yom Kippur: There were three animals involved, a bull and two goats. The Bull was to atone for offenses against God which might have been committed by the high priest or his family. The first high priest when the tabernacle was set up in the wilderness of Sinai after the Israelites escaped from Egyptian slavery was Aaron, the brother of Moses, and so

Aaron's name was put into the Yom Kippur instructions to stand for all the future high priests.

So the bull pays the price for offenses against God, but what about the goats. The goats are chosen to be about the same age and physique, so they would have the same worth in a pastoral society. The high priest is supposed to choose them "by lot," that is, through the operation of chance. One goat chosen by this process is dedicated to God, and is given to God as a sin offering.

The other goat is called Azazel. The Leviticus passage says: "the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel"

Notice that Azazel seems to be the name of the goat who has been chosen by lot and the name of the place in the wilderness into which this goat is driven.

The priest then sprinkles the blood of the executed goat and of the executed bull on the place in the tabernacle called the mercy seat. After those blood sacrifices, the priest goes back outside and confronts the live goat.

"Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all of the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness."

This instruction raises a lot more questions than it answers. First of all, we are not sure that the name Azazel belongs to the freed goat or to his place in the wilderness. Secondly, we don't know how the high

priest can place on the Azazel's head the sins of the Israelites. Thirdly, are those sins of the people now released, since the goat is merrily wandering around in the wilderness. Does some sin go unpunished? And what about atonement. How does the priest placing his hands on the goat's head somehow atone for the sins of the people?

I don't have good answers to any of these questions, but I raise them in honest search for a way to deal with moral wrongdoing which does not involve killing or harming the offender.

But there is a deeper part to the Azazel story. It derives from the myth of the scapegoat. This goat released in the Yom Kippur ritual came to be called the scapegoat, I suppose because it escaped the punishment of the other animals involved in the ritual. I will point out two interesting facts about Azazel. First, his story has certain parallels with the way Christians came to view Jesus's life. In a sense, the sins of the people placed on the head of the goat are parallel to the sins placed on the head of Jesus as St. Paul tells it. The difference is that Jesus does die, though he is resurrected after three days, while Azazel the scapegoat does not die.

But the other interesting fact about Azazel is that going through the procedure and driving the goat into the wilderness does completely wipe the slate clean for a year, much the same way that orthodox Christian theology holds that Jesus' death on the cross atoned for all the sins of human kind.

Rene Girard was a scholar who developed a robust theory of the scapegoat and connected it with human evil. He was French, but most of his academic career was at Stanford. Girard's theory was called mimetic desire, mimetic means imitative.

If you ever watched a couple of toddlers scrapping over a toy, you have seen mimetic desire in action. Timmy couldn't be less interested in the green truck until he sees Tommy playing with it, and suddenly he has to have it. His desire imitates Tommy's affection for the toy.

Rene Girard goes on to postulate that everybody has to have their mimetic desires frustrated a large part of the time, because as soon as Tommy gives the green truck to Timmy, Timmy loses interest in it and eventually nobody's desires get satisfied. Girard maintained that this frustration of desire often leads to a crisis in the community, and as the crisis becomes acute, people start looking for someone to blame. This is where the scapegoat comes in.

The scapegoat in this sense is seen by people in the community at the time as the villain. And if the crisis continues unabated, the community ends up either killing or banishing the scapegoat.

A good example is the story of Jonah and the whale. Jonah was supposed to go to Nineveh and preach the word of God, but he didn't want to go, so he booked a ship that would take him in the opposite direction. But God's wrath was kindled at him and a great storm came up. The sailors on the ship demanded that he be thrown overboard, since his passage and disobedience of God was causing the storm which now threatened all their lives. That's how Jonah got thrown into the sea and swallowed by the whale.

In the Jonah story, God is real and is the actual cause of the life-threatening stories. But in most of the scapegoat stories, the scapegoat is innocent.

Girard believed that this was what happened to Jesus. Jesus' actual mission, Girard argues, was to expose the falsity of the scapegoat mechanism, but that mechanism killed him.

Persecutions throughout history have had elements of the scapegoat. It is ironic that the scapegoat originates in the Hebrew Bible, because one of the most persecuted groups from medieval times until late in the twentieth century has been the Jews.

But is this fair? Is it fair to say that the social psychology of persecution of one set of people arose from the ritual of that very people? Was the scapegoat described in Leviticus the same character even as the person or people on whom blame would fall?

Take for example the Salem Witch trials. This clearly was a persecution, and was clearly based on a set of assumptions about the powers of magical control of the world. We would now consider these assumptions false. The accused witches can be fairly considered scapegoats today, but I'm not sure that that word or its origin in the Torah helps us understand it much.

I raise Girard's theory because it has the word scapegoat and because the term scapegoat has its origins here at Yom Kippur. But that still leaves a wide gap between the animal described in Leviticus and the phenomena of unjust persecutions of innocent people which seems to happen regularly in human history.

Let me leave that question there and try another tack. A lot of the wrongdoing we might be rueing at Yom Kippur, if we're giving thought to it at all, is financial. If you have done something wrong to me, can the wrong be atoned through compensation?

Monetary compensation cannot undo all harm; we cannot undo the misdeeds that have been done entirely. But of course compensation is not irrelevant. Monetary compensation may be a good start on atonement.

Which leads me to the question I want to leave you with. My great-great grandfather, whose name I carry, was one of the largest slaveholders in America in the mid-nineteenth century. At his death in 1851, his estate listed some 1700 slaves.

Am I held to some kind of moral duty to atone for my ancestor's treatment of a class of people which, though it was considered legal at the time, now appears to us as an historical monstrosity? I would solicit your heartfelt thoughts on this matter.

And if there are any lesser issues rattling around on this Jewish New Year, don't hesitate to pick up the phone and try to reconnect with those whom we may have harmed. I have had some disparaging words this morning about this Jewish ritual, but I think it is well worth talking about because it takes a different tack for dealing with moral fault than just killing or locking up the offender.

I would also like to hear from you as to whether you want to think about the whole problem of evil a lot, a little bit or not at all.

My blessings on you all.