

D'var for Yom Kippur 5775  
By Giulia Fleishman

We are in the midst of the final day of the days of awe, the days of teshuvah. As I understand it, teshuvah is the work we each do to make ourselves whole. Teshuvah is bringing awareness and insight to our broken and disconnected pieces. It is compassionately holding ourselves accountable for the ways we have been closed from the vibrant and transformative world within and around us.

On this most teshuvah-filled day, we read from Leviticus a passage which outlines the rituals enacted by Aaron on the day of atonement. At first glance there is little evidence of the demanding personal work I identify with teshuvah.

One of the rituals described in this text involves two goats, one to be slaughtered in sacrifice, the other to be kept alive and banished to the wilderness.

When I read this curious passage, I wonder, which goat would I rather be? Would I prefer to be the sin offering goat whom Aaron kills immediately and have my blood sprinkled over the Ark? Or am I more inclined to be the scapegoat, to carry the burden of all of the Israelites' sins upon my head, to go into the wilderness as an offering to some demon? Neither option really appeals to me. But there is something to be said for being slaughtered promptly, without much fear or suffering. And I am not particularly drawn to carrying the heavy load of the sins of others into the wild, to live in fear of death for countless days, thirsty and hungry, to most likely to die from dehydration, starvation, or attack by wild animals.

In the text I am also struck by the portrayal of the wilderness as the residence of a demon, and thus the demonization of the wilderness itself. The Hebrew word *midbar*, translates as wilderness or desert. They both connote a great expanse of the natural world. At the end of this passage the wilderness is alternately referred to as an "inaccessible" or "uninhabited" region. I find both of these descriptors problematic. They both highlight our separation and disconnection from the natural realm.

The "uninhabited region" in question, whether a vast, sandy desert or a mountainous forest, is in fact teeming with lively residents, from Nubian ibex and grandmother trees to phytoplankton and white witch moths. If we pay attention, we find that every place overflows with inhabitants.

The idea that wilderness, a concentration of wildness, is inaccessible, unsettles me. Wilderness is omnipresent. In a discussion about our lost intimacy with the natural world, naturalist and writer Jack Turner, challenges us to push our notion of wilderness even further. Or rather, to bring it closer. He invites us, when looking at the night sky, to "Contemplate the fact that you are the debris of those stars. Contemplate the fact that the atmosphere you are looking through is a wilderness of trillions of beings." In other words, wilderness is completely accessible. It envelops us each time we step outside. Just as teshuvah is available to each of us, so too is the wilderness.

When the Torah suggests the wilderness as the dwelling place of a demon, I want to know, when did we start demonizing this magnificent and awe-inspiring existence? How did the wilderness become our contemporary scapegoat? What have we lost in alienating ourselves from it? And how might this separation wound our enactment of teshuvah?

In the text, it says that the scapegoat is “set free” into the wilderness. I feel my allegiance shift from the sin offering goat which Aaron promptly kills and I wonder if I wouldn’t rather be the scapegoat. The scapegoat, it seems, is given a great gift: It is given free roam of the wilderness, it is given time for reflection, it is given transgressions to contemplate. In other words, this sounds like a perfect teshuvah storm.

The scapegoat presents us with a recipe for teshuvah that calls upon our allies in the wild, external world to help us with our introspective and heart-centered work, to help us feel in our core the wholeness of the world.

This time of year we gather in community to pour our hearts into our rituals of teshuvah. But we do not leave teshuvah behind as the days of awe pass. These days only highlight the journey we are always on, the journey to heal our broken parts and become whole. And so, our chance to follow the scapegoat’s example, to head into the wilderness, wherever we may find it, to spend time there with our hearts open and our lives pouring forth is an open invitation, one we can accept as often as we choose.