

Scapegoats

Acharei-Mot (Kedoshim – but not handled in this sermon)

4/18/2013

This Monday afternoon, explosions at the finish line of the Boston Marathon left three dead and almost 180 wounded, sending shockwaves of fear and worry throughout America. It seemed to hit the hearts of every single person in the country:

Bostonians, former Bostonians, and friends of Bostonians.

Runners, friends of runners, and anyone who has ever crossed a finish line.

As the clips played on the news, over and over again, an entire country re-lived every large-scale bombing attack of the last 20 years.

In the ensuing days, there has been more pain and death; more blood sweat and tears. Death counts rise in West, Texas, and the communities of both West and Boston are only beginning to recover, mentally and physically, from the damage done to their populations. Through it all, we have seen compassion, countless acts of heroism. The American population has devoted their social media output to raising up the heroes; the first responders, the marathoners who continued running, past the finish line and on to the hospital to donate blood, the man from Alaska who, hours after completing the run, handed over his medal to a dazed and distraught stranger who had been stopped a half-mile from the finish line and never received a medal herself.

These are the stories we love, these are the stories we hold close to our hearts when terrible things happen.

But these are not the only stories. The other stories are darker, more dangerous. They are the stories of anger and blame, the stories that point uninformed fingers and make unsubstantiated claims.

Headlines on Wednesday, before any suspects had been named, read: “In Boston bombing, Muslims hold their breath”¹, “Muslims fear scapegoating after Boston Marathon bombing”.²

Scapegoat.

It’s a loaded term that has been leveled against the Jewish population for thousands of years, and so I find it mildly ironic that the origin of the term is found in our own literature, in the very Torah portion we just read.

“V’samach Aharon et sh’tai yadav al rosh hasa’ir hachai, v’hitvadah alav et kol avonot b’nei yisrael...vshilach b’yad ish eetee hamidbara.”

“And Aaron will place his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel...and will send him away by the hand of an appointed man into the wilderness.”

This ritual, one of the many steps laid out in this week’s description of the ancient Yom Kippur sacrificial customs, presents systematic scapegoating. Aaron channels the sins of the entirety of the Israelite population onto this creature and sends it off into the middle of nowhere. It is a way of directed blame-placing, a way to focus all problems onto a single point of reference.

Now, I grant that there is a valuable psychological need for people (both as a community and also as individuals) to deflect blame. Our world does not make sense. The wrong people win, the best people die too young. The fire cannot be quenched, the flood cannot be stopped. The bomb goes off.

¹ LA Times, April 17th 2013

² The Guardian, April 17th 2013

And from the darkness of pain and sorrow and frustration, questions swirl round and round in our heads, demanding answers: why me? Why now? Why here? Why? Why? Why?

Some questions have answers. Why did the bomb go off? Because the bomb-maker had the mechanical know-how to build such a bomb. That person set up the bomb to explode, and so it exploded.

But that is not really what we are asking.

We are asking, “why didn’t we find the device before it exploded?”

We are asking, “why at a marathon? Why in Boston?”

We are asking, “why would any human being set out to destroy the lives of other human beings?”

There are no answers to these questions, not acceptable ones. And in the face of such deep and difficult questions, we are in danger of becoming lost in the “whys”, overwhelmed by the sheer inexplicability of it all. In the interconnected web of human action and reaction, every pulled string tugs at the entire edifice – every action affects every person.

And so we find a vessel toward which we can direct all of our hurt and anger, all of the things we have done wrong and all of the wrongs that have been done to us. We place our hands on the scapegoat, transfer our sins and the sins of others, and send the goat out into the wilderness.

On the one hand, we can understand scapegoating as a coping mechanism, a way of clearing our heads and hearts. By isolating and directing sin, we give ourselves a chance to think straight, to find a way to move forward in the face of seemingly insurmountable transgression. After all, the whole point of Yom Kippur is to provide an opportunity to wipe the slate clean, to atone for our sins, to purify ourselves.

But there is also inherent danger in this concept. For just like the blameless goat, we rarely blame the true guilty party, especially initially. More importantly, placing the blame rarely helps.

Blaming the Jewish people for the onset of the Bubonic Plague 14th century did not stop huge swaths of the population from dying from the disease. Blaming the entire religion of Islam for the extreme fundamentalist Islamist terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center will never re-raise those buildings or bring the victims back to life.

What is more, this blame breeds hatred. People in despair cling to even the smallest glimmer of an answer to their “whys”. In the last 24 hours, as the situation has developed and suspects have been named, the media has latched onto the religion of the two suspects, highlighting all Muslim content they can glean from the suspects presence on social media usage. The New York Times writes: “the younger brother describes his worldview as ‘Islam’ and, asked to identify ‘the main thing in life’, answers ‘career and money’ ...he lists a verse from the Koran, ‘do good, because Allah loves those who do good’ ...The older brother left a record on Youtube of his favorite clips, including ‘how I accepted Islam and became a Shiite” and “Seven Steps to Successful Prayer.”³ Nothing that I just read to you strikes me as dangerous or indicative of extremism, and the use of this information to indicate possible motive clearly displays the dangers that scapegoating presents.

I need not remind us, but I will: we as a Jewish people know the dangers of the hatred that mal-placed blame engenders. The blame placed on the Jewish people for the fall of Germany at the end of World War I led directly to the atrocities of the Shoah.

³ New York Times, “Dragnet Shuts Boston; One Suspect is Slain but Second Man is on Loose”, published 4/19/2013

If the practice of placing blame is so laden with dangers, perhaps there is nothing valuable to learn from the high priests scapegoating ritual? Perhaps we strike it from the record, cross it out of the Torah?

Not shockingly, I do not believe in crossing things out of the Torah.

The scapegoat ritual need not be stricken from the record. But it does perhaps require re-examination. Today, we must see this ritual through the lens of *tashlich*, the Rosh Hashana custom in which we name our transgressions, symbolically attach them to bits of bread, and then throw the sin-laden crumbs into a moving body of water. This transforms the ritual away from a tool that can be used to perpetuate the kind of dangerous stereotyping that must be avoided, and instead allows it to become a way to isolate pain and frustration, take steps to acknowledge that pain and frustration, and then move forward.

It has been a long hard week, full of death and destruction, full of questions and confusion, and very few concrete answers.

Adonai adonai, el rachum v'chanun – God our God, compassionate and merciful, may this Shabbat bring relief, may this Shabbat restore a sense of calm. May those who are injured find strength, may those in mourning find comfort. Send an extra dose of compassion to all those supporting those in healing and in mourning, and an extra dose of bravery to all those in pursuit of justice.

God, our nation is big and our communities widespread. Despite the distance between us, help us hold each other, help us feel close to each other. Give us patience and hope, and may we work toward a more just world, where all people are able to see each other as invaluable and important.

Ken yhi ratzon; may it be Gods will.