

TORAH SPARKS

TO SEE YOUR FACE IS LIKE SEEING THE FACE OF GOD

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

Dvar Parashah

The goats are like twins. Identical in form, indistinguishable to the eye. They stand side by side at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, waiting. One will be brought inward, into the innermost sanctuary, toward nearness and fire. The other will be cast outward, alive, into the wilderness, carrying with it the people's sins. And the way we choose between them—we don't. We cast lots. The fate of each goat is not in its nature, not in its merit, but in the chance drawing of a name. One to God. One to Azazel.

And so it is with twins. Jacob and Esau emerge from one womb, struggling from the start. One is smooth, the other hairy. One takes the heel, the other the blessing. Or was it the other way around? They are entangled from the beginning, and each becomes what the other is not.

Later, it will be Esau—the red one, the hunter, the man of the field—who becomes associated with Seir, the “hairy” place, the goat-place, the wilderness realm that borders but never enters the sanctuary. He will be called Edom. He will live east of the land. He will be feared, appeased, but never brought back in.

Jacob will wear his skin. Goat-skins. To take the blessing. To pass as his brother in the eyes of his blind father. And so Jacob becomes the one drawn inward—into the tent, into the covenant, into the destiny of a people whose offerings will always involve blood and guilt and trembling nearness.

Which brings us back to the parashah. The goats are Esau and Jacob, re-staged as ritual. One goat is Esau—alive, exiled, cast to Azazel, burdened with collective sin. One goat is Jacob—disguised in goat-skin, brought close, offered up, never quite walking away whole.

The Torah seems to anticipate the danger in all this. Immediately after the Yom Kippur ritual, we are **warned**, “They shall no longer offer their sacrifices to the goat-demons (שְׁעִירִים) after whom they go astray.”

The same root is used for Esau in **Genesis** (אֵישׁ שְׂעִיר), and used for the goats of Yom Kippur, appears here as a reference to idolatry. These are not just animals. They are temptations. Wildness. Rejection. The other. The danger is not only in casting out the goat to Azazel—it is in worshipping it. Becoming fascinated with exile. Offering sacrifice to the very thing we were meant to send away.

Esau is not evil. He is not a demon. But he lives in proximity to that line. He becomes, in **Isaiah's** prophecy, Edom—a land where goat-demons dance, where chaos and desolation reign. He is the goat we do not know how to bless. And yet Jacob cannot receive the blessing without wearing his skin.

What does it mean, then, that the goat for God must enter dressed as his brother?

It means that chosenness carries burden. That being drawn inward—toward God, toward covenant, toward fire—is not a prize. It is a cost. Jacob is the goat to YHWH: brought in, transformed, nearly destroyed. The fire does not consume him, but it brands him. He walks away limping. He is renamed. He becomes a living offering.

And Esau is sent out alive with the grief of a stolen blessing. With the face that haunts Jacob's dreams. With the strength to build nations, raise kings, plant roots. But never to return.

Yet Jacob without Esau is incomplete. Chosenness always implies its twin: rejection. The chosen is not chosen because of merit, nor the rejected rejected because of sin. The structure of covenantal history depends on rupture—an asymmetry that demands one be brought close and one sent away. The goat to YHWH dies. The goat to Azazel lives, but alone. The covenant is not complete without both.

But the danger, the ongoing risk, is in forgetting that the one sent away still exists. If we do not speak to the brother we cast out, we will meet him again, not as sibling but as shadow. The goat that bears the people's sins into the wilderness returns, eventually, as historical judgment. Esau becomes Edom. Edom becomes Rome. The twin becomes the terror.

So we are asked not to undo the ritual, but to remember it. To walk into Yom Kippur knowing that the goat for YHWH is only half the story. That atonement requires choreography, not closure. That we are not only Jacob; we carry Esau too. And if we cannot find a blessing for the brother, for the other, for the wilderness itself, we have misunderstood the fire we enter.

Jacob became Israel not when he deceived, not when he sacrificed, not when he fled—but when he wrestled. When he met the one he had cast away in the darkness and refused to let go. Not until the blessing changed both their names.

THE GOAT SENT AWAY

Jonathan Lipnick

Exploring the Parashah



*In this video series, we will explore an often neglected aspect of the parashah: geography. Each week we will focus on a physical location mentioned in the parashah and examine its historical significance. Of course not every parashah contains a narrative situated in a place; for these weeks we will select a word from the parashah that relates to the material culture of ancient Israel.

THE DEATH OF AARON'S SONS: A PARABLE

BASED ON PSIKTA D'RAV KAHANA 26:2

Ilana Kurshan

White Fire: Poetry on the Parashah

A long, long time ago, and far away,
There lived a man who married off his son.
The wedding feast was grand, the guests rejoiced,
With ample food and wine for everyone.

The father said, "And now I'll make a feast
For all the sages and, of course, the groom,
To celebrate the wedding once again –
He made the food, he cleaned, and swept the room

And just before the guests arrived, he turned,
To his own son, the groom, and said, "The wine!
It's still upstairs, please bring it down, my son—
So all the sages soon may drink and dine."

The son went up to fetch the well-aged wine
But didn't come back down. His father went
Upstairs to check his son and found him dead—
A snakebite in his flesh. His life was spent.

The man came down with heavy steps. By now
The guests had all arrived. They ate their fill.
The man said not a word til it was time
To say the blessings, then he said, "Until

Now you have come to celebrate my son.
My friends, alas, my son the groom is dead
We brought him to the wedding canopy
And now we'll bring him to the grave instead."

So Aaron, silent, as if all was fine,
Inaugurated God's new sacred shrine.

*

The Talmud teaches that the Torah was given in black fire on white fire (Y. Shekalim 6:1). The black fire is the letters of the Torah scroll, and the white fire is the parchment background. In this column, consisting of a poem on each parashah, I will try to illuminate the white fire of Torah – the midrashim, stories, and interpretations that carve out the negative space of the letters and give them shape.