

When Great Trees Fall

September 27, 2020

Have you ever been a scapegoat? Many of us have. The popular notion of a scapegoat is someone who takes the blame for something that isn't their fault or responsibility. This happens more often than any of us would care to admit. We blame a partner or parent or sibling for something we know isn't their fault.

In society, we often scapegoat particular groups—both the poor AND the rich, either the young OR the old, foreigners OR people who've been in office for a long time. So often, we scapegoat groups of people, blaming them for the ills of society, faulting one group or another for problems that aren't of their making nor in their power to correct.

Time and again, I've seen office dynamics in which a boss puts the blame on an employee once that person has left the organization, not because of truth, but in order to clear the air. It often feels easier to have the person who's walking out the door carry all of the sins and faults and bad blood, rather than to deal with the very hard work of getting people to work in healthy, constructive ways with each other, and take responsibility for one's own part in any problems.

Did you know that this idea of a scapegoat is Biblical? The term comes from Leviticus 16, in which we read the instructions for Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, the day of atonement. In this passage, the high priest prays all of the sins of the people onto the back of a goat, and then the goat is sent out into the wilderness, carrying the sins of the people with it, never to return. In ancient times, when this was practiced literally, in order to make sure the scapegoat didn't come back, and thus didn't bring the sins of the people back, the goat would be led to a cliff outside of town, and pushed off.

This idea of a scapegoat, or putting the faults and sins on the back of another and then punishing or even sacrificing them in order to tip the scales back into equilibrium isn't exclusively Judeo-Christian. Many cultures include the practice of something like scapegoating: in ancient Greece, there were many such practices, including in Athens where each year a man and woman were celebrated, then stripped, beaten with twigs, and driven out of the city with the idea that this would protect its inhabitants for the coming year, and in ancient "Roman law an innocent person was allowed to take up the penalty of another who had confessed their own guilt." (Britanica.com)

Modern practices of the High Holy Days don't include pushing a scapegoat off of a cliff. In fact, preparing oneself for Yom Kippur today includes a very heartfelt assessment of one's wrongs and an attempt to make amends in one's relationships.

Aish.com, an educational website dedicated to helping people understand Judaism points out:

Repentance and Yom Kippur are effective for the things you did to violate God's trust and expectations, but the hurt you caused, the damage you did against other people, THAT requires you to not only ensure full compensation, but make sincere amends.

It goes on:

We do subscribe to a right to be forgotten and forgiven...but in order for that to happen there must be sincere remorse, genuine regret, true commitment not to repeat the mistake, and importantly, a heartfelt and authentic apology. Then and only then does the perpetrator have a right for his or her misconduct to be forgotten. And, this right to forgiveness is so deep that, after a sincere apology, the burden shifts to the aggrieved to forgive.

Unfortunately, over the years, this spirituality of personal accountability and responsibility has taken a back seat to scapegoating. Both individually and collectively, we put our sins and brokenness on the backs of others, rather than making amends, rather than sincerely engaging in remorse and working to make change.

I think of all of this today, as our Jewish brothers and sisters prepare for the 25 hours of fasting that will accompany Yom Kippur at sundown tonight, and as our nation, indeed our world, mourns the death of the Honorable Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I was with friends when the news came last Friday that Justice Ginsburg had passed. It was the first time that we had gone out in public since March. We were on a patio, masked and distanced, when my husband shared the alert from his phone.

I wept. Publicly.

- In gratitude, for this tireless advocate for the poor and marginalized.
- In sadness, that this prophetic voice would now be silent.
- In fear, of what may come.

Justice Ginsburg learned of discrimination early in life. When her mother died of cancer the day before Ruth's high school graduation, the branch of Judaism that her family was a part of did not count women as constitutive of the 10 people needed to conduct public prayer, also known as a minyan. Ruth's prayers didn't count. Because she was a woman. And so, her fights for justice and equality for all of us, and they were personal.

In a fascinating juxtaposition, the Torah, which includes the prescription to pray the sins of the community onto the back of an innocent animal and scapegoat it to pay for our sins, also includes the admonition to judges:

"Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the innocent. Follow justice and justice alone."

(Deuteronomy 16:19-20a)

I can think of no other modern-day figure who better embodied this commandment. Her tiny frame housed a justice giant who refused to be blinded by the bribes of public opinion, fame, or future gain, and who, in doing so, refused to allow the words of those seeking justice to be twisted as so many in power allow to be done today.

Our New Testament lesson from the Letter to the Philippians gives us some meaningful, constructive ways to strive toward healthy, just communities, rather than communities rooted in

unstable power dynamics and personal gain. We're told "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility" to hold as our center the interests of others. Paul then goes on to encourage us to have the attitude of "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." (Philippians 2:6)

This, friends, is my fervent prayer for each and every one of us right now as individuals, and for our law enforcement officials, for the Senate and for parents and school boards. The underlying dynamic is one that I've lifted up here before, but it cannot be stressed enough: Jesus modeled for us that just because we CAN do something, doesn't mean we OUGHT to do it. Just because we CAN worship in person right now, doesn't mean that we OUGHT to do it. Just because lawmakers and elected officials CAN break with precedences of inclusion and mutuality, doesn't mean that they OUGHT to do so.

Depending on your Christology, Jesus COULD do anything he darned well pleased. He could have destroyed his opponents, slayed them with a word, but instead, he chose to humble himself, using his power not for personal gain, but rather to bring about the healing and wholeness, not only of his followers but also of his opponents! Jesus' way was to teach and heal in such a way that brought about the salvation of the powerless, but also the transformation of the powerful.

We've all heard the axiom that "absolute power corrupts absolutely." This lesson from Philippians is critically instructive to those of us in any situation of power: the Godly use of power is that which centers the needs of others rather than self.

As a feminist, I'm compelled to say that this doesn't equal the degradation of self which those in power often masquerade as humility. Rather, an integrated humility does not use its power to manipulate or control. An integrated humility understands that actions, behaviors, and attitudes that point toward mutual dignity are the only truly sustainable power dynamics. In embracing integrated humility ala Philippians, acknowledging our sins, brokenness, and unhealthy systems and structures, rather than being something to be shunted off onto the backs of others, become instructive, constructive building blocks toward deeper life in God. Accountability for one's actions, with the goal of mutual health, while work, are what ultimately draw us ever closer to the realm of grace.

Friends, I started this morning by reflecting on the concept of a scapegoat, on the idea put forth in many cultures that we can somehow make things right, by putting our brokenness on the innocent and allowing them to shoulder our burden, rather than doing the hard work of changing our behaviors, power dynamics, and structures. The spirituality of Yom Kippur, of the beautiful Maya Angelou poem which we heard Jan Davis read, and the Letter to the Philippians offer powerful correctives. One of the central figures of my spirituality, the great Oscar Romero of El Salvador, is quoted as having said shortly before he was martyred, "Que mi sangre sea semilla de liberacion." Translated: "If I am killed, may my blood sow the seeds of liberation."

Yes, in the death of the Honorable Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a great tree has fallen, and even the hills are shuddering with the impact. But a system whose existence rests exclusively on the shoulders of an 87-year-old, five-foot-one, 90-pound cancer survivor is a system inherently lacking in stability. It is important for us to grieve, to celebrate the prophet who graced us with her work, AND it is the Godly way for each of us to now take up her mantle, to take accountability, to sow the seeds of liberation from her death, for each of us to strive in our

interpersonal relationships and our civil structures toward justice, a justice not rooted in the bribery and lies of disproportionate power structures and scapegoats, but a sustainable justice rooted in a mutuality that understands that it is in striving toward others' wholeness and healing, we will find our own.

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