

STAR OF DAVID

By Simone Zelitch

Yom Kippur Morning 5784, in Dorshei Derekh

This d'var is dedicated to the memory of my Akiba Hebrew Academy teacher and treasured friend, Harold Gorvine, who taught me how to argue with myself.

Last December, I was at a science fiction convention in Cherry Hill, a lively event full of writers, readers, and Trekkies in costume. In the dealer's room, I hung out at a bookstand, hoping to promote my novel about an imaginary Jewish state and got to talking with a jewelry designer. Her stuff was gorgeous and intense, and I had the feeling that each piece had a story behind it. I told her about my novel, and she, in turn, told me about a personal project. She had made Jewish stars in bronze, and she gave them to every Jew on one condition: We had to wear them every day.

The *kavannah*—the intention —was clear. We are living in a period of rapidly increasing antisemitism, and wearing that star is a way to assert an identity. In particular, after the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue, the more we stand together in public, the less isolated we'll feel.

Well, I thought about it for a while. Then, I said no. Here was my reason at the time. That summer, I'd spent three weeks in Israel and Palestine, much of that time in Nablus in the West Bank. I'd seen Israeli flags fluttering on both sides of bypass roads, and in front of settlements. That June on Flag Day, Jews streamed through Damascus Gate in Jerusalem, kicked down grates of shops in the Muslim quarter and pepper-sprayed old women. Wearing that star identified me with the Israel flag. Of course, more recently, that flag became identified with pro-democracy protests, but let's face it. The Star of David is associated with the state and its policies. Do I want to carry Israel around my neck?

You won't be surprised to learn that the six-pointed star is a very old symbol. According to the Encyclopedia Judaica—at least the edition in the GJC library—that star can be found in ancient carving and manuscripts in every civilization—along with the pentagram and—yes—the swastika. The star became a primary Jewish symbol far later, as a counterpoint to the Christian cross, and Islamic crescent. You could call it a kind of “brand,” the jeweler kept insisting—the star doesn't look like the one on the Israeli flag—more like the yellow star the Nazis forced Jews to wear. Is that supposed to make it feel better?

I thought it through. Then, I thought some more. At last, I realized that my refusal had little to do with Israel. In fact, I was afraid. Not that I would be attacked on the street, to be honest. And, again, to be honest, I couldn't be sure where that fear came from.

What do we wear? What do we carry? What do we bear? Do we get a choice in the matter? This brings me to the parsha we just heard.

In Leviticus Chapter 16 verse 6, after sacrificing an offering of a bull for his own family's transgressions, Aaron takes two he-goats, and they stand before the entrance of the tent of

meeting. By lot, one is marked as a *korban* (sacrifice) for YHVH, a sin-offering for the Israelites. The second goat is “for Azazel” and left alive to make expiation—that is, atonement for the Israelites. Aaron lays his hands on that living goat and essentially burdens its heads with all of Israel’s transgressions, and then someone sets that goat free in the wilderness. That goat is called the Azazel-goat, though in some commentaries I’ve read, it’s called the “People’s Goat.” Mysteries abound here. If Aaron already sacrificed one goat for our sins, why does he lay those same sins on the other? And most of all, what or who the heck is Azazel?

Falling into the rabbit-hole of the wonderful web-site Sefaria, I’m left with more questions than answers. “Az” means “cut” or “hard.” Ibn Ezra considers the Alef placed between the Zayin and other Zayin which forms a kind of picture of a mountain-- the one the Azazel-goat’s thrown down. Ibn Ezra also gives a hint about the word Azazel: 33. Do we have to reach that age to understand Azazel or is the answer 33 verses later, in Leviticus Chapter 17 verse 7 which reads: “and that they may offer their sacrifices no more to the goat-demons after whom they stray...”?

Most sources state the Azazel isn’t a place. It’s a demon. Most intriguing is a Sefaria study sheet with a little picture of a goat that implied that the goat itself was actually Azazel. Was the scapegoat actually given to itself?

Or I should say “himself”? They’re identified as he-goats, after all. I recently got the chance to get up and personal with goats. Weaver’s Way has a work shift at the Highlands—goat-tending. I recommend it: three easy hours of work credit. For two Mondays in a row, I led two young goats by their leashes: Max and Knox. They were brothers, mild-tempered. Knox was a little more charismatic, occasionally jumping onto a picnic table. They munched English Ivy together almost in unison. A mother and her son Simcha joined us, and Simcha led a nanny-goat around. She had big horns and a long goatee, and a nasty habit of butting the brothers—mainly Max. I called out: “That’s not fair!” and when the nanny-goat did it again, little Simcha started saying “That’s not fair!” Of course, it wasn’t fair. I guess, you could say—forgive me—that being butted was Max’s lot in life.

Okay, a bad joke. But now, I’ll tell a story—call it a Midrash.

Long ago, in the land of Israel, there were two goats who were brothers. Their names were this: Korban and Azazel. They were happy, even-tempered goats, eating the thistles that grew around the borders of Jerusalem, frolicking through wadis, and sleeping curled up against each other through long winter nights. They were always together until the day came when they were led to the High Priest and lots determined who would be sacrificed to YHVH, and who would be sent into the wilderness.

When Korban was chosen for YHVH and knew he would face the fire, he said to his brother, “Azazel you are being set free. But know that you will also be in exile. As long as you live, you will never forget me—chosen for the fire. Weep for me.” And Azazel the he-goat wandered. He wandered for two thousand years. As time went on, Azazel felt the sharp memory of his brother Korban like a blade between his shoulders. At night, he dreamed of his brother, condemned to fire and smoke. The sins of the living that he carried on his head were nothing to the memory of the dead. Thus, as time passed, Azazel no longer saw where he was wandering. He thought only of that sacrifice, the

smoke, the terror of the altar. “Korban,” he called, “Korban,” and a time came when Azazel could no longer remember his own name.

Some of you may know that in Yiddish, *korban* is the word for what we call the Holocaust. That always disturbed me. It implies that the Holocaust was some kind of sacrifice to God that had a reason behind it, a lesson. When we recount our history, how much of it is about such disasters and pogroms? I know that, growing up, I was fixated on stories about the Holocaust. As I read Holocaust narratives, I projected myself into them. That was the Judaism that I grew up with in the '70s; I suspect that I'm not alone. Particularly here in the relative safety of America, how can we help but be haunted, to feel that asserting our own Jewish identity is something that we owe those who are murdered because they are Jews, not only in the death camps, but throughout our history, and maybe right now, more than ever. Never again! Survival and assertion of our identity is the point—the way death camps and contemporary antisemitism are answered. That was what the jeweler meant when she offered me that Jewish star.

Yet if we are Jews only because people hated Jews enough to murder them, who are we? Our minds, our hearts, our spirits, are a kind of line of defense, and given that position, there is often a kind of willful blindness. I think of the Arab riots in Hebron where the Jewish community was massacred in 1929. One can trace a clear line of reaction from that massacre to the establishment of Israel's first religious settlement in the '70s to Baruch Goldstein's murders in the Cave of the Patriarchs to the nightmare that is Hebron today. If we only assert our Jewish identity for the sake of the dead, we can't acknowledge our own communal transgressions and triumphs, the complexity of who we are and where we are now—spiritually, ethically, and yes, politically. Can there be a Judaism that is not about the Holocaust and Antisemitism, a Judaism of the living?

When I came back to Jewish practices and worship as an adult, that's what I sought, and I found it in many places. I found it at Mishkan Shalom, in the creative, subversive worship of the Fringes and the Tikkun Olam Chavurah. It's telling new stories. It's the revival of Yiddish, not as an act of nostalgia but an urgent hope that the language has lessons we can use today. It's right here at Dorshei Derekh: seekers of the way. As Dayle put it so beautifully last night, we bring a sweetness to our practice, and we create a Judaism that is fully alive. As Fredi said, we know each other well enough to recognize our gaits at a distance and build trust that allows us to acknowledge communal transgressions. In the powerful words of Isaiah today, Judaism addresses us right now. We do more than mourn. We act. Zionism, too, the Zionism that draws me again and again to Israel, is not intended to be a reaction to destruction. It's a daring challenge: affirming a Jewish life that isn't about death.

I did ultimately accept the offer of the Jewish star, and I wore it for a while. Then, I just got out of the habit. I can tell myself that it just didn't go with whatever outfit I was wearing, but in fact, that six-pointed star hanging around my neck just felt weird. Wearing it felt like I was publicly displaying something endlessly complicated, a part of myself that runs deep to strangers, something I can't fully explain or even understand.

I wouldn't have worn the Jewish star in Nablus when I was there that summer. Nablus is a deeply conservative Muslim city, and a center of resistance. A month after I left Nablus, the militant group called the Lion's Den was founded there, and the beautiful Old City where I had

wandered freely was repeatedly invaded by the Israeli army. Yet I must also tell this story: My wonderful guide to the city, Naseer Arafat knew I was Jewish. I told a few other people, the woman who ran the guesthouse who was studying comparative literature, a girl I'd met by chance in the Old City square who treated to me a dessert called *knafa*. Not the young men who railed against the Palestinian Authority on the hotel roof-deck, not the old men Nasser arranged for me to meet who'd led a strike in 1967. Not them. Yet I must say that when I told those few Palestinians that I was a Jew, it was a remarkable experience. I was giving them a gift. I will never forget—never—the moving, complicated conversations that resulted, the curiosity and graciousness and sense of reciprocity as they opened their lives to me in return.

But what if I wear this Jewish star all the time? Can I offer a gift—the gift of this gift and burden of being Jewish-- to everyone? I still don't know. I teach at Community College of Philadelphia, and when I wore that star for a while last year, none of my students mentioned it. Honestly, I suspect that they didn't know what it was. I'll tell one more story. A week and a half ago, I was teaching my evening students, and suddenly, the lights went out. A sane teacher would have just dismissed class. Not me. My students were as crazy as I was and turned on the flashlights on their phones to light the whiteboard as I put boxes around infinitive verbs. Then they took a grammar quiz.

There I was, roaming the room, looking at their answers, giving the papers back, and saying, "try again" and all the while thinking: I love these people, I love these people. At one point I heard myself say: How many Jewish mothers does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Silence. Slowly, I realized what I'd done. One student said, "Do Jews use lightbulbs?" Honestly, on top of everything, I don't think they'd ever heard a lightbulb joke before. A beat later, I finished "That's okay. I'll sit in the dark."

Okay. That was a pretty obtuse way to out myself. Yet there's a denouement. On Monday, one very perky student asked me earnestly, "Did you have a good Rosh Hashana?" She struggled with that word. I said I did. And I'm going to wear this Jewish star when I teach tonight.

Do I want to be branded? The term's offensive in a thousand ways. I think of products, I think of cattle. More disturbing was the report in August of the Palestinian who accused Israeli police of branding him with a Jewish star. The counter-claim was that the image came from bruises when somebody slammed his face against the shoelaces of an arresting officer. Can I bring my living Jewish identity to anyone who sees me? Everything's around my neck, everything including Israel. Can I be that People's Goat? Can I offer this ambivalent and ambiguous thing hanging around my neck like a gift without expecting anything in return?

I will wear it when I teach tonight. If my students don't know what it is, I'll tell them. I will wear it for as long as I can. If I stop wearing it, I won't say that it didn't match my sweater. I'll know better. If I fall short, well, that's what we do when we make vows during these Days of Awe. And next Kol Nidre, I'll acknowledge that there are some vows I cannot keep. I'm grateful for these humane rituals, and I carry them with me too: the knowledge that some things are difficult to bear, and that we need the strength to try.