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## 5768 YK Day Sermon

### “Harry Potter and the Mystery of the Scape Goat”

A rabbi on Yom Kippur normally experiences a tingling sensation. This is not from lack of food or drink, or merely from nerves on this momentous occasion, but also from something beyond simple human explanation. There are moments in the Yom Kippur, where a magical aura hovers over the congregation. We are back in the time of High Priests, when the separation between God and people was less defined.

Perhaps, the intensity of this experience has something to do with the rites and rituals associated with Yom Kippur. The twenty-six hours of the holiday, are compacted by the hours of services we all must endure: Kol Nidre, Ma'ariv (the evening service), Shacharit (the morning service), Pseukai De'zimrah (Psalms of Praise), Vidui (Confession), the Torah Service, Yizkor, Musaf (the additional service), Mincha (the afternoon service), Ne'ilah (the closing service), just to name a few. At the certain point the liturgy of the holiday inevitably blends together, the day becoming a microcosm for the entire year. We are attempting to relive everything that we have already been through, a year of ups and downs flashing before our eyes. We wrestle with the good and bad, hoping to finally let go and move on.

What I turn to most on Yom Kippur day, is the very surreal Torah reading from Parashat Acharei Mot in Leviticus describing the ritual of the scape goats. While today, our primary association with this is the weight of our sins placed on a pair of identical He-Goats, one sent to the wilderness to die, and the other sacrificed in bloody demonstration in front of

all of the Israelites. We equate these poor animals with the human tendency to blame others for our own mistakes.

However, what is actually in the text is obscured by thousands of years of human history. How could we possibly know what the High Priest or the Israelites felt during this ritual or what it meant to them?

Today, I will attempt to explain the impossible, to reach back into the vortex of time and finally and conclusively clarify the meaning behind this ritual. To do so, I will need to draw upon the power of the best known magician of our time. A person so famous, his books sell out before they even hit the bookstores, and in higher quantities than in any book outside of the Bible. For he has performed the ultimate magical trick of our time period, he has made reading cool again for children.

This mystery guest, is, of course, none other than Harry Potter. And, in explaining his story, I will also explain our own. Let me summarize. My trick will be in three parts:

1. First, I will successfully explain the power of J.K. Rowlings books, without, let me emphasize, revealing even the slightest hint of the seventh and final chapter that was released this summer.
2. Second, I will connect Harry Potter to today's Torah portion and to Yom Kippur in general.
3. And, third, I will use Harry Potter to explain the ritual of the scape goat that we read about today.

And, all of this, I will do with my hands, metaphorically tied behind my back. For I will do it all through the Jewish lens of Pardes. Pardes, meaning either apple orchard or paradise, is an acronym for how Jews approach text. The P standing for the Peshat, the

simple meaning. Before we get beneath the text, we first must understand its literal meaning. The R for Remez, the hint of what might be beneath. Next, we begin to scratch the surface of what the real meaning might be. The D for Derash, Biblical Exegesis. The text is always inherently linked to other texts, other experiences. And, finally, the S for Sod, or the Secret level. This goes well beyond the text, to its hidden meaning.

In the Talmud the story goes, four descended to Pardes, one went crazy, one died, another became an apostate, and only one, Rabbi Akiba, made it out safely. For it is through Pardes that we reach God.

So, you see, this is no easy task that I have placed in front of me, but I assure you, at the end you will be amazed.

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## 1. Peshat

The Peshat of Harry Potter is of a boy who at 10-years old discovers that he is destined for great things. Having been raised up until this time, by his Aunt and Uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, on Privet Drive, who treat him miserably, favoring their spoiled son Dudley, Harry has no idea about what is in store for him. All he knows is that there is something different about him and that he seems to have powers beyond normal human beings

In the fourth chapter of the first book, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Harry begins to discover why. He is sent an invitation to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft. Transported by a giant named Hagrid, he is suddenly immersed in a world completely different than our own. He discovers that the real world is split in half: there is the normal world inhabited by Muggles, or ordinary human beings, and there is the world of magic and wonder, that is the essence of Harry Potter.

Born to both a Muggle parent and a witch, Harry is part of both worlds, having to

navigate each as he matures to adulthood over the course of the seven books in the series. In one, he is a celebrity of unusual proportion, in the other tormented by guardians who hate and despise him.

However, there is, of course, a catch. His celebrity is the result of a battle his parents had with an evil magician named Lord Voldemort, a battle in which both of them were killed. However, before they died they managed to save their son, Harry, and also severely damage Lord Voldemort. On Harry's forehead is a permanent marker of this occasion, a scar in the form of a flash of lightning.

So fearful is the world of magic of Lord Voldemort, he is called simply “He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named.” And, neither the reader nor Harry know the power of Lord Voldemort, nor how his parents were able to vanquish him in the first place.

## 2. Remez

Now, that I've put forward the Peshat of Harry Potter, let's move a step deeper into the Remez. For this I would like to look at the larger themes in the series. Essentially Harry Potter is about growing up. The movies portray this the best as we physically see Danielle Radcliffe mature from boyhood to adulthood. Like many adolescents, Harry is awkward in his own body. He does not know his true power in the world and, with his friends Hermione and Ron Weasley, is shy and unsure of himself. The magic becomes a metaphor for his emergence as a full fledged adult. As he gathers strength with the various spells he is required to learn, he also begins to become comfortable in his own skin.

The series is also about uncovering secrets. Something has been hidden from Harry from the time of his birth and he must spend the entire rest of the story discovering what it is. This is an experience that many of us can relate to. Often families keep secrets between one generation to the next. In Harry's case, an entire society is conspiring not to reveal his secret. And, more than this they are afraid to reveal it. Harry Potter, in its own subtle way, is teaching us not to be afraid of our secrets and that all secrets, large or small, will eventually make their way to the surface.

In the story of the High Priest, he too has a large secret that he is hiding. Only Aaron knows what really happened with his sons, Nadab and Abihu, who were killed in front of him in the tabernacle. What a terrible burden he must carry as he performs his duty as High Priest.

## 3. Derash

Indeed, in addition to sharing H.P. as their English initials, there are many things that Harry Potter and the High Priest have in common. We are now at the level of Derash,

connecting one text to another and in doing so helping to clarify both texts.

Like Harry Potter, Aaron lives in two worlds, the world of the magical represented by his duties as High Priest. And, the world of the mundane, his individual interactions with Moses and Miriam, his brother and sister. However, unlike Harry Potter, in Aaron's case, we know very little about this other life. While Moses' story is humanized by his stutter, Aaron is almost always in his role as High Priest. Perhaps the only time we get to know him is during the story of the Golden Calf, when he fails to prevent the Israelites from creating an idol.

Aaron, like Harry, carries the weight of an entire society on his shoulders. He is the protector of the Israelites and the only one who can purify them after they have sinned.

And lastly, both Harry Potter and Aaron share the loneliness of loss, Harry for his parents and Aaron for his sons. While they both live heroic lives, they are also sad and lonely.

#### 4. Sod

And, now finally to the level of Sod, what is the secret essence of both Harry Potter and the High Priest. To uncover this we must look again at the story of the two goats. What does this ritual mean?

As it is written in Leviticus: And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for Azazel. And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which the Lord's lot fell, and offer him for a sin offering. But the goat, on which the lot fell to be for Azazel, shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go to Azazel into the wilderness.

And Aaron shall bring the bull of the sin offering, which is for himself, and shall make an atonement for himself, and for his house, and shall kill the bull of the sin offering which is for

himself”

The first thing you will notice is this mysterious place Azazel. This is the only time it appears in Torah and there is no explanation of what is being referred to and where the goat is being sent.

In the Harry Potter series there is a place, which sounds suspiciously similar to Azazel. The third book in the series is called *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Azkaban is a place where only the worst criminals go. Guarded by Dementors, soulless creatures that cause depression in anyone they touch, Azkaban is not a place that any magician would like to end up. Ten-feet tall and covered in dark, hooded cloaks which reveal only gray, decayed hands, Dementors have the power to cause you to re-experience your worst memory over and over again. And, when they kiss you, they steal your soul. If Azazel is anything like Azkaban, we pity the goat that is sent in that direction.

The second goat is for Aaron himself, this point is emphasized several times in the Torah portion. As it is written: “He shall kill the bull of the sin offering which is for himself.” With the entire community watching him, he must gorge himself on the meat of this poor goat. More than just purging the people of their sins, there must be a deeper meaning in this ritual for both Aaron and, I would also say, Harry Potter.

Remember, these are two people who exist in two different worlds. One world of magic and mystery where they are both celebrated as heroes. And, the other, the world of Muggles and the mundane, where they are completely invisible and alone. In one there is feast, in the other, complete and utter famine.

How are they supposed to reconcile these very different existences? Who is the real Harry Potter? Who is the real High Priest? Is there really a difference between the two sides of these characters? Harry Potter is both the bane of his uncle and aunt's existence and the

messianic hero of his new world. Likewise, Aaron is both the High Priest and a normal human being, with human needs. The sacrifice is for him because he too needs to be taken care of. He cannot ignore his own needs for the sake of the rest of the people. Likewise, Harry Potter craves being just a normal little boy where his every move is not monitored by Lord Voldemort.

At the end of the ritual, when one goat is eaten and the other sent off to the wilderness, the duality in Aaron's life has become singular. The message is clear, he can no longer live in parts, but must exist in both places as one person.

So, too, we cannot live our lives in a million different places. We come here on Yom Kippur to remember the essence of who we are. We must send off or sacrifice our goats, holding onto only what is really, authentically us.

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One of my favorite scenes in Harry Potter, occurs in the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. It occurs in the middle of the night during a Christmas vacation when all the students are home with their families. Left alone, Harry wanders the school in his cloak of invisibility. Stumbling into a hidden room to avoid being caught by teachers, he notices "a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi."

When he looks into the mirror, instead of his own image, he sees the faces of his parents staring at him. But, more than just his parents, he sees his entire family, family that he has never met before in his life.

What is beautiful and touching about this scene is for the first time, we realize fully how alone Harry is in the world. He is not the famous Harry Potter that is fearless and daring, but

a scared kid unable to conjure up what he really wants. Despite all the magic, he is still just a little boy.

The saying on the mirror a backwards riddle that when turned around reads: "I show not your face, but your hearts desire."

Harry, of course, wants to visit this mirror over and over again. On one such visit, he is surprised by the presence of the Headmaster, Dumbledore, who congratulates Harry for being one of the 100 students at Hogwarts who discovered the mirror. After a brief discussion, Dumbledore says about the mirror, "It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desires of our hearts. You, who have never known your family, see them standing around you. Ronald Weasley, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, the best of all of them. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible."

Amazingly, the mirror has almost the identical effect on people that the hated Dementors do. They both cause a person to focus on what is missing in their life, to the point of driving them absolutely mad.

To make it past the Demontors or the Mirror of Erised, as it is called (just desire backwards), or the ritual of the scape goats, we must know and understand our true selves.

This is also the case on Yom Kippur. Over the course of the holiday we must forget the Hagrid (pardon the pun) expressions on our faces, and our irritability from lack of food and drink, and focus on what is important in our lives. Let us put away our secrets and our unrealistic dreams, and instead focus on what we can accomplish and what we have already accomplished. In the end, it is not magic and ritual that will save us, but our own will to make the world a better place.

As Dumbledore tells Harry, “It does not do to dwell on your dreams and forget to live, remember that.”

Or as is written in Pirke Avot, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me; If I am only for myself, what am I? And, if not now, then when?”

A safe easy fast to all of us.