XVI: 1And the Lord spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, when they drew near before the Lord, and they died.

2And the Lord said to Moses: Speak to your brother Aaron, that he should not come at all times into the Holy within the dividing curtain, in front of the cover that is upon the ark, so that he should not die, for I appear over the ark cover in a cloud.

21And Aaron shall lean both of his hands [forcefully] upon the live he goat's head and confess upon it all the willful transgressions of the children of Israel, all their rebellions, and all their unintentional sins, and he shall place them on the he goat's head, and send it off to the desert with a timely man.

22The he goat shall thus carry upon itself all their sins to a precipitous land, and he shall send off the he goat into the desert.

And the goat arrived at Azazel’s in the desert, and Azazel took out his book and pen. “When were you born?” The goat said June 19th, 1943. Where? New York. Where have you been? I’ve been coming to you as long as I can remember, but the way was very rough. There were rocky stretches, and it was hard to cross them. I could barely…” “Enough,” said Azazel. “You’re late, and we don’t need any excuses. Now what have you brought.”

The goat bowed its head. Its hair was grey and stringy, barely covering the bald spot. And it was badly combed; badly trimmed, if you could say it was trimmed at all. It was all Azazel could do to reach out and touch the goat’s head. He rubbed the head for some time, feeling through the hair to the veins that still beat with the goat’s blood. The goat moaned softly, tolerating the pain and in what felt like an eternity the memory of the difficulty of the voyage. The departure from the man who sent him into the desert, beating him with whips and sticks; and earlier, the man who had worn white robes, and had placed both hands on his head while he whispered accounts of all the sins of the people. The weight, the pain, the burden, the years, the tears he had wept, the memories of those who had died in the ovens. The odor of the gas, the meat, the degradation, the loss.

When will I arrive, wept the goat, and end this torment?

Azazel closed his eyes, and keeping his hands on the old goat’s head began to chant his song, whose words were so ancient the desert itself could barely have been older. “This is the day of atonement,” he chanted, in some incomprehensible language “The final day of atonement.”

The goat understood it had come all this long way only to die, and while it struggled, its head bent, to try to understand why, Azazel gently pushed its head back and exposed its straggly neck to the blade.

The goat opened its mouth to bleat, but no sound could come out. It opened its eyes, and the desert sun blinded it. It raised its paw, which now felt finger by finger as though it were holding a book of curses; it raised its other paw which felt as though it were holding a book of blessings. It reached for Azazel who had not stopped his chanting. And then…was it was over?

The goat, we can call him ken now, fell into the darkness, and dreamed of the days when he was younger, less of a goat. His mother was calling him, and he was laughing and hiding. She called anxiously, Kenny, where are you. He hid behind the big chair in the living room, the one he had wet the day before. She found him, and changed his diapers before feeding him. He liked the applesauce best. Poppy came home, and taught him how to play. He moved his pieces, and when Poppy wasn’t looking he took his king and said checkmate. Later his sister gave him a bath, and they went to bed. Outside it was raining, and the dark apartment windows seemed to rattle in the wind. Tomorrow was Thursday and he could listen to the Lone Ranger on the radio, squeezed in behind the chair next to the speaker.

The rest seemed to go quickly, his father would say, too quickly. School, friends, marriage, kids, divorce, more classes, marriage again, two more kids. And then another day, and… Azazel. Always finishing with Azazel, his head bowed, the rubbing of hands, the neck stretched, the sun, the blade, the blood.

What good have I done, he thought, I thought, after all these years, and all these dvarim? What can my bleating in the stony desert ever accomplish? He felt, I felt, I could never give an answer to that question, and I don’t even know if that is the right question for now. At moments like this I always want to go back to Azazel’s words, to ask them to speak for me, and to make me think of what I can say.

So I searched for Azazel’s words, and not finding them exactly, took second best, as always. This is what Aaron told me to tell Azazel, “all the willful transgressions of the children of Israel, all their rebellions, and all their unintentional sins.”

They did bad things, I said to him, so he wouldn’t go slit my throat.

Like what, he said.

I can’t say, I said, and he put the knife’s blade on my throat.

I bleated out, they said dirty words.

What dirty words?

I can’t say, I’ll get spanked.

Whisper them to me.

I whispered them, all the dirty words, including the f word, and the s word, and even the bad words for black people and Italians and jews and more.

Enough he said, what else did he say.

What they did, I said.

What they did what, he said again, and put the knife on my throat.

I cried and pointed to my pants, my thing, and said, touched it.

Azazel laughed at me, and said, what else.

I pointed at him, and said, they told me you weren’t real. I said, you weren’t real.

He said, do you think I am real, and I looked at him briefly, before dropping my eyes. Yes, I said, you are real.

Smart answer, he said. Tell me more.

There was only one more thing.

They killed someone, I said.

Who, said Azazel.

It was my brother.

What was his name?

Abihu, I said. They killed him, and then said they would send me away. And now I am here.

What am I supposed to do, I asked. I’ve come all this way to you, and I’ve done what the man told me to do. I’ve answered all your questions. I’m afraid.

Are you sorry, asked Azazel?

For what, I asked.

That’s for you to remember, and to say.

I don’t want to say it, not in front of all these people.

Just whisper it to me, said Azazel.

I didn’t want to, but I told him. I told him everything. I spilled the beans. I confessed. I became a dirty jew, a rotten…can’t say the word, but you know what I mean. I told him everything, but I didn’t feel sorry, really. Not for that.

But I felt sorry for telling him. I thought, now he will punish them. He will laugh at them for what they did, and for pretending they didn’t do it, and even for doing it when they didn’t mean to do it. They had done all those things to me, before they sent me away to Azazel, and I knew when I got here and had to tell him, it wouldn’t help. I hadn’t known Azazel had a knife, but maybe I really did know and didn’t want to admit it.

To whom could I tell all these things that I’ve been carrying all my life? My loves, my indiscretions, my betrayals, my hopes, my pride, my proofs that no one would listen to, my transgressions. All I could hope to wear now would be the filthy cloths of the desert traveler, while the man who had killed my brother and sent me into the oven would go home and wash his cloths clean. What did they say?

23And Aaron shall enter the Tent of Meeting and remove the linen garments that he had worn when he came into the Holy, and there, he shall store them away.

24And he shall immerse his flesh in a holy place and don his garments. He shall then go out and sacrifice his burnt offering and the people's burnt offering, and he shall effect atonement for himself and for the people.

Was Aaron really my father? I thought it was Louis Harrow and my mother Miriam Harrow. We

were born in another time and another place, and we travelled far to come here. Now all that has become forgotten, and all that seems to remain before Azazel are those words, he shall effect atonement for himself and his people.

But they forgot to tell me exactly how to effect this atonement, and what atonement really is.

I know it is time for me to make up what this atonement means, and Ken can’t do that. He can tell you what Moses tried to say with his circumcised lips, but who knows if it came out right. He said it like this:

15He shall then slaughter the he goat of the people's sin offering and bring its blood within the dividing curtain, and he shall do with its blood as he had done with the bull's blood, and he shall sprinkle it upon the ark cover and before the ark cover.

16And he shall effect atonement upon the Holy from the defilements of the children of Israel and from their rebellions and all their unintentional sins. He shall do likewise to the Tent of Meeting, which dwells with them amidst their defilements.

17And no man shall be in the Tent of Meeting when he comes to effect atonement in the Holy, until he comes out. And he shall effect atonement for himself, for his household, and for all the congregation of Israel.

Since no man was there to tell us what happened, and since papa aaron died many years ago, and I can’t call him to ask what he did, we’ll have to imagine it together.

Imagine what we are hearing while papa aaron effects atonement:

23And Aaron shall enter the Tent of Meeting and remove the linen garments that he had worn when he came into the Holy, and there, he shall store them away.

24And he shall immerse his flesh in a holy place and don his garments. He shall then go out and sacrifice his burnt offering and the people's burnt offering, and he shall effect atonement for himself and for the people.

Maybe next year I will be able to tell you more about this “effects atonement” thing. For now I think I has to do with washing your clothes, and maybe remembering what happened to my brother when he and I made some mistake. I think that was it, but it hurts too much to remember it now. Wait a little, wait a bischen. I will tell you next year, my love, and we will be happy again.

Azazel put down his book. As I looked at him my eyes played tricks on me. Papa? I said. He answered, L’Shena tova.

Then he turned away. Was there a tear in his eye? While he wasn’t looking, I peered into the book, and read, where the page was open, “Eloheinu will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” I shuddered, and bleated softly. He didn’t seem to hear me, so I looked again. “He stretched forth his hand and took the sacrificial knife to slay his child.” I couldn’t help it, and bleated again. Softly, but still more than before. He seemed to be looking away, at something in the distance. The sun blinded me when I peered out to see what it was. Then I read on: “ensnared by its horns in the bushes.” I knew what was coming next. “offered it as a burnt offering in place of…”

The sun was burning down now, and it was impossible for me to see any more. The book almost closed on the last page that had the words “nations shall bless themselves because you listened,” and I knew that it would be hopeless to dream of the next year as coming, as a time that would be tova. Yet…

Why was I here, I wondered, and then remembered the last words of the man with the whips and sticks who had wept when he drove me into the wilderness. I can’t really say I understood them, because his cruelty seemed so painful, and all I could do was to run to escape. Remembering the pain, I whimpered, and whispered what he had said. Was it with a touch of regret? “for your children are returning to their home. Bring me back. Let me return.” I felt that although I was being whipped, I was also being begged by his words: “bring me back, let me return, for you are…” the sounds grew too garbled after that. Lord, you, change, rethought my…ashamed. I am stricken deep within.”

Now was I remembering my running away, or was he himself being whipped with his own hand, “I am ashamed, I feel disgrace, I bear in pain the errors of my youth.”

He couldn’t take it; I had to pretend that I was the one, responsible for his youthful indiscretions, or else Adonai, the lord, his father, might bring the knife down on his throat and fulfil the word he had given to kill him.

I am flooded with memories now. I am filled with yearning now.

The old man is making me speak, making me say these words, his words, azazel’s words that appeared as blood from his mouth, his lips moving in the desert sun’s blaze, crying, So says the ancient one.”

I had no choice but to comfort him. I spoke again. Papa. Av. Abi. Father, my poor poor father, who had dreamed of so much. Was it for me? Or for all of us? Papa, avi, papa, avinu. We loved you papa, we adored you. Why not say it, I love you papa,…avinu malkeinu, we adored, avinu malkeinu, honenu va’anenu, it’s ok, papa, we love you, listen papa; ki ain banu ma’asim. Papa, we have nothing, but still, we can talk. I’ll say it for you papa.

And Azazel turned slightly. I knew he was listening.

I raised my voice, and said what he was waiting to hear  
Asey imanu tzedakah vahesed, Asey imanu tzedakah vahesed, vehoshi’enu.

[Humming]

And then the book was closed.

L’shana tova