

Yom Kippur 5778

September 30, 2017

In the middle of Sophia Square in Kiev, Ukraine, there is a statue of a man on a horse. The man is Bogdan Chmielnicki, one of the great national heroes of Ukraine. In 1648, he led a Cossack revolt that freed Ukraine from Polish control. Many in Russia also regard him as a hero because he forged closer links between Ukraine and the Czar. I'd be willing to bet some of you have seen the statue on tours with Prof. Berk or others. So, as some of you know, Jews generally have only one thing to say about Chmielnicki, *yimach sh'mo v'zichro*, may his name and his memory be erased. In the process of the revolt, Chmielnicki's cossacks murdered perhaps as many as 100,000 Jews, whom they hated for both political and religious reasons. The Chmielnicki massacres of 1648 are generally considered one of the great tragedies of Jewish history. The despair they caused helped lead both to the Hasidic movement and to the false belief in Shabbetai Tzvi as the messiah.

One of my friends and colleagues talks about the outrage he felt upon seeing such a glorification of this murderer of our people.

Instinctively, I feel the same way. But I do not feel that way about the statue of Andrew Jackson in the middle of New Orleans, even though he ordered the attacks and forced marches that killed perhaps 20,000 Creek and Cherokee. I most certainly do not feel that way about George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who owned slaves and also supported the killing or deportation of Indians. I don't even feel that way about Robert E. Lee, whom I have always considered an honorable man though he fought for an awful cause. Mind you, the word "feel" is important here. I am not saying I shouldn't feel that way, just that I don't. One's gut feelings in this regard are a product of numerous factors, including what historical books you happened to read as a child.

As one might say in Talmudic language, *ad heichan* political correctness? How far do we have to go to recognize evil that has been done in our name? I would like to bring in here the ceremony that we just read about in the Torah, that we will soon reenact with the Avodah

service.

וַיִּתֵּן אֶהָרוֹ עַל־שְׁנֵי הַשְּׁעִירִים גְּרָלוֹת גּוֹרָל אֶחָד לַיהוָה וְגּוֹרָל אֶחָד לְעִזָּאֵזֶל: ט וְהַקָּרִיב
 אֶהָרוֹ אֶת־הַשְּׁעִיר אֲשֶׁר עָלָה עָלָיו הַגּוֹרָל לַיהוָה וְעָשָׂהוּ חַטָּאת: י וְהַשְּׁעִיר אֲשֶׁר עָלָה עָלָיו
 הַגּוֹרָל לְעִזָּאֵזֶל יַעֲמֵד־חַי לְפָנָי יְהוָה לְכַפֵּר עָלָיו לְשַׁלַּח אֹתוֹ לְעִזָּאֵזֶל הַמִּדְבָּרָה:

Aaron shall... place lots upon the two goats, one marked for the Lord and the other marked for Azazel. Aaron shall bring forward the goat designated by lot for the Lord, which he is to offer as a sin offering; while the goat designated by lot for Azazel shall be left standing alive before the Lord, to make expiation with it and to send it off to the wilderness for Azazel.

One of the goats is offered as a hataat, purification offering. So on Yom Kippur one might assume this is the goat that bears our sins. We kill that goat, and so our sins are destroyed. But instead our sins are placed on a goat that is not killed. It is left alive and sent off somewhere beyond where people can see it.

Why don't we kill our sins? Isn't the symbolic destruction of sin the point of Yom Kippur? The fact is, we can't. In reality, our sins are out there, and many of them cannot be undone. With all the talk of political correctness: attempts to get rid of statues of Confederate leaders, changing the name of the Washington Redskins, removing the segregationist Woodrow Wilson's name from buildings at Princeton, we cannot possibly do what is needed to cleanse our past. In fact, a hataat according to Jewish Law only cleanses one of unintentional sins. This suggests that the goat sent to Azazel specifically represents intentional transgressions, from which cleansing is much harder. Many of the acts of land-grabbing, racism, and even genocide that we try to undo with political correctness were done with some knowledge that they were wrong. Andrew Jackson removed the Cherokee in the face of an explicit supreme court decision that ruled against him. We who are ultra-sensitive to such acts in the past enjoy their fruits every day. Even the most liberal of us would likely not tolerate it if, let's say, Mexico

attempted to get back Arizona and California by force. The fact that Manifest Destiny helped create a strong United States, from which we as Jews have benefitted in numerous ways, complicates the picture even further. There is likely not a group on the face of the earth that does not idolize somebody who was bad to somebody else. We may be outraged when we see a statue of Chmielnicki. But it is instructive to read of his life as written by Ukrainians. Even if they think his anti-Semitism was awful, it does not erase what he did for them. In *Von den Juden und ihren Luegen*, "Concerning the Jews and their Lies" [1547], Martin Luther -- frustrated that Jews would not convert to his newly reformed Christianity -- wrote what is practically a recipe for Kristallnacht. (Burning down synagogues and the like.) I do not expect my Protestant colleagues to stop revering him.

I want to suggest that the goat sent out into the wilderness is there to create awareness where retraction is impossible. The idea of undoing every sin of world history is ludicrous. Yet neither am I saying the "political correctness" some traditionalists deride is a bunch of

malarkey. I am sympathetic to changing names of sports teams that have now begun to offend us. Even if indiscriminate invasions have an ancient pedigree, international law can and should try to rein them in. When I think about it, the story we tell ourselves every Thanksgiving about how the Pilgrims and Indians joined in fellowship for days of feasting is problematic. That image hardly represents the real story of White people's relationship to Native Americans. But every nation has expurgated its founding stories to some extent. We are not going to stop having Thanksgiving dinner. What we can do is delve more deeply into the truth to flesh out a fairer picture. We will not kill the goat, but it will continue to wander in our conscience.

I really wish the Ukrainians would remove that statue of Chmielnicki. But they won't. So I hope they learn that in addition to whatever good he did, he was also a murderer of Jews. I am not sure every statue of Robert E. Lee needs to go -- although I certainly admire localities that have chosen to do so. I hope though that those places that keep such statues also teach the horrors of slavery in America, so that

our future might be a little better than our past. Perhaps this is a way forward in the culture wars that have been so plaguing us. May societies all over the world find the courage to learn from our pasts that cannot be undone. As the Sage Reish Lakish says, great is teshuvah, for it has the power to make *zedonot na'asin ke-zekhuyot* intentional sins seem as merits.

