

THE CROSSROADS OF LIFE

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Two identical goats awaited the High Priest in the Temple courtyard on Yom Kippur. The multitudinous spectators watched with bated breath as the High Priest was presented with a box that contained two slips of paper, the lots that would determine the respective fates of the two goats. He reached into the box, drew the lots and placed them on the heads of the goats. One goat was now designated "for God," the other for Azazel.

The High Priest proceeded to ritually slaughter the goat that was "for God." He collected its blood, sprinkled it on the holy altar and offered up the goat as a sanctified sacrifice to God. The other goat was led out of the courtyard into the open country to a distant mountainside covered with jagged rocks. The goat was pushed over the precipice, and as it tumbled down the mountainside it was torn to pieces by the sharp rocky protrusions.

What was the significance of this ritual? Why was it considered one of the highlights of the Yom Kippur service, the holiest day of the year? The commentators explain that the two goats symbolize the two divergent roads along which a person can travel through his lifetime on this earth—the road of spirituality and the road of materialism.

The road to spiritual growth is arduous and difficult. It requires much sacrifice. But in the end, perseverance brings fulfillment and eternal rewards as the exalted spirit connects with the Above. Most of us have felt at one time or another a moment of spiritual transcendence and remember the profound exhilaration as it resonated in their hearts and souls. This is the greatest pleasure a human being can experience, and it is represented by the goat that is designated "for God" and sacrificed on the altar.

The road to material success, on the other hand, is more accessible. It provides constant gratification for the body's physical needs and lulls us into a false sense of security. But this road ultimately leads to destruction, to a life wasted on the pleasures of the moment and deprived of the supreme and enduring pleasures of the spirit. At the end, it falls off the final precipice and disintegrates into nothingness.

Yom Kippur is the day when these two roads intersect. It is a defining moment in a person's life. Once again, he stands at the crossroads. Once, he must make the hard choices that will affect not only his life on this earth but the eternal condition of his indestructible soul.

A weary traveler, thirsty and covered with dust, sat by the side of the highway in the broiling sun.

Suddenly, he heard a rumble in the distance. He looked up and saw a cloud of dust approaching. As it drew near, he saw that it was a beautiful carriage drawn by four handsome white horses. As the carriage drew nearer, it came to a halt, and a rich man stepped out.

"My good fellow," he said to the weary traveler, "can I offer you a ride? It is much too hot to walk when you can ride in comfort."

"Thank you, sir," said the traveler, "but I must decline your kind offer."

"But why?" said the rich man. "I am not asking you for anything. I'm just offering to help a man in obvious distress."

"And I thank you for it," said the traveler. "But you see, we are not traveling in the same direction. You are traveling south, but I am headed north. We have different destinations."

In our own lives, we need to ask ourselves if we are headed north or south. We need to ask ourselves if spiritual aspirations are our ultimate goal or if we are completely focused on material accomplishments. We need to ask ourselves if we are really content to take the easy way, the point of least resistance, or if we are prepared to make hard choices and sacrifices. Let us remember that the road to materialism ends in disappointment, while the road to spiritual growth ultimately delivers everlasting reward.

The Secret of Clairvoyance

You won't bump into many sorcerers and wizards on the streets of New York or Chicago, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. There are innumerable reports about the feats of practitioners of the occult. Granted that a good many of them are nonsense, but some are probably true. Where there's smoke, there has to be at least some fire.

The Torah acknowledges the existence of sorcerers and wizard, as well as an entire list of other occult practices, such as witchcraft, divination and necromancy, and strictly prohibits them in the strongest possible terms. Reading through this long list is an eerie, bone-chilling experience, and when it is over, we stumble across a strange juxtaposition.

What is the first commandment the Torah gives us after the subject of the occult comes to an end? It is the prohibition against cursing one's father or mother. The commentators are puzzled. What is the connection between this cursing a parent and the occult?

Let us now consider for a moment the Torah prohibition against the occult. Imagine a person at a major crossroads in his life. Faced with difficult decisions, confused, he wants desperately to know what the future holds in store. So what does he do? He consults a necromancer or another occult diviner of the future. Why is this such a terrible sin?

The commentators explain that it is actually possible to discover the future by ascending the Kabbalistic ladder through the fifty levels of holiness to the ultimate level of divine inspiration. This is actually the secret explanation of the powers of the occult. All things in the world exist in dichotomies in order to provide people with free will. If there is a holy path to clairvoyance, then the Almighty will create, as a counterpoint, an unholy path to clairvoyance. Therefore, when a person seeks clairvoyance on the unholy path of the occult, he is in essence rejecting the holy path to clairvoyance, which leads directly to the embrace of the Almighty.

This is what the Torah is telling us by the juxtaposition of the prohibition against cursing parents to the prohibition against the occult. Do not think for a moment that occult practices are a harmless, nondenominational spiritual experience. They are a rejection of the Almighty, just like cursing your parents instead of blessing them is a rejection of the people to whom you owe most in the world.

A young traveling in a distant land man sought out a famous guru. The guru, painfully thin and wearing only a stained dhoti, received the young man while sitting cross-legged on the dirt floor of his hut. He stared at the young man with large, liquid eyes and told him all about his past and his future. The young man was astounded.

Upon returning home, the young man visited a great sage and told him about the guru.

"Interesting," said the sage, "but tell me, how did he treat his wife?"

"Well, he was a little sharp and abrupt with her."

"Then he is nothing. His powers come from unholy sources. If he were a man of genuine spirituality and elevation of the soul, he would treat his wife with more consideration."

In our own lives, living as we do in such an intensely materialistic society, we are witnessing a great upsurge of interest in things spiritual, as is to be expected. But unfortunately, much of this interest is being diverted into unholy channels. People who are accustomed to seeking easy fixes for material pleasure are now seeking out the occult and other ersatz spiritual experiences as easy fixes for spiritual fulfillment. We even hear about degenerate media celebrities dabbling in the Kabbalah. It is all a farce. There is no easy path to true spirituality, nor is there a substitute for it. If we want real spiritual fulfillment, we must embrace the Torah, its values and its ideals. This is the only path that leads to the Almighty Himself. Text Copyright © 2010 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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