

Who Were the 'Precious Ones of Yerushalayim' and How Can We Join Their Ranks? Yom Kippur 5787

Rabbi Akiva Males

Rabbi, Young Israel of
Memphis, Tennessee



AMONG THE MANY UNIQUE DETAILS OF THE annual Yom Kippur *Avodah* (service) that took place in the *Beis HaMikdash* (Holy Temple) was the *Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach* (the scapegoat). In Vayikra 16:21-22 we read:

כא - וקמך אהרן את־שתי יָדָיו על־ראש השֹּׁעִיר הַסֵּי וְהִתְנַחֵה עָלָיו אֶת־כָּל־עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־כָּל־פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכֹל־חַטָּאתָם וְנָתַן אֹתָם עַל־רֹאשׁ הַשֹּׁעִיר וְשָׁלַח בְּיַד־אִישׁ עֹתִי הַמִּדְבָּרָה:
כב - וְנִשָּׂא הַשֹּׁעִיר עָלָיו אֶת־כָּל־עֲוֹנוֹתָם אֶל־אֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה וְשָׁלַח אֶת־הַשֹּׁעִיר בַּמִּדְבָּר:

21 - And Aaron shall lean both of his hands 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.

22 - The 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.

The *Mishnah* (*Yoma* 6:4) teaches that the one leading the scapegoat was accompanied at the start of his journey:

יקירי ירושלים היו מלווין אותו, עד סוכה הראשונה

The precious ones of Jerusalem would escort him until the first shelter.

In his commentary to that *Mishnah*, Rav Ovadia Mi'Bartenura defines those precious individuals as being "from the important people of Jerusalem."

Just who were those "important people"? Furthermore, what did they do to earn being described by our Sages as "*Yakirei Yerushalayim* – the precious ones of Jerusalem"? Were they great scholars, people known to be meticulously observant Jews, or persons of extremely high moral character? Perhaps they were people of great pedigree or high social standing?

Rabbi Mordechai Yehuda Leib Zacks, *zt"l*, (Jerusalem, 1906-1963) suggests that they were a small group of people who simply chose to escort the individual leading the Yom Kippur scapegoat into the wilderness. Rabbi Zacks posits that they did not want that communal representative to feel lonely and frightened when heading out into the desert. By accompanying him at the start of his journey, this cohort helped ease his feelings of anxiety.

This begs the following question: Why should engaging in this one simple act crown its practitioners with the title of "the precious ones of Jerusalem"? After all, the *Mishnah* taught that they merely accompanied the one leading the scapegoat to the first station outside the city – not all the way to the final destination. Furthermore, as kind as this deed was, it occurred just once a year. On the surface, this one small act does not appear to merit earning the title of "*Yakirei Yerushalayim*"?

Rabbi Zacks suggests that we need to look at what those

individuals willingly gave up in order to escort their fellow Jew as he left Jerusalem. They had been in the *Beis HaMikdash* on Yom Kippur – witnessing the *Kohen Gadol* (high priest) carry out the singularly unique *Avodah* of that day. Can one imagine a holier place to be – or any greater spiritual experience to witness?

Yet, what did this select group of people choose to do? They said to themselves, "How can I only focus on myself and my own spiritual experience? There's a Jew about to head out into the wilderness all alone. He must be feeling nervous. I need to tear myself away from my own powerful spiritual accomplishments and help calm another Jew's nerves."

This special group of individuals chose to leave the holiest place on Earth (the *Beis HaMikdash*), on the holiest day of the year (Yom Kippur), so that another Jew might have peace of mind. Sacrificing a powerful spiritual experience for the wellbeing of another Jew earned them the lofty title of "*Yakirei Yerushalayim* – the precious ones of Jerusalem."

For generations, a beautiful story has been told about Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1809-1883):

One Yom Kippur eve, Rabbi Salanter did not arrive in shul in time to recite the solemn *Kol Nidre* prayers together with the congregation. His absence puzzled many who had made every effort to be there. The rest of the story later emerged: On his way to shul that evening, Rabbi Salanter heard a baby crying uncontrollably. He quickly deduced that the infant's mother had left her sleeping baby in order to attend *Kol Nidre* at shul. The child had awoken while its mother was away and was distraught. To calm that panicked baby, Rabbi Salanter decided to forgo his own Yom Kippur eve experience. He chose to stay at that infant's side, doing his best to soothe that distressed child until the mother returned. Rather than experience the spiritual high of reciting *Kol Nidre* with a *minyan* (quorum), on that Yom Kippur night, Rav Yisrael Salanter offered comfort to a baby and prayed alone.¹

Rabbi Salanter's decision epitomizes how Rabbi Zacks understood the term "*Yakirei Yerushalayim* – the precious ones of Jerusalem." In fact, on that fateful Yom Kippur eve in the 1800's, Rav Yisrael Salanter must have thought of this very *Mishnah* in *Maseches Yoma*. Certainly, this is what compelled him to comfort that baby whose cries he chose not to ignore.

In the year that lies ahead, let's open our eyes and ears to the very real needs of others in our communities. Let us commit ourselves to look beyond our own interests and attend to the more pressing needs of our fellow Jews. In doing so, each of us can also be counted among the "*Yakirei Yerushalayim*."

In the merit of selflessly caring for others, May Hashem seal us – and all of *Klal Yisrael* – in His *Sefer Chaim Tovim* (Book of Good Life). ■

For a complete telling of this story, see Rabbi Dov Katz, "*Tenu'as HaMussar*" (p. 342). Feldheim Publishers (1996).