



SERMON ACHAREI MOT:¹ ACHAREI MONTY HALL

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 27 April 2019
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 The Monty Hall problem is a famously divisive maths puzzle loosely based on an American TV gameshow called *Let's Make a Deal* hosted by, you guessed it, Monty Hall. A contestant is faced with three doors: behind one is a brand new car, and behind the other two are worthless goats. The contestant chooses one of the doors – let's say, door C. But then, the host opens one of the remaining two doors and reveals a goat. So suppose that the goat behind door A is revealed. The contestant is then offered a chance to switch their initial choice (door C) to the remaining closed door (door B). Then we find out whether or not they've won the car. The puzzle is: do the laws of probability mean that the player has a higher chance of winning if they switch, or does it make no difference?
- 2 Anyone who wants to talk about the maths can come and come and chat to me at kiddush, because right now I want to think about the symbolism. Specifically, I want to think about the presence, on Monty Hall's gameshow, of two goats and an element of random chance. Because the idea to use two goats (as opposed to, say, two sacks of potatoes) must surely have come this week's parashah.
- 3 For Leviticus also tells a tale of two goats. Lots are cast. One goat is sacrificed, the other is cast out into the wilderness.
- 4 But the motif goes wider than that. It goes all the way back to Genesis. Two brothers. One kills the other, then is cast out into the wilderness.



- 5 Two half-brothers. One is cast out into the wilderness, then the other is taken up the mountain to be sacrificed.
- 6 Today's commandment about the pair of goats used as part of the Yom Kippur ritual has close parallels with the stories of Cain and Abel, and Ishmael and Isaac. In all three cases, there are pairs of closely-linked beings – siblings for the humans, and the Mishnah tells us that the penitential goats must be as nearly identical as possible² – of which one is killed (or nearly killed) and the other exiled into that wasteland which lies beyond the edge of the Biblical narrative.
- 7 The Swiss Calvinist theologian Karl Barth saw each pair's members as equally valuable and serving an equally Divine purpose.
- 8 “The second goat is also ‘placed before the Eternal’. The treatment meted out to him also forms an integral part of the Day of Atonement. Cain is just as indispensable as Abel, and Ishmael as Isaac. For the grace which makes the first the chosen one can be seen only from the second, because the first, the chosen, must see in the second, the unchosen, as in a mirror, that from which they were taken, and who and what the God is who has delivered them from it. We have to remember that they are both of them ‘placed before God’. We have not to remember this only in the case of the first one, the first goat, the individual chosen for the Eternal One.”³
- 9 This recognition that both chosen and unchosen are equally important parts of God's plan is important. But there is also another side of the coin: instead of saying both members of each pair are serving a Divine purpose, we could say that both members of each pair are deeply ill-starred. Abel had the misfortune to become the first ever victim of the first ever murder; Cain was doomed to wander the world marked and alone.



- 10 With Ishmael and Isaac, the Torah clearly wants us to think of Isaac's experience as a blessing – he was singled out for a direct, personal relationship with God – and Ishmael's as a curse. But realistically, both are curses. Being tied down and all but executed by one's father is no blessing; nor is being expelled from the family home by one's father.
- 11 Of the two goats, one is to be cut off from the life-sustaining sources of society; the other is simply killed outright. The choice was made by the drawing of lots. The very situation of being caught up in a Godly lottery is, perhaps, itself a curse.
- 12 But then again, that's life. We're all caught up in a Godly lottery to some extent. This is what philosophers call moral luck, the way in which our circumstances – were we born into a happy family or a troubled one; a rich one or a poor one; were we healthy or unhealthy – affect who we are and the way we behave.
- 13 This is not to write off our free will and ability to choose. Just like the contestant at the start of Monty Hall's gameshow, when faced with a range of choices, we are free to choose whichever we like. But, just like the contestant a little later on, when faced with more complex choices, our background will nudge us one way or another. A Monty Hall player with a maths degree will be predisposed to make one choice; a player who never had that opportunity may be predisposed to make another.
- 14 I see the Levitical ritual of two goats as a game constructed by the Torah to simulate and symbolise life. The drawing of lots, to determine which of two goats (or, indeed, two brothers) suffers which unwelcome fate, symbolises life's chanciness and our lack of control.



- 15 But the wider context of that ritual has a different message, because the two goats are about sin. Sin is something over which we do have control. The entire concept of Yom Kippur is that we are culpable for our actions, responsible for our wrongdoing, and – inevitable as the fact of our wrongdoing may be, for none of us is perfect – we choose to take steps to atone for the earlier wrong choices we made.
- 16 The drawing of lots recognises that we’re at God’s mercy and that our control over our fates is limited – as limited as the two goats whose futures are determined indiscriminately. Yet the act of atonement concedes that we retain significant freedom and that it is never too late to exercise it for a good cause.
- 17 Even for something as trivial as a gameshow, Monty Hall built in an element of redemption. The contestant makes a choice which is essentially arbitrary – but then, once they receive more information, they’re given a second chance. Do they see the error of their ways? Do they want to apply their mind in a genuine, heartfelt attempt to find the right door, the one with the prize behind it? Do they want to turn away from the door they were about to open, the door that leads either to a goat headed for sacrifice or a goat headed for the wilderness?
- 18 This parashah challenges us to say to ourselves: “Now listen, me. I have an opportunity to escape, or to try to escape, the fate of those two goats – let me try to identify the door that will help me to do so.” Kein y’hi ratzon: may this be God’s will.

Check against delivery.

GW 27.04.19



¹ Leviticus 16:21-30

² mYoma 6:1

³ Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics: the Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), vol 2, part 2: 360.