

The Goats and the Gates: Fate and Miracle

יֹמָא ג, ט
בָּא לוֹ לְמִזְרַח הָעֶזְרָה, לְצִפּוֹן הַמִּזְבֵּחַ,
הַסֵּגֶן מִיְמִינוֹ וְרֹאשׁ בֵּית אֵב מִשְׁמָאלוֹ.
וְשֵׁם שְׁנֵי שְׁעִירִים,
וְקִלְפֵי הַיֵּתֶה שֵׁם וְבָה שְׁנֵי גוֹרְלוֹת.
שֶׁל אֶשְׁכְּרוּעַ הַיּוֹ,
וְעִשָּׂאן בֶּן גַּמְלָא שֶׁל זָהָב,
וְהָיוּ מְזַכְרִין אוֹתוֹ לְשִׁבְחָ:

Yoma 3:9

He [the high priest] then went to the east of the Temple court, to the north of the altar, the deputy high priest at his right and the head of the [priestly] family [ministering that week] at his left. There were two goats, and an urn was there, and in it were two lots. They were of boxwood, and ben Gamla made them of gold, and they would mention his name in praise.

Ben Katin made twelve spigots for the laver, for there had been before only two. He also made a mechanism for the laver, in order that its water should not become unfit by remaining overnight. King Monbaz had all the handles of all the vessels used on Yom Kippur made of gold. His mother, Helena, made a golden candelabrum over the opening of the Sanctuary. She also made a golden tablet, on which the portion concerning the suspected adulteress was inscribed. For Nicanor miracles happened to his doors. And they were all mentioned for praise.

And these they mentioned to their shame: Those of the house of Garmu did not want to teach anything about the preparation of the showbread. Those of the house of Avtinus did not teach anything about the preparation of the incense. Hugas, a Levite, knew a chapter [concerning] the song but did not want to teach it. Ben Kamtzar did not want to teach anyone his art of writing. Concerning the former it is said: “The memory of the righteous shall be for a blessing” (Proverbs 10:7); concerning the others it is said (v. 7): “but the name of the wicked shall rot.” (Yoma 3:10–11)

Rabbi Yishmael says: The children of Israel (may I be atonement for them!) are like boxwood, neither black nor white but of an intermediate shade. (Nega'im 2:1)

Rabbi Kruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan: Three books are opened [in heaven] on Rosh HaShana, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the intermediate. The thoroughly righteous are forthwith

inscribed definitively in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are forthwith inscribed definitively in the book of death; the doom of the intermediate is suspended from Rosh HaShana until Yom Kippur. If they deserve well, they are inscribed in the book of life; if they do not deserve well, they are inscribed in the book of death. (Rosh HaShana 16b)

What was the miracle that happened to [the doors of Nicanor]? They said: When Nicanor was bringing them from Alexandria, a sea wave came over them to drown them. They took one of them and threw it in the sea. They wanted to throw the second one as well, but Nicanor did not let them. He said to them: If you throw the second, throw me in with it. He was grieved until he reached the port of Jaffa. As soon as he reached the port of Jaffa, [the first gate] came up from underneath the boat. Some say a sea monster had swallowed it, and when Nicanor reached the port of Jaffa it spewed it out and threw it up on dry land. (Tosefta Yoma 2:4)

Our Rabbis taught: What miracles happened to his doors? It was reported that when Nicanor had gone to fetch doors from Alexandria of Egypt, on his return a gale arose in the sea to drown him. Thereupon they took one of his doors and cast it into the sea and yet the sea would not stop its rage. When, thereupon, they prepared to cast the other into the sea, he rose and clung to it, saying: “Cast me in with it!” [They did so, and] the sea immediately stopped its raging.

It has been taught: Nicanor was one of the Greek generals; every day he waved his hand against Judah and Jerusalem and exclaimed, “When shall it fall into my hands that I may trample upon it?” But when the Hasmonean rulers proved victorious and triumphed over him, they cut off his thumbs and his big toes and suspended them from the gates of Jerusalem, as if to say: Of the mouth that spoke arrogantly, of the hands that were waved against Jerusalem, may vengeance be exacted. (Ta'anit 18b)