

אֶזָּזַיִל

AZAZEIL

ונתן אהרן על-שני השעירים גרלות גורל אחד לה' וגורל אחד לעזאזל

And Aharon shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for Hashem, and the other for the scapegoat (*Vayikra* 16:8).

The central *avodah* of the *Yom Kippur* service in the *Beis Hamikdash* involved the goat for Hashem and the goat for Azazeil. On *Yom Kippur* the *Kohein Gadol* presented two goats to Hashem at the door of the *Beis Hamikdash*. He cast lots upon the goats: one was to be offered as a sin offering to Hashem, while the other had an atonement ceremony performed over it and was let loose as a scapegoat into the wilderness (*Vayikra* 16:10). The goat for Azazeil was loaded with the sins of *Klal Yisrael* and served to expiate the wrong-doings of *Klal Yisrael* (*Yoma* 66:). The goat was then turned over to an individual called an “*ish iti*” (i.e. the man who had been prepared for that time) (*ibid.*), who was commissioned to push the goat backward over a cliff. It would barely reach the halfway mark of its descent before it was completely dismembered (*Yoma* 66:-68:).

The goat for Azazeil had none of the characteristics associated with conventional *karbanos*. It was not slaughtered by *shechitah* —ritual slaughter— it was not offered onto the *mizbei'ach*, nor was its blood sprinkled on the *mizbei'ach*. Nevertheless, it was the most important animal offering of *Klal Yisrael* with the most far reaching implications in the *Yom Kippur* service. It atoned for all transgressions mentioned in the Torah, both light and grave, whether committed presumptuously or in error, whether the offender was aware or not that he had sinned. The scapegoat even provided atonement for light sins if the transgressor had not repented at all (Rambam, *Hilchos Teshuvah* 1:2). This was an amazing, all-powerful offering which far surpasses the efficacy of all other *karbanos*, which can atone for transgressions committed *bemeizid*—willfully—but unlike the Azazeil, do require the act of *teshuvah*. What gave the Azazeil this potency?

The *Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah* 65:15) explains this amazing phenomenon by interpreting the *pasuk* which discusses the Azazeil:

ונשא השעיר עליו את כל-עונותם

And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities (*Vayikra* 16:22).

The word “*sa'ir*”—“goat”— can be interpreted as “the hairy one” — which is a description of Eisav *Harasha*; and it can also be interpreted as “*Eretz Se'ir*”—“the land of Seir” — which refers to the territory inhabited by the descendants of Eisav. The word “*avonotam*”—“their iniquities”—can be broken down into its two component parts: “*avonot tam*”— the sins of the one referred to as “*Tam*” (man of simple integrity). The word “*tam*” is a descriptive reference to Yaakov *Avinu*. Hence, the *pasuk* now reads:

ונשא השעיר עליו-זה עשו; את כל עונותם-עונות תם

And Eisav (goat) shall bear upon him all the iniquities of *Klal Yisrael*.”

This *pasuk* on the Azazel implies that *Klal Yisrael* transfers all of its sins to Eisav and is thereby guaranteed atonement of all iniquities. This demonstrates that the sins of Yaakov are a result of the actions of Eisav. He disrupts and incites *Klal Yisrael* to sin; therefore, the offering of the Azazel merely returns the resultant transgressions to their originator (see *Yalkut Shimoni* 115).

The Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* III 46) explains that the transfer of sin from Yaakov to Eisav is not actually a metaphysical event, but rather a symbolic action. The solemnity of the Azazel ceremony galvanizes *Klal Yisrael* into a sincere repentance. The repentance is so thorough that *Klal Yisrael* is totally cleansed of any previous sin. Nevertheless, whether the Azazel actually involves a transfer of sin or serves as an incentive for repentance, the Rambam rules that atonement is not consummated until after the Azazel has been pushed over the cliff (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 1:2). What is it about the act of the Azazel that creates this ability? Why does it have this far reaching effect on the life of *Klal Yisrael*, making it in effect the ultimate *karban*?

The *Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* (46) reports a spectacular dialogue which occurred on the day the Torah was given, between Samael (Satan) and Hashem. Satan complained that he was given sovereignty over all the nations of the world except for *Klal Yisrael*. To this Hashem replied, “You do have sovereignty over *Klal Yisrael* on *Yom Kippur* day for the sins they committed during the year (see *Rokei'ach* 216), but if they did not sin, you do not have any sovereignty over them at all.” Therefore, the *Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* continues, we offer a bribe to the Satan on *Yom Kippur* day, in the form of a *se'ir chatas* (goat sin-offering) — the Azazel. Hopefully, Satan will be placated, and instead of prosecuting *Klal Yisrael*, he will now act as an advocate. The act of paying tribute to Satan by offering him the Azazel amounts, in effect, to the erasing of all of *Klal Yisrael*'s sins since the Satan has been disarmed.

The Ramban (*Vayikra* 16:8) explains this strange spectacle. Hashem commanded (that on *Yom Kippur*) we let loose a goat into the wilderness granted to that “prince” (power) who rules over the wastelands. The intention of our driving the goat into the desert is not that it be an offering from us to Satan, but rather to fulfill the wish of our Creator, Who commanded us to do so. This may be compared to someone who makes a feast for his master, and the master commands the host, “Give one portion to that servant of mine.” It is actually the master who gives the gift to the servant; the host merely obeys the master's command and does, in honor of his master, whatever he is commanded to do.

This is the reason for designating the Azazel by lot, and not through deliberate human choice. The Ramban states, that would have been like worshipping Azazel or taking a vow in its name. Hence, what seems to be the *Kohein* casting lots is actually the hand of Hashem apportioning the goats. Both goats were placed “before the Eternal” (*Vayikra* 16:10), both were proclaimed to be His, and by sending one goat to Azazel we are merely fulfilling Hashem's wish.

This reasoning conflicts with the view of the Ibn Ezra (*Vayikra* 16:8). He explains that the rites involved in the purification of the leper (*Vayikra* 14:7) and of a house afflicted by leprosy (ibid. 53) are paralleled with that of the Azazel. The leper is required to present two birds to the *Kohein*. One bird is to be slaughtered by the *Kohein* while the other bird is to be let “loose into the open field.” The act of letting the “bird out of the city into the open fields” shall “make an

atonement for the house.” The goat sent into the desert affords *Klal Yisrael* atonement, and so too, the releasing of the bird into the fields results in the leper’s atonement.

In the case of the Azazel, in order to avoid the appearance of Satan-worship, the *Kohein* had to cast lots over the goats to make it clear that it was Hashem Who would be designating the animal for Satan. Why then, in the case of the leper, does the *Kohein* himself determine (ibid. 5) which bird is to be released to the field? Would this not raise the Ramban’s problem with verbal designation: Azazel worship or, at the very least, taking a vow in its name? The designation of the birds used by the leper can be better understood according to the explanation of *Rabbeinu Bechaya* (ibid. 7). While he agrees with the view of Ibn Ezra that sending the bird out to the field is an appeasement to the forces of the field, *Rabbeinu Bechaya* explains that the destructive forces of the field are on a lower level than “the prince of the desert who must be bribed on *Yom Kippur*.” Hence, since these are such low level figures, the error of mistaking them for deities does not come into play.

Satan, a servant of Hashem, is appeased on *Yom Kippur* with the Azazel offering as per Hashem’s instructions. The idea presented by the aforementioned *Midrash* that the Azazel actually entails a transference of *Klal Yisrael*’s sins to Eisav can very well be understood in the “bribe” context presented by *Pirkei D’Rebbe Eliezer*: Satan is bribed with a gift, which he accepts, thereby becoming a defender of *Klal Yisrael* instead of acting as prosecutor (see *Rabbeinu Bechaya* 25:28). That gift is actually the sins of *Klal Yisrael*, loaded up on the goat. The gift is a goat “adorned” with sin — very attractive to Satan, the angel of Eisav — the conjurer of sin. Hence, sin is returned to its master, while the master is duped into accepting it as a gift.

The fact that the sacrificial offering to the *sitra achra* (the power of Evil) is indeed a *kidush Hashem* can be confirmed from the encounter between Eliyahu *Hanavi* and the *Nevi’ei Haba’al* (*Malachim* I 18:25). At first, Eliyahu asked them to choose either of two bullocks which was to be consumed by a fire from their god. The pair were twin bulls, born of the same mother and fattened in the same feeding trough (Redak ibid. 26). The *Nevi’ei Haba’al* were given the option of choosing by lots (*goral*) which animal would be offered to Hashem, and which would be offered to Ba’al. The following *pasuk* (26) chronicles the events: “and they took the bullock which was given them [by Eliyahu] . . .” Rashi (ibid.) explains that the bullock chosen by the *Nevi’ei Haba’al* escaped from them and sought refuge at the side of Eliyahu. The bullock did not want to participate in a *chilul Hashem* at the hands of the falsifiers. Eliyahu had to reassure the bullock that its ultimate sacrifice at the hands of the *Nevi’ei Haba’al* would not be considered a transgression of the Name — on the contrary, it would result in the sanctification of Hashem’s Name. Hence, the calf’s complicity with the perfidious act of the *Nevi’ei Haba’al* actually resulted in a *kidush Hashem* — just as the sacrifice of the Azazel is also a *kidush Hashem*, an act commanded by Hashem in the Torah.

In order to prevent man from erring in thinking that he may exercise the liberty of making offerings to the *sitra achra* on his own, the Torah immediately follows the *parsha* of Azazel with the admonition:

And they shall no more offer their sacrifices
unto satyrs, after whom they have gone a whoring

(*Vayikra* 17:7).

This reference to La'se'irim is interpreted by the *Toras Kohanim* (*Acharei Mos* 9:8) as referring to "the demons." The above-mentioned *posuk* now reads:

And they shall no more offer their sacrifices unto
the demons, after whom they have gone a whoring.

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