

Azazel: Thoughts and Sources

The story of Azazel, as we have heard every year on Yom Kippur, always meant to us that one of the two goats brought before the High Priest was selected to wander aimlessly in the wilderness of Azazel to carry the sins of the Jewish people. Not until studying the story in tractate Yoma, did we know the difficult and complex details of this process.

In Parashat Acharei Mot, the Torah's fullest description of the Yom Kippur ritual regarding the goat for Azazel appears (Leviticus 16:2-34). But Holy Days, holidays, and festivals develop and evolve as human life changes. The Yom Kippur we celebrate in the 21st century is considerably different from the ritual and ceremony described in Leviticus 16.

One of the most remarkable elements of Yom Kippur in ancient times, when the central Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, was the ritual of "the two goats." Two indistinguishable members of that species were brought before the High Priest, who placed a randomly-pulled lot on the head of each animal. One lot read "to G-d" and the other "to Azazel" – the name of a steep cliff in the Judaeian desert. (Leviticus 16:10)

At the Temple in Jerusalem, the first goat was sacrificed in solemn ceremony in the Temple, the second was taken from the Temple to the cliff called Azazel and thrown off the cliff backwards, dying unceremoniously before it even reached the bottom.

Prior to the existence of the Temple in Jerusalem, the fate of the goat "to Azazel" is succinctly covered in Leviticus 16:21-22. A designated man will take the goat to the wilderness ... to an uninhabited land and presumably release it there. The Torah does not state that the designated man kills the goat or pushes it off a cliff.

Two goats were brought before the High Priest, who cast lots to decide which of the goats was to be designated "for God" and which "for Azazel." Laying his hands upon the head of the goat designated "for Azazel," the High Priest confessed the sins of the entire congregation. In Temple times, this goat was then led forth to a high, rugged cliff in the wilderness, from which it was cast down as atonement for the sins of Israel.

He [Aaron] shall take the two he-goats and stand them before Hashem, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. Aaron shall place lots upon the two he-goats: one lot "for Hashem" and one lot "for Azazel." Aaron shall bring near the he-goat designated by lot for Hashem, and make it a sin offering. And the he-goat designated by lot for Azazel shall be stood alive before Hashem to provide atonement through it, to send it to Azazel, to the wilderness. (Leviticus 16: 7-10)

The Crimson Thread

What is the purpose of the crimson thread? The Talmud suggests that it was intended to distinguish the sent-away animal from the slaughtered animal (Yoma 41b). In the

Temple, the High Priest would tie a strip of crimson wool to the head of the goat designated for Azazel. And this goat was positioned near the site from where it would be sent off to the wilderness and its final destination.

According to the Mishnah's account, the thread was tied to the scapegoat twice. First, it was tied immediately following the casting of the lot for the two goats (m. Yoma 4:2). He bound a thread of crimson wool on the head of the scapegoat and he turned it towards the way by which it was to be sent out. It was tied on the animal again after it had been sent into the wilderness, immediately before it was pushed off a cliff (Yoma 6:6):

He divided the thread of crimson wool and tied one half to the rock, and the other half between its horns.

After the high priest had performed several other rituals he returned to the goat, placed his hands on it and confessed: "O God, Thy people, the house of Israel, has sinned and transgressed before Thee...." He then handed the goat over to the person who was going to take it, called *l'sh 'Itti* (Lev. 16:21), i.e., the man who had been prepared for that time (*et*). Although any Jew was qualified to fulfill this function, the high priests did not allow non-priests to do it (Yoma 6:3). When the *l'sh 'Itti* reached the cliff, he pushed the goat over it backward and it hardly reached the halfway mark in its descent before it was completely dismembered (Yoma 6:2–6).

It seems that even in the time of the Second Temple when they used to kill the goat, its actual death was not considered indispensable since, as soon as the goat reached the desert, the high priest was permitted to continue with the divine service and was not required to wait until the goat was killed. It is possible that the goat was killed in order to ensure that it would not return – laden with the sins – to inhabited places.

The goat which was dispatched to Azazel was not a sacrifice since it was not slaughtered. From the actual verses themselves it is not even certain whether the goat was killed. The goat was dispatched in order to carry the sins of Israel into the wilderness, i.e., to cleanse the people of their sins. This is also the reason why the ritual took place on the Day of Atonement.

Does the practice of tashlich, the casting away of our sins in the water during Rosh Hashana, relate to the goat of Azazel who carries away the sins of the people of Israel? In both cases, it is not the casting away that cleanses the people, but the confession that precedes it. This is something we can bear in mind each year during the High Holidays, and keep an ancient and unique ritual with us today as we seek atonement and redemption.

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