

Spotlight on.... Goat Demons!

This week we read another double parsha - Acharei Mot/Kedoshim. Acharei Mot teaches us about the unusual ritual referred to as “Seir L’Azazel,” which was part of the Yom Kippur service. Aharon was commanded to take two goats, and cast lots to determine which would be designated to God, and which to Azazel/אֶזְזֵל. The goat designated for God would then be slaughtered as a korban. Aharon would then take the goat for Azazel/אֶזְזֵל, put his hands on it and confess all of the nation’s sins onto it, and then send it off into the wilderness.

One of the mysteries of this ritual is - who or what is Azazel/אֶזְזֵל?? The Torah doesn’t explain it at all, so the commentaries offer a bunch of different interpretations. Before we look at some, stop and look at the Hebrew word spelling. What words do you see in it? What possible meanings could this have?

Here are some of the explanations:

Ramban: Azazel was the name of a demonic force that ruled over the wilderness.

Hoil Moshe: Azazel was the name of an imaginary demonic force that ruled over the wilderness. Its name came from a mix of רָאשׁ (strength) and לָצַח (walks), meaning who walks with strength (but not in a good way!)

Rashbam: Azazel is connected to the word רֵאשׁ, which means “goat.”

Questions:

1. Review the ritual in Chapter 16 of Vayikra. According to each of these explanations, what is the purpose of this ritual? What does it accomplish?
2. Why do you think that this goat was sent away to the wilderness and not slaughtered like the first one was?

BONUS QUESTION: What other explanations can you find based on the name אֶזְזֵל?
Email your answer to MaharatRuth@ostns.org to win a free...goat?