

Parsha Ponders

Yom Kippur | September 13, 2021 | 7 Tishrei 5782

*Two seemingly indistinguishable goats*¹

ומאת עדת בני ישראל יקח שני-שעירי עזים לחטאת וגו' ונתן אהרן על-שני השעירים גורלות גורל אחד ליקוק וגורל אחד לעזאזל: והקריב אהרן את-השעיר אשר עלה עליו הגורל ליקוק ועשהו חטאת

From the congregation of the Children of Israel, he shall take two goats for a sin offering...Aharon shall place on the two goats lots: one lot [to designate the goat] for Hashem, and one lot [to send it to] Azazel. Aharon will then offer the goat whose lot designated it to Hashem, and he shall make it a sin offering²

A major part of the Yom Kippur service in the Temple involved two identical³ goats. They had to look the exact same, be the same size, and be sold for the same price⁴. One of them was to be brought as an offering to Hashem, and the other was to be sent off a cliff⁵. What was unique about these goats is the fate of each one was determined by a lottery. A box would contain two pieces of paper, one saying, “for Hashem”, and one saying, “for Azazel”. The paper saying “for Hashem” would determine which one would be brought as an offering, and the paper saying “for Azazel” which one for the cliff. The Kohen would stick his hands in the box and each one would grab a paper. The fate of the goat to his right would be determined by the paper in his right hand. The same for his left. What can we learn from this unique and unusual procedure⁶?

If we analyze these two goats, even though they start off identical, their final fates can be no further apart. The one “for Hashem” is slaughtered by the *Kohen Gadol*. It's offered in the holiest place in the world, the Holy of Holies. Its service involves the partition curtain, the Holy Ark, and its cover. In contrast, the one “for Azazel” doesn't get ritual slaughter. It's not sent there by anyone prominent; anyone is suitable for the job⁷. Its end isn't a pretty sight⁸. This contrast is quite stark, considering in the beginning the two goats were indistinguishable. Since their fate is determined by a lottery, it's abundantly clear that we have no say in which one is “for Hashem” and which one is “for Azazel”. It's entirely determined by Hashem⁹.

From all of this we can discern a powerful lesson in our service of Hashem, particularly on the holy day of Yom Kippur. Just like these two identical goats, whose fates reached either the highest heights or the lowest depths, we perhaps can find something similar in mankind. There could be two people, who on the outside seem totally alike, both in their character and in their *mitzvah* observance. They have the same life circumstances, and same abilities. However, it could be that on one day, namely Yom Kippur, their fates end up being the complete opposite of each other. One of them will reach the greatest spiritual heights, and one, G-d forbid, will end up in the darkest depths. How could this be?

¹ Based on Be'er Yosef to Leviticus 16:5-10

² Leviticus 16:5,8,9

³ Yoma 6:1

⁴ Although, the *mishnah* clarifies that this is only the ideal. Ex post facto if they weren't identical, the service is still accepted

⁵ See Rashi to v. 10, Yoma 6:6, and *ibid* 67b

⁶ See the Be'er Yosef, who also addresses why, unlike all other offerings, the sanctity of the goat for the offering is determined by the lottery itself, and not the declaration of the Kohen that it should be an offering (Yoma 40b)

⁷ *ibid* 66a

⁸ See *ibid* 6:6

⁹ See Proverbs 16:33

One of these two may properly take advantage of Yom Kippur. They'll fulfill the *mitzvah of teshuvah*, properly repenting, with all of its details. They'll completely regret all of their wrongdoings, and put them behind them, forever. All the more so if this person repents out of love of Hashem, where our Sages say¹⁰ such a person's sins become considered like merits. If so, they will gain for themselves hundreds if not thousands of *mitzvos*, at the same time as they lose all of their sins. In a place that those who properly repented stand, even those who never sinned can't stand¹¹. This person is represented by the goat that is "for Hashem".

However, what if the second of these two doesn't take advantage of Yom Kippur? What if they don't recognize the significance of the day, and repent with sincerity and all of their might? Even though nothing changed with their behavior from before Yom Kippur, since the day went by and they didn't consider once to repent, they could end up being written in the book of the wicked. Yom Kippur is only effective for those who repent¹². The sin of not repenting will result in the person sinning even more¹³. They could spiral out of control and end up distancing themselves from Hashem and His Torah. This person is represented by the goat that is "for Azazel".

The Yom Kippur service should therefore give us pause as we approach Yom Kippur. What happens with the two identical goats could very well happen with us. Yesterday, you could have two people who are indistinguishable in their service of Hashem, and we'd have no idea where they'll end up. However, on the single day of Yom Kippur, their lottery is cast. One for the staff, and one for loving kindness. Just like the fate of the goats was undetectable, and only Hashem knew where they would end up, so too those who stand before Him on Yom Kippur. It's not evident where they will end up. Who will be for Hashem? Who will, G-d forbid, not be for Hashem? He knows our thoughts, who actually repented with sincerity and with their whole soul. Who will come close and cling to Hashem our G-d, such that they will have lasting life and good days¹⁴? Let's take advantage of this awesome day. Let's take control of our lot.

Gemar Chasimah Tovah

¹⁰ Yoma 86b

¹¹ Berachos 34b. The Be'er Yosef connects the concept of מאהבה תשובה making זדונות into זכויות with the idea of standing where גמורים צדיקים can't. He's not the first to do so. It's also suggested by the Chida in his Kisvei Dovid Derush L'Shabbos Shuvah § 13 s.v. מזה נמשך מזה and Devarim Achadim Derush L'Shabbos HaGadol § 14 s.v. אך לטעם המפרשים. It's also suggested by the Dubna Maggid in his Kochav Ya'akov Haftaras Vaeschanan to Isaiah 40:2. It also seems to be the understanding of the Chasam Sofer in his Toras Moshe I to Leviticus 13:2

¹² See Yoma 8:8 and Mishneh Torah Hilchos Teshuvah 1:3

¹³ See Avos 4:2

¹⁴ See the note of the Be'er Yosef's son, who beautifully connects this piece to an essay by Rav Yitzchak Blazer, a primary student of Rav Yisroel Salanter, in Ohr Yisroel Kochavei Ohr § 5