



Grappling with the Scapegoat in the Torah

How Can I Explain the Torah's Directive to Cast a Goat off a Cliff?

We have several vegan students at Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin. Before Purim my husband reported that one such student was quite disturbed that the megillah must be written on parchment made from animal skin. The following day, I was teaching about the parallels between Purim and Yom Kippur. Drawing a lot is significant to both holidays. The lot on Purim is well-known, but when I got up to explaining about the lot of Yom Kippur, I had to hesitate. How could I explain, to women who struggle with accepting the use of animals in Judaism, that a lot was made between two twin-goats to determine which one was to be sacrificed to Hashem and which one to be thrown off the cliff? I had to first explain the general Jewish outlook that Hashem has created the entire universe for us to serve Him. Rocks, crystals, soil, wood, roots, leaves, fruits, as well as work-animals, eggs, milk, meat, skin and horns are all created for us to use kindly and gently for the sake of performing Hashem's mitzvot. Mind you, *use but not abuse* is the mitzvah, for the Torah prohibits causing unnecessary pain to animals. Therefore, the Torah commands that ritual slaughter must be with the sharpest knife – in the most humane way. Then how could the Torah command throwing an innocent goat off a cliff to meet a slow death? What's more, I recall how the Mishna (*Yoma* 6:6) teaches that the he-goat was dashed to pieces before it made it halfway down the cliff, a matter that I certainly wasn't going to share with my students. I remember looking straight at the kind eyes of the young woman who had difficulties with the animal-skin parchment and warning my students as follows, "I'm afraid that what I'm going to tell you now is not going to be easy for you to swallow, but this is what the Torah says. I know it's hard to understand... so I'm going to say it quickly...the second ram ehh... was cast off the cliff... now I've said it! Let's go on..." While my students may have forgotten the issue, my own question was still lingering within me. How can the Torah command something so cruel for the poor innocent goat. Is it his fault that we have sinned?

Comparing the Pain with the Gain of the Scapegoat

Being aware of the Torah's care for the pain of animals, the question of why on Yom Kippur we send the goat to Azazel off to such a horrific death, kept lingering in the back of my mind. Finally, after doing some research, I got a glimpse of understanding how the atonement which this goat brings for the accumulated sins of Israel during the entire year prevents boundless future pain in the entire universe.

ספר ויקרא פרק טז וְקָח אֶת שְׁנֵי הַשְּׂעִירִם וְהֶעֱמִיד אֹתָם לִפְנֵי הָשֵׁם פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד:

(ח) וַיִּתֵּן אֶהָרֹן עַל שְׁנֵי הַשְּׂעִירִם גִּרְלוֹת גּוֹרֵל אֶחָד לַשֵּׁם וְגוֹרֵל אֶחָד לְעִזָּאֵזֶל:

(ט) וְהִקְרִיב אֶהָרֹן אֶת הַשְּׂעִיר אֲשֶׁר עָלָה עָלָיו הַגּוֹרֵל לַהֵשֵׁם וַעֲשֵׂהוּ חֹטָאת:

(י) וְהַשְּׂעִיר אֲשֶׁר עָלָה עָלָיו הַגּוֹרֵל לְעִזָּאֵזֶל יַעֲמֵד חַי לִפְנֵי הָשֵׁם לְכַפֵּר עָלָיו לְשַׁלַּח אֹתוֹ לְעִזָּאֵזֶל הַמִּדְבָּרָה:

"Aharon shall take the two he-goats and place them before Hashem at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; and Aharon shall place lots upon the two goats: 'one lot for Hashem' and the other lot 'for Azazel.' Then Aharon shall bring the he goat upon which the lot, 'for Hashem,' came up, and designate it as a sin offering. While the goat upon which the lot "for Azazel" came up, shall be placed while still alive, before Hashem, to [initiate] atonement upon it, and to send it away to Azazel, into the wilderness" (*Vayikra* 16:7-10).

On the holiest day of the year, Aharon takes the energy of all our sins and places them on the designated ram. In order to grant us atonement, this goat must carry all the pain that our collected wrongdoings have caused in the universe. Applying our natural Jewish compassion, for all created beings, to this poor scapegoat, is part of our teshuva process that enacts our expiation. Our desire to repent rises in proportion to how much we detest causing pain to an innocent animal. It makes us realize that it is not the Torah but our own sins that cause the pain in the world that this poor goat now must carry. Arousing our care and empathy for all beings in general and for this scapegoat in particular helps us to feel true pain and remorse in our heart for the enormity of our own transgressions – the root of all injustice and hurt on the planet. Without this goat, with the crimson string of sin on its neck – turning white and pure after being sent off the cliff, we may not have realized the immense negative impact of our sins. The communal repentance and rectification in the world engendered by the scapegoat thus prevent future worldwide agony and strife. Considering the universal rectification this goat enacts with its subsequent transformation of evil and hurt in the world elucidates how it greatly outweighs the immense pain it had to undergo.

The Meaning of ἄζαζ/ Azazel

It is interesting to note that the word ‘scapegoat’ may come from the Hebrew עֶזְאֵזֶל/Azazel (mentioned in *Vayikra* 16:8, 10 and 26). The word Azazel – rather than referring to a demon or fallen angel as in Christianity – derives from a compound of עֵז/ez – ‘goat’ and אָזַל/azal – ‘ran out.’ This goat represents the power of evil which is most prevalent in desolate places where humanity has never ventured. Thus, the place of Azazel was a mighty cliff, where no one had ever been able to go due to its steepness. Although, the Torah recognizes the power of evil, often called ‘the Other Side’ in the Kabbalah, it must not be confused with being considered as an independent force competing with Hashem. Rather, evil is a servant of G-d created as an obstacle for us. This obstacle and preventive force ultimately enables us to fulfill our full potential. In this way, the goat to Azazel symbolizes that evil indeed serves the greater good. The word עֶזְאֵזֶל/Azazel is also an acronym for זֶה לְעַמַּת זֶה עִשָּׂה הָאֱלֹהִים/ze le’umat ze asa Elokim. “...In the day of adversity consider: *G-d has made the one as well as the other*” (*Kohelet* 7:14).

The Twin-Goats Parallel Ya'acov and Esau

The Talmud teaches that the two goats must look identical – like twins (*Yoma* 62a). Lots were drawn to determine which of the two identical goats would be sacrificed in the Sanctuary and which would be for Azazel. These twin-goats, that parallel the twin brothers Ya’acov and Esau, illustrate that both righteousness and evil are from G-d. The antecedents of these twin-goats were the “two good goats” that Rivkah originally commanded Ya’acov to bring his father in order to receive his blessing (*Bereishit* 27:9). Both goats are called “good” because good needs evil in order to exist, if for no other reason than to have something to reject. It is the contrast with evil that allows good to shine. Thus, on the holiest day of the year, the scapegoat carrying all our evil sins, sent off to a desolate place where the power of evil reigns, transforms evil to the greater good. By Hashem commanding us to sacrifice this goat to the Other Side, so-to-speak, G-d’s ultimate power over everything, including evil, becomes revealed.