

Anyone who has heard the traditional Torah reading on Yom Kippur morning, and then stayed until the end of the long service has had a double helping of the first chapter of our parashah. It is not only the official Torah reading (although many congregations use something else to avoid the repetition), it is also reenacted in the *avodah*, the culmination of the *Musaf* service. The overarching theme of this chapter is atonement on Yom Kippur, which includes sending one of two identical sacrificial goats, symbolically laden with all three variations of the people's sins: transgressions (*avera*), intentional sins (*peshah*), and unintentional sins (*chet*), into the wilderness. This goat, which is chosen by lot (not *pur*, as in Purim, but *goral*) is to be "sent away to Azazel, into the desert." (16:10, 20-22) There is much speculation in biblical, apocryphal, and rabbinic literature over who or what *Azazel* actually is, and opinions differ on the origin and meaning of the name. *Azazel* also appears in various forms in astrology, mythology, and popular culture (for example, a supervillain in Marvel Comics). In the apocryphal Book of Enoch (from ca. 200 BCE), *Azazel* is descended from a breakaway group of Watchers (or Holy Ones, mentioned in Daniel 4:10,14,20). These "fallen angels," who lived before the Flood and mated with human women, fathered the *Nephilim*. (Genesis 6:1-4) *Azazel* revealed to the people the secrets of witchcraft and taught them to make weapons, jewelry, and cosmetics, "leading them into wickedness and impurity; until he was finally, at the Lord's command, bound hand and foot by the archangel Raphael and chained to the rough and jagged rocks of *Beth Chadudo*, (the first entrance into the desert), where he is to remain in utter darkness until the Day of Judgment, when he will be cast into the fire to be consumed forever." [<https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2203-azazel>]

Talmud Tractate Yoma 67b, which discusses *Azazel* at length, offers differing explanations of the name: "The sages taught: The word *Azazel* indicates that the cliff the goat is pushed from should be rough and hard. ... The verse states *gezeira*, indicating an area that is sharp, like a cliff. ... *Azazel* is a reference to the hardest mountain, and so it says: 'And the mighty [*elei*] of the land he took away (Ezekiel 17:13):' *Azazel* is interpreted as *azaz-el*, with *el* connoting something rough and hard. The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: *Azazel* is so called because it atones for the actions of *Uzza* and *Azael*, the names of those who sinned with the daughters of men and thereby caused the world to sin during the generation of the Flood." Modern scholarship usually agrees with Nachmanides that *Azazel* either denotes a particular location, or is one of the *se'irim* (hairy ones), satyrs living in the desert, to whom the Israelites are forbidden to offer sacrifices. (17:7) Hence, designating a goat laden with the people's sins to *Azazel* was a graphic way to direct the people's sins back to their source as well as emphasize the prohibition of sacrificing to any entity except HaShem. This ritual is also the origin of our word "scapegoat." The other goat was dedicated as a sin offering to HaShem, making it clear that despite his divine origins, *Azazel* was the personification of evil and therefore eternally separated from HaShem. The goat designated for *Azazel* was escorted via a series of ten (Rabbi Meir), nine (Rabbi Yehuda), or five (Rabbi Yosei) booths spaced out along the way (a distance of either ten or twelve *mil*) from Jerusalem to the cliff. The rabbis did agree that food and water were offered at every booth, even if no one really needed it. They explain that it was offered to prevent people from unnecessarily worrying that food might not be available if needed. Citing Isaiah 1:18 (If your sins prove to be like crimson, they will become white as snow; if they prove to be as red as crimson dye, they shall become as wool.") the rabbis discuss a strip of crimson that was tied to the opening of the entrance hall of the Temple and to the goat, which, if it turned white when the goat reached the wilderness, meant that the *mitzva* was fulfilled and atonement had been effected. Of course they disputed where and how to tie that strip of crimson, and worrying that people would peek before the end of Yom Kippur, they "established that they should tie half of the strip to the rock and half of it between the goat's horns, so that the people would not know what happened to the strip until after the conclusion of Yom Kippur." Whatever happened to the strip of crimson, which, by the way, is not mentioned at all in the Torah reading, the goat was torn from limb to limb on the jagged rocks. If the rabbis of the Talmud wondered about this strange and uncharacteristically cruel ritual, concluding that it is simply one of the *chukim*, those unexplainable statutes we observe because HaShem said so, how are we to view it today? In the *tashlich* ritual on Rosh HaShanah we symbolically cast away all the baggage that has separated us from our good intentions and ultimately from HaShem. On Yom Kippur we deal with the source of our transgressions, aware that when Adam and Chava ate from that fateful tree, we acquired the ability to discern between good (our *yetzer ha-tov*) and evil (our *yetzer ha-ra*), these two forces within each of us, that vie for supremacy. It is our duty to continually strive to allow the good to outweigh the evil. But as we all know all too well, sometimes we fail, which means we separate ourselves from HaShem. The goats, each with their specific designation, represented a way to restore balance and realign with HaShem's commandments. Of course we cannot undo the wrongs we have committed, but symbolically ridding ourselves of them – after having done the preliminary work of admitting them and making amends – is a powerful confirmation of our deep trust that *teshuvah*, change for the better, is always possible.

Shabbat shalom!