

ACHAREI MOT: A GOAT FOR AZAZEL

Leviticus 16:1-34 (Plaut, pp.770-774 / old version pp. 863-867)

Azazel and the Scapegoat (Plaut, p. 780 / old version pp. 859-860)

The Hazards of the Yom Kippur Service (Plaut pp. 780-781 / old version 860)

The Transmission of Sin And Holiness

(Rabbi Chayva Lehrman - www.929.org.il/lang/en/page/106/post/45372)

The word “scapegoat” first appeared in its modern usage in 1824, evolved from Tyndale’s coining of the term in 1530, “the goat sent into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement, symbolic bearer of the sins of the people.” Tyndale was, of course, translating from a much older source: Leviticus 16:21.

Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man.

Through the scapegoat, Aaron annually purges the Israelite community of its collective sin. More precisely, Aaron lays his hands - *v'samach Aharon* - on the head of the goat and channels the Israelites' collective sin onto it, thus exploiting the contagious nature of impurity towards pure ends.

The same verb is used in the first Jewish leadership transition, from Moses to Joshua: “He laid his hands - *vayismach et yadav*—upon him and commissioned him—as the LORD had spoken through Moses” (Numbers 27:23).

This model and terminology are still used in modern rabbinical ordination (*smicha*), placing the caretakers of our community in a legacy of divine commission. This legacy is further emphasized in the opening line of Pirke Avot: “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly.”

Transmission of Torah preserves a bit of the holiness given at Sinai.

What does it mean that both sin and holiness can be transmitted? That the transmission itself is a holy act. In the verses immediately following the scapegoat ritual, Aaron must carefully remove his clothes, bathe in water, and offer a burnt sacrifice. By doing so, he demarcates and crosses the boundary between the sacred *smicha* and the mundane.

As teachers of Torah, transmitters of the holiness of our tradition, may we also take steps to recognize and protect the holiness of this work.

The Meaning of the Name Azazel

(Dr. Anna Angelini - www.thetorah.com/article/is-azazel-a-goat-place-demon-or-deity)

‘Aza’zel (עֲזַזְאֵל) as spelled in the Masoretic text has no clear meaning in Hebrew. It is probably a correction of an original form ‘Azaz +’el (עֲזַזְאֵל) attested in some manuscripts of the Samaritan Pentateuch and in the Temple Scroll’s (11QTS) rendition of the scapegoat ritual...

The form ‘Azaz’el (עֲזַזְאֵל) combines the Semitic root עֲזַז, meaning to be “enraged,” “fierce,” or “strong,” with ‘el, referring either to the proper name of the god *El*, or perhaps the generic term for a god in Hebrew. Azazel could mean something like “*El*/the god is fierce/strong” or perhaps “the rage of *El*/the god.” The biblical name עֲזַזְיָהוּ *Azazyahu/ Azaziah* (1 Chr 15:21; 27:20; 2Chr 31:13) follows the same format, with the Yahwistic theophoric element, *yahu*, instead of *el*.

Alternatively, since a god named Azuz/Aziz is attested in Mesopotamian and Levantine (especially Phoenician) sources, the name could mean “Azaz is god,” referring to an incarnation of this deity.

The ritual of the two goats appears to present Azazel as a deity, since Azazel is parallel to YHWH in the ritual, with one goat going to each. Several clues in the passage suggest, however, that the god Azazel has been “demoted.”

The goat must first be presented to YHWH before being sent off to Azazel, indicating YHWH’s superior status: “He shall take the two goats and set them before YHWH at the entrance of the tent of meeting” (Lev 16:7).

Moreover, unlike YHWH, Azazel does not receive a sacrifice but is rather the target of an apotropaic ritual, performed to ward off impurity and effect atonement. Finally, Azazel resides not in a temple, but in the desert (v. 10 *hammiddbarah*), a space which is often connected with chaos and death.

Azazel may once have played a more powerful role in Israelite religion, but Leviticus 16 now treats him as a demonic entity who presides over the wilderness and chaotic spaces, where impurity belongs, and as the recipient of an elimination ritual.

Against this background, it seems likely that the change in spelling from ‘Azaz’el (עֲזַזְאֵל) to ‘Aza’zel (עֲזַזְאֵל)—i.e., by moving the aleph—is a theological correction, intended to erase any theophoric element from it, or to distinguish its name from an angel’s name.

...While later Jewish interpretation attempts to erase Azazel as a being, suggesting that it could be the name of a land or even as a reference to the scapegoat itself, he was a key figure in Second Temple period thinking. In Jewish interpretation, he is the instigator of sin which leads to the flood, and he continues to try to trip up the righteous, including Abraham himself. In some texts, he even begins to resemble what we would call the devil. While all this apparently derives from his place as a desert being to whom sins are to be sent, some Christian texts understood his role in the opposite way, seeing him as an apotropaic figure who could protect from harm.