**ACHAREI MOT (**1st part)

*Vaykira* (*Leviticus*) 16.1 - 17.7

*Eitz Hayim* 679; Plaut 863; Hertz 480

This weeks portion, which includes all of Chapter 16 and almost half of Chapter 17 of *Vaykira* (*Leviticus*), gives us the rules for observing Yom Kippur in Biblical days. As might be expected, there were lots of animal sacrifices associated with the service for Yom Kippur. The rest of my talk will focus on one of them, the goat sent to Azazel (), which Rabbi Plaut in his Chumash (859) describes as The most embarrassing feature of the ancient ritual, and which the usually restrained Rabbi Hertz describes in his Chumash (554) as patently archaic. I gave this same Parashah in my d’var almost exactly ten years ago, and my thought is that we should learn about Azazel once every ten years. The intervening nine years should be devoted to more useful topics.

We first learn about this ritual in verse 16:5 of Vayikra, where we read that the High Priest selects two male goats for a purification offering, which is similar to a sin offering. Then in verse 16:7, we are told that the High Priest takes the two goats and has them stand “before God,” which is to say at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. The High Priest is given a box with lots, one marked for God and the other marked for Azazel. The goat for God is then sacrificed in the usual way, and its blood, along with that of a bull sacrificed at the same time, is supposed to cleanse the people Israel and all of the places where they have prayed over the previous year from sin. The text seems to imply that to this point the ritual only deals with something done in error or ignorance.

The other goat, the one for Azazel, is then brought forward. The High Priest puts his two hands on its head and admits that the people Israel has committed some sins willingly, even rebelliously, and those sins are transferred to the goat, which is led outside the camp and let loose far enough away that it cannot find its way back. The actual wording used by the priest appears in the Mishnah, and includes all three categories of sin: Cheita, Avon, and Pesha:

* Cheita is an inadvertent sin, such as not getting home before Shabbat.
* Avon is a sin because of personal weakness, such as giving in to one’s desire for a cheeseburger.
* Pesha is deliberate rebellion even though you know God’s commandments.

In later times, the goat for Azazel was pushed over a cliff, perhaps because it often did find its way back. And that is all we know about this strange ritual except that anyone who touched the goat for Azazel had to bathe and wash clothes because he was ritually contaminated.

Most commentaries imply that the ritual for Azazel is unique in the Torah. But it is not. If you look back a week when we were reading M'tzora, one finds two parallels but with a pair of doves. (Actually, it can be any kosher bird; doves are likely mentioned because they are domesticated, and they are cheap.) The two cases involve purification rites for (a) a person cured of leprosy (Vyk. 14:4-7) and (b) a house declared free of plague (Vyk. 14:49-52). No mention is made of Azazel in these cases, but they are the only other two places in Torah where one of two sacrificial animals is set free. How did I learn this? Satan told me! This source will be clarified towards the end of my d'var.

Returning to today's Parashah, the obvious question that one must ask is: Just who or what is Azazel? Rabbi Plaut (859) suggests (citing Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides) that it was a demonic being who was presumed to live in the desert and who was a focus of impurity. The apocryphal Book of Enoch and Christian mythology suggest that it was the name of a rebel angel or group of angels. Enoch goes further and says that it was one of those angels who taught humans the means of warfare, and those were the angels in Chapter 6 of Genesis who had sex with human women, and it was their progeny who brought sin into the world.

Not surprisingly, Hertz will have none of this sort of explanation. He is almost scathing at the suggestion that Azazel was a demon or a rebel angel because that would have meant that, on Yom Kippur of all days, Jews were at best expressing homage to, and at worst sending a sacrifice to, an evil being--practices that are expressly forbidden in Torah. Hertz does admit that Jewish folkways tended to personify Azazel, something that led to lots of strange translations.

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Of course, a lot of rabbis were bothered by anything that seemed like offerings to a demon, so, in a way of evading the issue, Nachmanides (Ramban) emphasizes that it was God who controlled the lots that determined which goat was for Azazel, and therefore no blame could follow on the Jewish people. This explanation is consistent with the strongly monotheistic view that evil, just like good, is under Gods unique and total mandate. Somewhat to the contrary, *Encyclopedia Judaica* includes a picture from a German Machzor from the 15th century with the goat for Azazel being thrown over a cliff and into the arms of the devil waiting below. However, the entry on Azazel in that *Encyclopedia* emphasizes that the goat sent to Azazel was not slaughtered and therefore is not a sacrifice.

*Eitz Hayim* seems content to close off further speculation by noting that the term “Azazel” appears nowhere else in the Bible and that, despite all the speculation, its meaning is unknown. Evidently, by the second Temple period, priests had come to interpret azazel as simply meaning far away. Ironically, this use has its echoes today in the common Israeli expression, Lach (l'chah) l'azazel.

However, the Talmud had a more dramatic way of saying the same thing nearly two millennia ago. The Talmudic words are that the-goat-to-be-sent-away is one of just four statutes “***to which Satan objects***” (TB; *Yoma* 67b; emphasis added). This statement is not elaborated, but it presumably implies that even rabbinic discussion failed to come up with a satisfactory rationalization. The other three statues are: *shatat’-atnetz* (wearing clothes made of linen and wool, which is certainly mysterious); *halitzah* (the ritual by which a widow absolves her brother-in-law from marrying her, which was later nullified in Jewish law), and *the role of doves in purifying a leper*, which is what led me to take a closer look at Parashat M'tzora***.*** Indeed, there are two references to sacrificing one bird and letting the other fly away free. The Hebrew is almost identical in the two passages.

After quoting Satan, the Talmudic passage immediately cautions us against ignoring some commandment simply because it lacks a rational explanation. Nevertheless, the search for rational explanations continues to the present time.

Before closing, I want to note that that the concept of Azazel is the origin of our word scapegoat. This word was created by William Tyndale (1594-1636), who, according to *Wikipedia*, was the first translator of the Bible into English to base his translation directly on Hebrew and Greek originals. He also was one of the early writers to take advantage of printing. Though the meaning of scapegoat has changed somewhat over the years, it still reflects the ability to blame someone else for our own sins and thereby to avoid the punishment. Tyndale himself was soon to become a scapegoat. The printing of his translation was a challenge to both the Roman Catholic Church and the new Church of England. He was tried for heresy, strangled, and burnt at the stake, which is about as logical as sending a goat to azazel.

Shabbat shalom,