

THERE, BUT FOR TESHUVAH, GO I

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

He shall take the two goats and stand them before Hashem...Aharon shall place lots upon the two goats: one lot "for Hashem," and one lot "for Azazel."

Be'er Yosef: This procedure places the Yom Kippur goats at sharp odds with all other offerings, where verbal designation assigns kedushah to an animal. In the case of these goats, it is the lottery and the lottery alone that assigns one animal the role of a chatas. A verbal declaration without the lottery, says the gemara,² is simply ineffective. How can we account for this anomaly?

We can start by considering a parallel event at the showdown between Eliyahu and the priests of Ba'al.³ Chazal tell us⁴ that the two bulls that were offered up on Mt. Carmel were identical-looking twins. While Eliyahu's bull willingly followed him, the one chosen by the priests of Ba'al stood its ground, and refused to budge. All the idolatrous prophets surrounded it and tried to move it, to no avail. Thereupon Eliyahu spoke to it, and asked it to go with the idolaters.

The bull resisted. "My fellow bull and I emerged from the same womb. We were raised together. Should it bear the Name of G-d and be offered up to Him, while my fate should be to be offered to a false god, to anger Hashem?"

Eliyahu responded. "Go with them, and look for no excuse. I assure you that the same way that the bull that goes with me will help sanctify Hashem's Name, so will you!"

Still, the bull refused to move. It insisted that it would have to be handed over to the priests by Eliyahu himself. And so it was.

Our goats run parallel with this episode. While neither winds up in the domain of a false god, the difference between their treatments could not be more striking. One moves to a very honorable position; the other to a place of shame.

The goat designated for Hashem becomes perhaps the most dramatic korban of the year. Its blood is brought inside the Holy of Holies, sprinkled towards the place of the Shechinah by a kohen gadol who prepared for the occasion for an entire week. The other goat - which entirely resembled the first in appearance, stature, value - did not even merit proper shechitah. Sent out to a desolate wilderness, it met with an ignominious end, pushed off a rocky crag. The fall would tear its body to shreds.

The impression upon the observer was powerful. The two goats began their Yom Kippur career completely similar, and ended it as polar opposites. The difference in outcome was determined by Hashem Himself, acting through the lottery. This hints to us that one of the two animals gained prominence because Hashem saw it as fulfilling its promise, its mission. It suggests to us the person who has actualized the potential of Yom Kippur through sincere teshuvah, to finding his way back to his source in Hashem. Whatever he was before Yom Kippur is irrelevant. By unleashing the power of teshuvah, the person who was previously distant and reviled by Hashem has become close and loved.

The other goat represents the person who has failed to respond to the promise of Yom Kippur. He has guaranteed that he will not be selected by Hashem to rejoin Him. Instead, he is left to the fatal wilderness that he has made of his life.

Like the bulls on Mt. Carmel, both goats participate in sanctifying Hashem's Name, because it is the contrast between them that we take to heart. The "winners" and "losers" on Yom Kippur - those chosen for good things by Hashem and those not chosen - need not be the product of different behavior in the course of the year. Completely opposite fates are sealed on Yom HaDin for people whose performance records are entirely similar. What separates them - what determines who will be chosen for a year of security and prosperity and who will not - can appear to be random, but is anything but. The difference is the quality of a person's repentance.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Vayikra 16:5-10
 2. Yoma 40B
 3. Melachim 1 18
 4. Bamidbar Rabbah 23
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