

SAIR HAMISHTALEACH: THE SCAPEGOAT

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah:

Two identical goats were taken on Yom Kippur. A lottery was cast; one goat was deemed "to G-d" and sacrificed as a sin-offering; the other was sent to the wilderness and to Azazel, where it would be thrown off a cliff to its death (Leviticus 16:7-11).

What is the nature of the Sair HaMishtaleach, the sent-away goat which was dispatched to Azazel? And why on Yom Kippur of all days?! What does this have in common with the theme of the most sacred date in the Jewish calendar: the Day of Atonement?

Teshuvah, repentance is integral to the essence of Yom Kippur.

Historically, this date was the anniversary when the Jewish nation was finally absolved from the sin of the Golden Calf. On this day, Moshe once again descended from Sinai, this time carrying the second Tablets. (The First Tablets were smashed upon his original descent from the mountain).

Accordingly, Yom Kippur is the occasion when the Jewish nation recovers its lost purity. The holiest day of the year is the opportunity wherein the Jew identifies with his Neshama, "his pure soul", namely that spark of G-dliness that can never be contaminated. (This explains the Ketores, incense offering of Yom Kippur brought into the innermost, "purest" chamber of the Sanctuary. See our essay Ketores: It Smells Divine)

The numerical value of the word HaSatan, the Accuser (the spiritual force alias the Evil Inclination) is 364 - for this angel has dominion on every day of the solar year - bar one. On Yom Kippur, the Satan has no jurisdiction as all evil is banished from within man (Yoma 20a).

Adam's primeval sin led to the internalization of evil within man. Eating from the Tree of Knowledge of "Good" and "Evil" led to the forces of "good" and "evil" became intermingled. Thereafter, mankind's task was the on-going struggle to differentiate and to separate "good" and "evil". (See our essay Basar B'Chalav: Milk Shall Not Meat.)

We uproot the Yetzer Hara that had earlier been granted a foothold within a person. We repel the "evil" that has set up residence within our psyche by showing how it is out of place. Only once this has been removed, can the Jew return to his pristine state - to his spiritual roots, to a clean slate through atonement and repentance.

His "good" self is free to pursue G-dliness - as symbolized in the goat whose destiny was to be

offered as a sacrifice in the Sanctuary. The other goat was not considered an "offering" but rather a "bribe" or "gift" to the Satan. It symbolizes the source of "evil" expunged from within man and dispatched far away from the sanctity of the Jewish camp. It is forcefully removed and sent to Azazel where it is thrown off a cliff to its death. Similarly, the Satan is classified an unwanted alien. It is an enemy that is joyously extricated from within our midst.

All this highlights how the sins of the Jewish people are, in truth, extraneous to their being. That iniquity is not deeply entrenched within the Jew; when he errs, these are only minor lapses that can easily be rectified. Our misdemeanors can be brushed off. They can be cast away (which lies in the Tashlich ritual casting away our sins into the sea (Micha 7:19).) because they are foreign.

The two goats are reminiscent of the twins which emerged from Rivkah's womb. Originally alike, the destiny of Yaakov and Eisav radically diverged as they developed as the respective personification of "good" and "evil". Yaakov had smooth skin; were chaff of wheat blown from a field to fall on him, he would be able to brush this away. But as a hairy man, this would symbolically become entangled in Eisav hair and prove hard to free.

So on Yom Kippur, when disassociated from all vestige of evil, is a Jew then capable to achieve atonement and with his repentance to be cleansed from all sin.

May all of our Jewish brethren be sealed in the Book of Life! Amen! Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and Torah.org.