

# GOATS ON YOU

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

**I AM ALWAYS INTRIGUED** by the way the Torah can teach something Kabbalistic, and not make a big deal about it. As a result, people don't as well, and just learn it on a Pshat level, the simplest level of explanation.

Obviously the ENTIRE Torah is Kabbalistic. As the Ramban points out, the entire Torah is one long Name of God, aside from all the Names that are mentioned in the Torah. You can't get any more Kabbalistic than that.

True as that is, still, it is possible to ignore that fact because the Torah reads just fine as a straightforward narrative. Some mitzvos may be beyond our understanding at this time, but most people can accept that without having to get Kabbalistic. As we said at Mt. Sinai, "We will do and [when possible] we will [also] understand."

The parentheses were mine, but they seem to be an accurate assessment from over the ages.

One mitzvah that is somewhat of an exception is the goat to Azazel on Yom Kippur. Part of the Yom Kippur service in the Temple was to choose two identical goats—literally twins—and send one for slaughter to God and the other off a cliff to Azazel.

If they were twin goats, what determined which one went where? The Torah tells us:

[Aharon] shall take the two he goats, and place them before God at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. Aharon shall place lots upon the two he goats: one lot "For God," and the other lot, "For Azazel." Aharon shall bring the he goat upon which the lot, "For God," came up, and designate it as a sin offering. The he goat upon which the lot "For Azazel" came up, shall be placed while still alive, before God, to [initiate] atonement upon it, and to send it away to Azazel, into the desert. (Vayikra 16:6-10)

Thus the fate of each goat was determined, not by man, but by God. Aharon may have chosen the lots, but it was Divine Providence that determined how they came out.

The question is, if the goats were identical, why did it make a difference which goat went to God, and which one went to Azazel? Was there a blemish in one goat that could not be seen without first killing it, which was not possible in this case since it had to be sent alive off the cliff?

After all, could the two goats really be identical in EVERY way? Wouldn't genetics guarantee that one was healthier than the other, or better than its twin in some way? Perhaps this sacrifice required

a level of perfection that man could not guarantee but God could.

The question can be answered on more than one level. Recently I heard one answer that is as profound as it is simple, and very relevant to raising children.

The person was speaking about children who come from Torah observant homes but who do not continue in the Torah way. One of the most common names used for such children is "OTD," which stands for "Off the [Torah] Derech—Way."

The speaker used the question about the goats to illustrate an important point he was making. He pointed out how, when people see a child from a Torah family turn secular, they assume that something went wrong in the chinuch—education. Or, they assume something is wrong with the child. Why else would a child not want to be frum?

Likewise, when children grow up and continue in the Torah way, they assume the opposite. They think that the child remained observant because he had the proper chinuch, the proper family upbringing. Why else would a child remain religious, especially in today's world?

Though each assumption is often correct, closer investigation reveals that this is not always the case. In many situations, two different children can have "identical" upbringings, and experience the same kind of chinuch, and yet end up going in two different spiritual directions. It can and often turn out that the reason why one child remained true to Torah is the reason why another did not.

Of course, people do not like to hear such things. It makes the whole process of raising children too mysterious, too chancy. Parents like to believe that they have more control over the outcome of their children than they actually do. The "success" that some families have with their children seems to suggest that they are right.

The speaker said that the goats teach us otherwise. They tell us that two children can be, for all intents and perhaps, identical in upbringing and chinuch, and yet end up going in two different directions. One can end up going "to God," and one can end up going "to Azazel," that is, in a spiritually destructive path.

The reason for the difference? Nothing we can see. Nothing we can determine. Divine Providence. Something only God can see. Something only God understands. Something only God knows.

Many years ago I came across Sha'ar HaGilgulim, the Arizal's teachings on the topic of reincarnation. I had no idea what to expect when I started, other than learning about the concept of reincarnation. What I learned so amazed me that I learned in more than once, and eventually translated the sefer into English.

Admittedly, it is risky business translating anything Kabbalistic. Translation requires interpretation and VERY specific phraseology. This is ESPECIALLY so when it comes to something as mystical as reincarnation and personal rectification.

So why did I do it anyhow? For the very reason mentioned above. To share with others the extremely valuable insights I learned. The sefer changed my perspective with respect to people. I learned about how very different one person's journey in life can be from another's, but for reasons we can't know, like previous incarnations or inherent soul natures.

The sefer helped me understand myself better. It helped me understand others better. It helped me understand Jewish history better. Those with whom I have shared the work have said the same thing as well. They have learned, as I have, that the most obvious answers are not always the right ones when it comes to explaining why one child remains on the path of Torah, and one does not.