



“Aharon shall place lots upon the two he-goats”

A Novel Interpretation regarding the Atonement Afforded by the Two He-goats Based on the Incredible Explanation of the Meshech Chochmah

In honor of Yom HaKippurim, which approaches auspiciously, it is fitting that we examine the sacred avodah performed by the Kohen Gadol involving the two “se’irim”—he-goats. One was designated for Hashem, and one was designated for Azazel, as described in the Torah in parshas Acharei Mot (Vayikra 16, 5):

”ומאת עדת בני ישראל יקח שני שעירי עזים לחטאת... ולקח את שני השעירים והעמיד אותם לפני ה' פתח אהל מועד, ונתן אהרן על שני השעירים גורלות גורל אחד לה' וגורל אחד לעזאזל, והקריב אהרן את השעיר אשר עלה עליו הגורל לה' ועשהו חטאת, והשעיר אשר עלה עליו הגורל לעזאזל יעמד חי לפני ה' לכפר עליו לשלח אותו לעזאזל המדברה”

—from the assembly of Bnei Yisrael, he shall take two he-goats for a sin-offering . . . He shall take the two he-goats and stand them before Hashem at the entrance to the Ohel Moed. Aharon shall place lots on the two he-goats — one lot for Hashem and one lot for Azazel. Aharon shall bring near the he-goat designated by the lot for Hashem and make it a sin-offering; and the he-goat designated by the lot for Azazel, shall be stood alive before Hashem to provide atonement through it, to be sent to Azazel to the Wilderness.

It is essential that we comprehend the significance of the two “se’irim” that HKB”H commanded us to bring on Yom HaKippurim—one “for Hashem” and one “for Azazel.” Unfortunately, we no longer have a Beis HaMikdash, due to our countless sins, and, as a consequence, we no longer have a Kohen Gadol actually performing the Yom Kippur service involving the two he-goats. Nevertheless, the two se’irim teach us an important lesson that is relevant even today. Clearly, we only perform this service today tangentially by reciting the appropriate passages found in our machzorim, in keeping with the dictum found in Hoshea (14, 3): “ונשלמה פרים” —and let our lips substitute for bulls.

It is fitting, therefore, that we examine the “avodah” performed by the Kohen Gadol involving the two he-goats as “chatas” offerings—one designated for Hashem and one designated for Azazel. The latter is commonly referred to as “שעיר המשתלח”—“**the he-goat that is sent away.**” It is especially worthwhile for us to examine the function of the “שעיר המשתלח” that afforded atonement for all transgressions—from the most minor to the most major. The Mishnah expresses this fact as follows (Shevuos 2b): “על שאר עבירות שבתורה, הקלות והחמורות, הזדונות והשגגות, הודע ולא הודע, **for all other transgressions mentioned in the Torah, whether they are minor or major, deliberate transgressions or unwitting ones, whether he became aware or did not become aware, positive commandments or prohibitions, those punishable by “karet” and those punishable by a court-imposed death penalty, the “he-goat sent away” (to Azazel) atones.**

A Tall Mountain and a Deep Abyss Separate the Two He-goats

It is apparent from the pesukim that follow that the purpose of both he-goats is to afford Yisrael atonement for their sins and iniquities. After all, the Torah refers to them as “**two he-goats for a chatas-offering.**” Notwithstanding, they are separated by a tall mountain and a deep abyss. For, the he-goat designated “for Hashem” was sacrificed by the Kohen Gadol on the mizbeiach, and its blood was sprinkled in the Kodosh HaKodashim. This is described in the following pesukim (ibid. 15): “**ושחט את שעיר החטאת אשר לעם והביא את דמו אל מבית לפרוכת... והזה אותו על הכפורת ולפני הכפורת, וכפר על הקודש מטומאות בני ישראל ומפשעיהם לכל חטאתם**—**he shall slaughter the chatas he-goat of the people and bring its blood within the Parochet** (the curtain between the

Kodesh and the Kodesh HaKodashim) . . . **and sprinkle it upon the Kapores (the cover of the Aron) and in front of the Kapores. Thus, shall he bring atonement upon the Kodesh for the impurities of Bnei Yisrael, and for their willful sins among all of their sins.**

In stark contrast, however, the he-goat designated "to Azazel" was not sacrificed at all. It was sent out of the Beis HaMikdash, accompanied by a designated person, to be pushed off a cliff in the wilderness. Here are the pertinent pesukim (ibid. 21): "וסמך אהרן את שתי ידיו על ראש השעיר החי, והתוודה: עליו את כל עוונות בני ישראל ואת כל פשעיהם לכל חטאתם, ונתן אותם על ראש השעיר ושלח ביד איש עתי המדברה, ונשא השעיר עליו את כל עוונותם אל ארץ גזרה ושלח" **Aharon shall lean his two hands upon the head of the living he-goat and confess upon it all the iniquities of Bnei Yisrael, and all their rebellious sins among all their sins, and place them upon the head of the he-goat, and send it with a timely man to the midbar. The he-goat will bear upon itself all their iniquities to a cut land, and he should send away the he-goat to the midbar.**

This deserves further clarification. As stated, both he-goats are meant to atone for Yisrael's transgressions. So, why was only one of them sacrificed in the Beis HaMikdash, while the other one was not sacrificed, at all? As we have learned, the second he-goat was sent off into the wilderness to Azazel to be thrown off of a cliff—in such a manner that it rarely reached the bottom intact. This was taught in a Mishnah (Yoma 67a): "ודחפו לאחוריו והוא מתגלגל ויורד, ולא היה מגיע לאחצי" **he would push it backwards, and it would tumble down, and it would not reach halfway down the mountain before it was torn limb from limb.**

There is another difference between the two he-goats that is worth examining. Aharon HaKohen was only instructed to lean his hands upon the head of the he-goat that was sent away, while confessing all of the transgressions of Yisrael. In contrast, he did not lean upon the head of the he-goat designated "for Hashem," and did not confess upon it. Instead, it was simply sacrificed in order to atone for Yisrael's **"willful sins among all of their sins."**

Aside from all of these questions, we must endeavor to understand why HKB"H commanded that two he-goats be brought as "chatas-offerings," to atone for Yisrael's transgressions. After all, Aharon HaKohen had already sacrificed the he-goat "to Hashem," which provided atonement for Yisrael's transgressions, as stated in the passuk: **"Thus shall he bring atonement upon the Kodesh for the impurities of Bnei Yisrael, and for their willful sins**

among all of their sins." So, what purpose was served by placing his hands upon the head of the "he-goat that was sent away" and confessing **"upon it all the iniquities of Bnei Yisrael, and all their rebellious sins among all their sins."** Which sins did the he-goat "to Hashem" atone for and which sins did the he-goat "to Azazel" atone for?

Seeing as we are discussing the two he-goats, it is also worthwhile explaining the tremendous chiddush taught in the Mishnah (Yoma 62a): "שני שעירי יום הכפורים מצוותן שיהיו שניהן שווין במראה" **regarding the two he-goats of Yom Kippur, their mitzvah is that they be alike in appearance, in height, in value, and in their simultaneous purchase.** The practical implications of this unique requirement must be explored. Seeing as one of the he-goats was to be designated "to Hashem" and the other "to Azazel," why was it required that they be identical in all aspects?

An Incredible Concept Presented by the Meshech Chochmah

We will begin to shed some light on the matter by introducing an incredible insight found in the illuminating commentary of the Meshech Chochmah on parshas Acharei Mot (Vayikra 16, 30). He addresses the formula instituted by our blessed sages (in the middle berachah of Shacharis and Mussaf on Yom Kippur): **"כי אתה סלחן לישראל" for you are the Forgiver of Yisrael and the Pardoner of the tribes of Yeshurun in every generation.** First of all, we must endeavor to reconcile the redundant terms: **"Forgiver of Yisrael"** and **"Pardoner of the tribes of Yeshurun."** Secondly, the phrase **"Pardoner of the tribes of Yeshurun"** does not appear anywhere else in our prayers.

He explains the significance of this formula based on what we have learned in the Gemara (R.H. 26a): **"מפני מה אין כהן גדול נכנס בבגדי זהב לפני ולפנים לעבוד עבודה, לפי שאין קטיגור נעשה סניגור" why doesn't the Kohen Gadol enter the inner sanctum to perform the service in the golden garments? Because the prosecutor cannot become an advocate.** This matter is explained in greater detail in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Yoma 38a): **"מפני מה אינו משמש בבגדי זהב... אמר רבי לוי, שאין קטיגור נעשה סניגור, אתמול כתיב בהם (שמות לב-לא) ויעשו להם אלהי זהב, ועכשיו הוא עומד ומשמש בבגדי זהב."** Since they made a god in the past out of gold, he cannot now perform the sacred avodah clad in gold.

To explain the matter, let us refer to the following passuk (Shemos 32, 34): **"וביום פקדי ופקדתי עליהם חטאתם" and on the day that I make My account, I shall bring their sin to account against them.** Rashi explains: **Always,**

in the portion of Yehudah, who advised his brothers to sell Yosef. Therefore, atonement could not be sought there; for, as we know, the prosecutor cannot become an advocate. This matter is discussed in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 6b):

”רבי מאיר אומר לא נאמר בוצע אלא כנגד יהודה, שנאמר ויאמר יהודה אל אחיו מה בצע כי נהרוג את אחינו, וכל המברך את יהודה הרי זה מנאץ, ועל זה נאמר ובוצע ברך ניאץ ה”

—Rabbi Meir says: A “compromiser” was only said with regards to Yehudah, as it is stated (Bereishis 37, 26): “And Yehudah said to his brothers, ‘What gain will there be if we kill our brother?’” And anyone who praises Yehudah is considered a blasphemer; concerning such a person, it is stated (Tehillim 10, 3): “One who praises a compromiser (Yehudah) has blasphemed Hashem.” Rashi comments: He should have said, “Let us return him to our father”—seeing as his brothers heeded his words.

The Meshech Chochmah substantiates his point by referring to an alarming passage in the Sifri (Zos HaBerachah):

”מפני מה זכה בנימן שתשרה שכינה בחלקו, כל השבטים היו במכירתו של יוסף ובנימן לא היה במכירתו של יוסף. אמר הקב”ה, אני אומר לאלו שיבנו בית הבחירה, לא כשיהיו מתפללים לפני, איני מבקש עליהם רחמים, איני משרה שכינתי בחלקם, שלא היו רחמנים על אחיהם.”

Why did Binyamin merit that the Shechinah should dwell in his portion? All of the other shevatim participated in the selling of Yosef; but Binyamin was not involved in the sale of Yosef. HKB”H said: “If I tell these to build the Temple, won’t I want to show them mercy when they pray before Me?! Instead, I will not have My Shechinah dwell in their portion, because they did not show their brother mercy.”

We now have cause to be elated, for we can finally comprehend the formula that we recite in the Yom Kippur tefilah: **”כי אתה סלחן לישראל ומחלן לשבטי ישורון בכל דור ודור”—for you are the Forgiver of Yisrael and the Pardoner of the tribes of Yeshurun in every generation.** Here are the sacred words of the Meshech Chochmah:

וזו שאמרו, כי אתה סלחן לישראל, היינו על כל החטאים שבין אדם למקום, שהרושם הוא משורש העגל, שנאמר (שמות לב-ד) אלה אלקיך ישראל, ושם נאמר סלחתי כדבריך, ומחלן לשבטי ישורון, הוא על חטאים שבין אדם לחבירו, ששורש שלהן הוא מחטא מכירת יוסף שחטאו שבטי ישורון.”

The phrase **”סלחן לישראל”—Forgiver of Yisrael—**relates to all sins “between man and G-d”— “bein adam laMakom.” Those sins are influenced by the seminal sin involving the “eigel.” In relation to that sin, it states (Bamidbar 14, 20): **”סלחתי כדבריך”—I have forgiven in**

accordance with your words. The phrase **”מחלן לשבטי ישורון”—Pardoner of the tribes of Yeshurun—**relates to sins “between man and his fellow man”—“bein adam l’chaveiro—which stem from the sin of “mechiras Yosef,” perpetrated by the tribes of Yeshurun.

The He-goat to Hashem Atones for Sins “Bein Adam LaMakom” the Dispatched He-goat Atones for Sins “Bein Adam L’Chaveiro”

As a loyal servant in the presence of his master, I was struck by a wonderful idea, which can be insinuated from what the Meshech Chochmah wrote. For, based on his magnificent insight, we can suggest a wonderful explanation for the matter of the two he-goats—“se’irim.” As we have learned, HKB”H commanded that both be brought as “chatas-offerings.” The one “to Hashem” was sacrificed on the mizbeiach, and its blood was sprinkled before the “Kaporet” in the Kodosh HaKodashim. The one “to Azazel” was dispatched into the midbar.

We already asked why HKB”H commanded that two he-goats be brought. Why didn’t the one chatas “to Hashem” suffice to atone for all of Yisrael’s transgressions? Yet, according to what we have learned from the Meshech Chochmah, it is incredible! From the very onset, HKB”H delegated the atonement for Yisrael’s sins to two distinct “chatas” he-goats. For, the he-goat designated “to Hashem” was aimed at atoning for sins “between man and G-d”; whereas the he-goat “to Azazel” was aimed at atoning for sins “between man and his fellow man.”

This explains very nicely why the Kohen Gadol sacrificed the he-goat “to Hashem” on the mizbeiach and sprinkled its blood in the Kodosh HaKodashim—where HKB”H’s Shechinah dwells. As explained, its purpose was to atone for transgressions “bein adam laMakom.” Therefore, it was fitting that a gift be presented to HKB”H in the dwelling place of His Shechinah, and to ask for mercy and forgiveness for having sinned against Him.

In contrast, the he-goat “to Azazel” came to atone for sins “bein adam l’chaveiro.” It would have been inappropriate to sacrifice it in the Heichal and to sprinkle its blood in the Kodosh HaKodashim; for those structures were located in the portion of Binyamin, who was not involved in the selling of Yosef. Therefore, it was not possible to bring an atonement for the sin of “mechiras Yosef” there. For, instead of rachamim—divine mercy—the attribute of “din” would have been triggered, due to the fact that the brothers were unwilling to show Yosef mercy.

Accordingly, HKB”H commanded that it not be sacrificed in the Beis HaMikdash, in the portion of Binyamin; rather, He commanded that it be sent to Azazel in the midbar. For brotherly hatred does not belong in a holy place; it should be relegated to the desolate wilderness. This coincides wonderfully with the words of the Meshech Chochmah. As he explains, the reason they tied a strip weighing two selas to the he-goat was to atone for the sin of “mechiras Yosef”—which was provoked by the striped tunic Yaakov made for Yosef out of two selas of fine wool.

In this manner, we can also comprehend why HKB”H commanded that the dispatched he-goat be tumbled down a high cliff, as described in the aforementioned Mishnah: **“He would push it backwards, and it would tumble down, and it would not reach halfway down the mountain before it was torn limb from limb.”** This ceremonial act alludes to the fact that all sins “bein adam l’chaveiro” stem from the human trait of haughtiness—where a person sees himself as being superior to others, like a tall mountain. This notion is conveyed by the following Gemara (Sotah 5a): אמר רבי יוסף, לעולם ילמד אדם מדעת קונו, שהרי הקב”ה הניח כל הרים וגבעות והשרה שכינתו על יוסף. **Rabbi Yosef said: A person should always learn from the “da’as” of his Maker; for HKB”H passed over the taller mountains and hills and rested His Shechinah on Har Sinai.** Therefore, the designated person pushed the he-goat down the mountain, causing it to be torn apart limb from limb. This was meant to teach us that the quality of haughtiness destroys all that is good in a human being.

Sins “Bein Adam L’Chaveiro” Are the Source of Sins “Bein Adam LaMakom”

Nevertheless, we find an apparent contradiction to this crucial concept. In the Mishnah cited above (Shevuos 2b), we learned that the dispatched he-goat atoned for all sorts of transgressions: **“Whether they are minor or major, deliberate transgressions or unwitting ones, whether he became aware or did not become aware, positive commandments or prohibitions, those punishable by “karet” and those punishable by a court-imposed death penalty.”** So, how does this accord with our contention that the “he-goat sent away” atones primarily for sins between man and his fellow man? Let us explain. The characteristic of haughtiness and arrogance— “ga’avah”—which is the root of all sins “bein adam l’chaveiro,” is also the root of all sins “bein adam laMakom.” In Sha’arei Kedushah (2, 4), Rabbi Chaim Vital writes the following, which should rattle us to our inner cores:

“הגאווה היא שורש להרבה עבירות, אם בין אדם למקום ואם בין אדם לחבירו, כי גורם להזיק לחבירו ולשנאתו ולדבר לשון הרע עליו, וכאלה רבות, ואם בינו למקום, שכן כתיב ורם לבבך ושכחת את ה’ אלקיך, ואמרו רבותינו ז”ל כל שיש בו גסות הרוח נקרא תועבה, שנאמר תועבת ה’ כל גבה לב”.

“Ga’avah” is the root of many aveiros—whether they be between man and G-d or between man and his fellow man. For, it causes a person to harm his neighbor, to hate him, to speak ill of him (“lashon hara”), and do many other similar things. Regarding the category “between man and G-d,” it is written (Devarim 8, 14): “And your heart will become haughty, and you will forget Hashem, you G-d.” Our Rabbis of blessed memory said (Sotah 5a): “Anyone who is haughty is referred to as an abomination, as is states (Mishlei 16, 5): ‘Every haughty heart is an abomination of Hashem.’”

So, while it is true that the he-goat “to Hashem,” sacrificed in the Beis HaMikdash, was a korban atoning for all transgressions falling into the category of “bein adam laMakom”; nevertheless, until a korban was brought to atone for the transgressions “bein adam l’chaveiro,” the tikun for aveiros “between man and G-d” could not be accomplished. For, one could very easily backslide and violate all of the precepts of the Torah, chas v’shalom. Therefore, in His infinite wisdom, HKB”H commanded that two “se’irim” be brought. Although the he-goat “to Hashem” atoned for aveiros “between man and G-d,” it could not accomplish this goal without a concomitant atonement for aveiros “between man and his fellow man.” For this purpose, HKB”H commanded Yisrael to bring a he-goat “to Azazel.” It was pushed down the side of a tall mountain; its limbs were shattered in the process, alluding to the shattering of the human trait of “ga’avah.” Only then did Yisrael merit atonement for all of the major transgressions.

It is with great pleasure that we can now comprehend why HKB”H commanded the following only with regards to the dispatched he-goat: **“Aharon shall lean his two hands upon the head of the living he-goat and confess upon it all the iniquities of Bnei Yisrael, and all their rebellious sins among all their sins.”** For, only Aharon HaKohen, who lacked any trace of “ga’avah,” was suitable to perform this ceremony. HKB”H Himself attests to Aharon’s lack of “ga’avah” when He says to Moshe (Shemos 4, 14): **“ויראך ושמח בלבבו”—and he will see you and he will rejoice in his heart.** Rashi comments: **It is not as you (Moshe) think, that he (Aharon) will resent you, because you are rising to greatness.**

Additionally, we find the following testimonial regarding Aharon's character from Hillel HaNasi (Avos 1, 12): "הלל אומר: הווי מתלמידיו של אהרן, אוהב שלום ורודף שלום, אוהב את הבריות ומקרבן לתורה—**Hillel says: Be among the disciples of Aharon—love peace and promote peace, love your fellow creatures, and bring them closer to Torah.** Therefore, it was fitting for him to be the one to lean with his two holy hands on the head of the "he-goat to be sent away." For, that he-goat was meant to atone for the aveiros "between man and his fellow man"—emblematic of the opposite of peace ("shalom") and which stem from the trait of "ga'avah."

The Reason the Two He-goats Had to Be Equal in All Aspects

In this manner, let us rise to the occasion and explain the curious fact we learned in the Mishnah: "שני שעירי יום הכפורים—**regarding the two he-goats of Yom Kippur, their mitzvah is that they be alike in appearance, in height, in value, and in their simultaneous purchase.** We shall refer to what the great Chafetz Chaim writes in Shemiras HaLashon (Part 2, Chapter 27). He addresses that which is written in parshas Ki Sisa (ibid. 31, 18): "ויתן אל משה ככלותו לדבר אתו בהר סיני שני לחת—**he gave to Moshe, when He finished speaking with him on Har Sinai, the two Tablets of the Testimony, stone tablets inscribed by the finger of G-d.** Rashi explains: **The plural word "לחת" is written defectively** (without the letter "vav," as if it was in the singular), **because both (tablets) were equal.** The source for this comment is the Midrash (S.R. 41, 6): "לחת כתיב מזוז"—the defective spelling indicates that neither tablet was bigger than the other.

He refers to the commentary of the Ramban on parshas Yisro (ibid. 20, 13), where he explains that the two "luchos" were divided up into two sets. The first set of five commandments, which were inscribed on the first tablet, consisted of mitzvos "bein adam laMakom": "לא", "אנכי ה' אלקיך", "יהיה לך אלהים אחרים", "לא תשא את שם ה' אלקיך לשוא", "זכור את יום השבת לקדשו",

"כבד את אביך ואת אמך"—such as **"I am Hashem, your G-d,"** and **"You shall not bear the name of Hashem, your G-d, in vain."** In contrast, the set of five commandments inscribed on the second tablet consisted entirely of mitzvos "bein adam l'chaveiro": "לא תרצח", "לא תגנוב", "לא תנאף", "לא תענה ברעך", "לא תחמוד בית רעך"—such as **"You shall not kill"** and **"You shall not commit adultery."**

Now, there are people who are meticulous regarding the mitzvos of the right tablet. They observe the mitzvos "bein adam laMakom" to an extreme degree. On the other hand, they are lax in their observance of the mitzvos on the left tablet—the mitzvos "bein adam l'chaveiro." For instance, they are not careful with regards to "lashon hara," or they are not scrupulous in money matters. Conversely, there are people who are very careful in their observance of mitzvos "bein adam l'chaveiro." They give tzedakah generously and are always willing to aid anyone in need. Yet, these very same people are careless with regards to their observance of mitzvos "bein adam laMakom." Therefore, "לחת אבן" is written in the singular indicating that both sets are to be observed equally, without any difference or bias.

At this point, it is fitting to add a wonderful allusion from the great Rabbi of Komarna, zy"ta, in Zohar Chai (Shemos, Part 2, page 164). He writes that the numerical value of the mitzvah to love Hashem (Devarim 6, 4): "ואהב"ת א"ת הויה" is exactly equal to the numerical value of the mitzvah to love Yisrael (Vayikra 19, 18): "ואהב"ת לרעך כמוך א"ת הויה". This teaches us that we should not differentiate between the love of Hashem—mitzvos "bein adam laMakom"—and love of Yisrael—mitzvos "bein adam l'chaveiro."

So, it is precisely for this reason that: **"Regarding the two he-goats of Yom Kippur, their mitzvah is that they be alike in appearance, in height, in value, and in their simultaneous purchase."** This peculiar requirement teaches us that there is no difference whatsoever between the he-goat "to Hashem" atoning for mitzvos "bein adam laMakom" and the he-goat sent away atoning for mitzvos "bein adam l'chaveiro." In the eyes of HKB"Y, the two are equal.

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