



והגדת לבתך  
*Vehigadet Levitekh*  
*And You Shall Tell Your Daughters...*

*A D'var Torah for Yom Kippur*

By Rachel Friedman

Karen Miller, Editor

*JOFA strives to promote women's learning and scholarship, and to publicize the work of outstanding female teachers of Torah. Through these mailings we would like to increase the number of divrei Torah written by women.*

# Shedding Sin: The Scapegoat Ritual on Yom Kippur

By Rachel Friedman<sup>1</sup>

The rite of the scapegoat, described in Leviticus 16 and read in synagogues on Yom Kippur, is the climax of the Yom Kippur Temple service. Two male goats are selected by the high priest. One is sacrificed to God and the other is sent to *Azazel*<sup>2</sup> in the wilderness, bearing the sins of the people of Israel.

What is the meaning of this provocative ritual? Why is the rite of the scapegoat the climax of the Yom Kippur Temple service? And does this unusual ritual, although no longer performed today, have relevance for us beyond its historical value?

## The Metaphysical Approach

The commentators understand this ritual in two different ways. The first may be called “metaphysical” and the second “symbolic.” The metaphysical approach defines the scapegoat ritual as a *rite of riddance*. It is a process by which sins and impurity are *actually* removed from Israel and its Temple.<sup>3</sup> This view is reflected in ancient, medieval and modern sources.<sup>4</sup>

Several basic arguments are made in support of the metaphysical approach. First, the rite of the scapegoat is one of several *rites of riddance* in the Torah. It is comparable to the rite of the purification of a leper as described in Leviticus 14.<sup>5</sup> An individual afflicted with *tzaraat* (leprosy) is ultimately purified by the priest by means of a complex procedure involving two birds. One bird is slaughtered and the other is sent forth alive into the open country after being dipped in the blood of the first. According to the metaphysical approach, both the release of the bird and the dispatch of the scapegoat are expressions of *riddance*. The disease of the leper carried impurity which could defile Israel just as the sinfulness of the Israelites could defile the Temple. The live bird transports the impurity of the leper into the open field just as the scapegoat carries the iniquities of Israel into the wilderness. Both rites reflect an expiation of evil forces from within Israel.

A second argument for the metaphysical character of the scapegoat ritual relates to one possible definition of the word *Azazel*. The word is used in the following way in Leviticus 16:

וגתן אהרן על שני השעירים גורלות גורל אחד לה' וגורל אחד לעזאזל

Aaron shall place lots upon the two goats, one marked for the Lord and the other marked for *Azazel*.<sup>6</sup>

והשעיר אשר עלה עליו הגורל לעזאזל יעמד חי לפני ה' לכפר עליו לשלח אתו לעזאזל המדברה.

The goat designated by lot for *Azazel* shall be left standing alive before the Lord, to make expiation with it and to send it off to the wilderness to *Azazel*.<sup>7</sup>

The meaning of the word *Azazel* has perplexed exegetes for millennia. The most popular opinion in antiquity, ranging from early post-biblical literature to the late midrashic works, identified *Azazel* as a demonic ruler of the wilderness.<sup>8</sup> The position that *Azazel* was a supernatural demonic being was also adopted by several medieval exegetes. In an enigmatic comment, the twelfth century Spanish

commentator, Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, connects Azazel with the goat-demons (שעירים) referred to in Leviticus 17:7.

ולא יזבחו עוד את זבחייהם לשעירים אשר הם זנים אחריהם..

And they shall no more offer their sacrifices to the goat-demons [*se'irim*] after whom they stray...

The cult of *se'irim* was the worship of goat-demons whose domain was the wilderness. In a clearer exposition, the thirteenth century Spanish exegete, Ramban, portrays *Azazel* as an angel or prince who ruled the wilderness.

Now this is the secret of the matter. There were those who worshiped other gods, namely the angels, and who would offer sacrifices to them... Now the Torah has utterly forbidden the acceptance of their divinity or any worship of them. But the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded that on Yom Kippur we dispatch a male goat into the wilderness to the prince who rules over the areas of destruction.<sup>9</sup>

To Ramban, the scapegoat ritual was a process by which a live goat bearing the sins of Israel was sent to a demon of destruction pursuant to God's command on Yom Kippur. The demon was subservient to God and the ritual was in adherence to God's command. The scapegoat was not an offering to *Azazel*; its purpose was to remove the spirit of impurity from Israel and deliver it to the wilderness, the realm of *Azazel*.

A final argument in support of the metaphysical nature of the rite of the scapegoat relates to the identification of *Azazel* as a goat-demon. If, it is argued, the high priest subdues the goat-demon by sending against it another goat, this is an example of sympathetic magic by which similar powers confront each other. This is reminiscent of the incident of the copper serpent in Numbers 21:6-9. To cure the infected Israelites of their snakebites, God instructed Moses to place a copper serpent on a standard. The Israelites who gazed at the copper serpent would be healed of their snakebites, because the good serpent would defeat the evil serpent. In the rite of the scapegoat the good goat would defeat the evil goat. Metaphysical good defeats metaphysical evil.<sup>10</sup>

### The Symbolic Approach

Many scholars view the rite of the scapegoat as symbolic rather than metaphysical. According to this view, the rite in and of itself did not eliminate evil from Israel and its Temple. Instead, it was practiced for its dramatic effect. It was intended to impress upon the individuals who performed it, witnessed it and knew of it, the need to purge sinfulness from the midst of the people. Only in this way could the nation retain the holy character of its Sanctuary and maintain its special relationship with God.

Yehezkel Kaufmann, a twentieth century biblical scholar, argued eloquently for a symbolic approach in *Toledot HaEmunah HaYisraelit*.<sup>11</sup> Kaufmann distinguished the rite of the scapegoat from *rites of riddance* on several grounds. First, the ancient Near Eastern *rites of riddance* were aimed at the expulsion of demons or demonic evil. In the biblical scapegoat ritual, the expulsion is not of a demon but rather to a demon. Furthermore, the sins that are carried off are viewed as the religious and moral transgressions of the Israelites before God, and not as emanating from demonic forces. Finally, the *Azazel* of Leviticus 16 is not conceived of as the source of danger or harm. In fact, *Azazel* plays no active role and doesn't sound like a demon at all. Kaufmann concludes:

[*Azazel*] is merely a passive symbol of impurity—sin returns to its like. The value of the rite does not lie in exorcising a dangerous demonic power, but in fulfilling a commandment of God.<sup>12</sup>

A symbolic approach to the scapegoat ritual is not new or unique to modern scholarship. In the late twelfth century, Maimonides rejected the metaphysical approach to the rite of the scapegoat in *The Guide of the Perplexed* and explained what he saw as its symbolic significance.

No one has any doubt that sins are not bodies that may be transported from the back of one individual to that of another. But all these actions are parables serving to bring forth a form in the soul so that a passion toward repentance should result: We have freed ourselves from all our previous actions, cast them behind our backs, and removed them to an extreme distance.<sup>13</sup>

To Maimonides, the rite of the scapegoat was not intended to affect the physical location of sins but rather the emotions of the people. It was intended to arouse us, to catch our attention, to motivate us to repent and put our sins behind us so that on Yom Kippur each of us can make a fresh start.

### The Scapegoat Ritual: A Timeless Message

We conventionally translate the title “Yom Kippur” or “Yom Hakippurim” as the Day of Atonement and indeed, the theme of this holiest of days is *kapparah* – a complete atonement for the people of Israel. What is the essence of *kapparah*? How can human beings truly atone for their sins and achieve forgiveness from God and from fellow human beings? The key to answering this question is reflected in the Yom Kippur Temple service and particularly in the scapegoat ritual.

The Hebrew root כפר [*kpr*] – to atone – is repeated numerous times in Leviticus 16's description of the Yom Kippur Temple service. In the Torah, the root *kpr* has two levels of meaning. On the one hand, it denotes the “price of life” as reflected in the term כופר [*kopher*] – a ransom. For example, when in the process of counting the Israelites God commands that each male above age twenty pay one half shekel to the Sanctuary, the payment is called כסף הכופרים [*kesef hakippurim*] – ransom money. A second level of meaning of *kpr* is “to wipe off or to cleanse.” It is in this sense that the root is used, for example, in Leviticus 16:30:

כי ביום הזה יכפר עליכם לטהר אתכם מכל חטאתיכם לפני ה' תטהרו

For on this day he shall atone for you to cleanse you of all of your sins; you shall be clean before the Lord.

I would suggest that the timeless message of the scapegoat ritual is that to truly achieve *kapparah*, there must be both aspects – on the one hand, the payment of a price and on the other, a cleansing of our sins. That is why there are two goats in the scapegoat ritual – one that is sacrificed to God as a sin-offering and one that is sent to *Azazel* bearing the sins of the people. The goat that is sacrificed as a sin-offering represents the idea that in principle, we must pay a price for our sins. As Ramban notes in his discussion of the theology of Temple sacrifice, an individual who brings a sin-offering must recognize the purpose of the offering. Were true and exact justice to be done, a person would pay for his sins with his life, but the sacrifice serves as a *kopher* – a ransom – a substitute for his own life.<sup>14</sup>

The second goat in the scapegoat ritual – the goat that is sent to the wilderness bearing the sins of the people – represents the removal of our sins and the purging of our beings. The high priest places both of his hands on the head of the live goat and confesses over it all of the sins of Israel. He places the sins on the head of the goat and sends it off to the wilderness, never to return.<sup>15</sup> This is the ultimate image of catharsis – a complete confession and removal of our sins so that they are no longer part of our being or our space. This second aspect of *kapparah* – a cleansing of our very selves – is achieved through reflection, confession and a resolve to cast away our sins. It is this second aspect of atonement that is represented in the dramatic ceremony of the live goat that is sent forth to *Azazel*.

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The idea that to truly atone for our transgressions we must pay a price and confess is intuitive. As a psychological matter, if a human being knows she has done something wrong, she will not feel a sense of personal resolution and closure unless she has confessed and owned up to the misdeed on the one hand and made amends or paid up to the extent possible on the other. Appropriately, the requirements of both payment and confession are the conceptual prerequisites for atonement in Jewish law. As Maimonides notes in the Laws of Repentance, even capital punishment will not achieve *kapparah* without the prerequisites of confession and repentance.<sup>16</sup> By the same logic, it is not enough to apologize to our fellow human beings for wrongs that we may have done towards them. Rather, it is up to each of us to “make things right” to the best of our abilities.

Whatever the true meaning of the rite of the scapegoat in Leviticus 16, this provocative ceremony has made a lasting impression upon the religious life of the nation of Israel throughout the millennia. The Mishnah in Yoma provides an elaborate account of its enactment in Second Temple times, and to this day, both the biblical and mishnaic descriptions are a captivating presence in the liturgy of Yom Kippur. Even if its metaphysical significance is now lost, the dramatic symbolism of the scapegoat ritual enhances the experience of repentance and the possibility of true *kapparah*. In this season of *teshuvah*, may each of us recognize the timeless message of the scapegoat ritual. May all of us confess our sins and make amends for our sins so that we may achieve spiritual closure and communal peace. *Ketivah V'Chatimah Tovah!*

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Rachel Friedman will deliver a more extensive shiur on **Shedding Sin: The Scapegoat Ritual on Yom Kippur** on Tuesday September 21, 2004 at 12 pm. For further information call Drisha Institute at 212-595-0307.

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<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew “*la-aza'zel*” may be translated as “to *Azazel*” or “for *Azazel*”.

<sup>3</sup> The term metaphysical is used here in the sense that an action is being done which has an effect in the world on entities (in this case, the evil forces) that are real but not physical.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion see: B.A. Levine, *JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus*, pp. 250 - 253.

<sup>5</sup> This analogy was made, e.g., by Rashbam on Leviticus 16:10.

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 16:8.

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 16:10.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Enoch 6-13, Yoma 67b, Yalkut Shimoni I, 155. For other rabbinic interpretations see Yoma 67b.

<sup>9</sup> Ramban, Leviticus 16:8.

<sup>10</sup> But see Rosh Hashanah 29a for a symbolic approach to the incident of the copper serpent.

<sup>11</sup> Tel Aviv: Bialik Institute-Dvir (1937).

<sup>12</sup> Translation by M. Greenberg, *The Religion of Israel*, University of Chicago Press (1960) pp. 114-115.

<sup>13</sup> Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, III:46.

<sup>14</sup> Ramban, Leviticus 1:9.

<sup>15</sup> Leviticus 16:21-22.

<sup>16</sup> Laws of Repentance, ch.1.