Acharei Mot: Vayikra (Leviticus)

What's it all about?

Following the deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, **God warns against unauthorized entry into the Holy of the Holies,** the inner sanctuary of God's earthly dwelling place, a privilege permitted only to the High Priest and only on Yom Kippur. Also on Yom Kippur, the parsha explains, **lots must be cast, selecting one goat as an offering to God and another, symbolically carrying our collective sins, sent into the wilderness.** The parsha also warns against bringing korbanot, or animal or meal offerings, anywhere else but the Temple in Jerusalem, and details the laws forbidding incest and other deviant sexual relations.



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"For on this day, God will effect atonement for you, in order to purify you. You will be purified before God of all your sins."

Take a deeper dive

Our parsha contains what is arguably one of the strangest rituals in all of Torah: Two goats are selected, lots are cast, one goat is sacrificed as an offering to God and the other is sent to the wilderness, carrying all of our symbolic sins with it.

Except that the Torah doesn't use the word "wilderness." The word it chooses is much more loaded: **The second goat is sent to "Azazel."** What's Azazel? Ramban, the great Nachmanides, explained that Azazel is an actual being, also known as Samael, or, if you will, Satan. Here's how Ramban interprets the act: "And we give Samael a bribe on the Day of Atonement."

Huh?!? We make an offering to Satan on Yom Kippur?!? That sounds profoundly idolatrous, so the great Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik stepped up to explain this complicated interaction. **"It was not intended that the scapegoat offering be sacrificed by us to Satan, God forbid,"** he wrote, **"but that when making it, our intention is nothing else but to carry out our Creator's will as He commanded us…** Go and see the feelings of sorrow, of disappointment, of frustration and of distress that man endures… for the sake of petty human cupidity, financial covetousness and the craving for honors… This terrible feeling of alienation and loneliness usually overcomes man due to an excessive pursuit of futile vanities."

In other words, on Yom Kippur, HaShem accepts all of these feelings, all of our Satanic Yetzer Hara, or evil inclination, as if they were offered as a sacrifice to Him.

Because, as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explained, the sacrificial goats are really ourselves. **We can think that we're wonderfully free, that we're not bound by any commitment or obligation, that we shun such primitive and petty things like religion and tradition. But when we choose to live that way, we aren't really free;** all we achieve is a life of wandering around in the wilderness, with no spiritual sustenance and no hope of redemption. That is why, on Yom Kippur, we offer this aspect of ourselves as sacrifice, committing ourselves to God rather than to that other, devilish force.

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