

Atonement!

Achrei Mot 5782/2022

Achrei Mot outlines the sacrificial rites associated with Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. The central element of the rites is the selection of the two goats – one for God and one for Azazel¹.

What is interesting is the relationship between Azazel, the mystical Satan, and the nature of atonement.

Rabeinu Bachya is quick to point out that both goats are in fact offerings to Hashem, and that they just go on different paths to reach the same destination². This is perhaps indicative of a person's own journey in seeking atonement – some are direct, others more circuitous or treacherous, but both have the same goal.

However, Avot d'Rabbi Natan brings an interesting midrashic element about a conversation between the Satan and God. The Satan wanted more control over the destiny of the Jewish people. God responds that he would have power over them on Yom Kippur³. Suddenly a link appears between Azazel and the Satan, with the former colloquially known as hell. So, what is this sacrificial goat doing?

In the Book of Job, we see another conversation between God and the Satan, this time with the Satan complaining about the protections God is providing Job. God tells the Satan that everything that Job has is within the Satan's power, but he is not allowed to lay a hand on him⁴.

On Yom Kippur we are granted atonement and sealed in the various moments of judgement that occurred on Rosh Hashanah. When one thinks about the two goats, one goes the direct route to God and perhaps could be associated with the book of life and death, something that is only in God's power, but maybe the second one goes out not to directly appease the Satan, but to acknowledge the Satan's ability to impact the Jewish people on Yom Kippur, and perhaps more specifically the sealing of the material judgements that occur.

This physical or material element to Yom Kippur is not something that we think about often, and more so, it is not something that we necessarily would associate with Azazel, the Satan, or Goats, but if we are to understand that the vast majority of our iniquities come from the relationship with the physical and material, then atonement is specifically granted vis a vis that physicality or materialism.

If the Satan represents that physical or material, then it makes sense not only appeal to that element by the more circuitous route of the second goat, but also in the specific mode of the fast itself.

Philo states the Greek's astonishment that the holiest day of the Jewish calendar could be marked without feasting, music, and dancing⁵. But if the Satan needs appeasing, and that appeasing comes by our own physical iniquities, then it makes perfect sense that our own atonement is enhanced by our cessation of physical and material engagement.