

## Parshat Acharei Mot 5776

The sedra introduces the subject of Azazel. In perek 16 verse 7 it says, referring to Aaron: *"he shall take the two he –goats and stand them before Hashem, at the entrance to the Tent of meeting."* Aaron would put his hands in the lottery box and put the lots on the goats. The lots were originally made of wood, which we now know was boxwood. Later the lots were prepared from gold by the High Priest, Yehoshua ben Gamla, during his term of office. He was praised by the sages for this initiative which was done to enhance the honour of the holy day. As he put his hands on the goats, Aaron recited viduy. One goat was chosen for Hashem and the other as Azazel. After confessing for Israel, the High Priest gave the scapegoat into the hands of the individual who had been designated to lead it into the desert. This, too, was considered a great privilege. Even though it was not an intrinsic part of the service and therefore could even be done by an Israelite, it was customarily safeguarded within the priestly ranks. It was difficult physically as it involved a 12 mil walk in the midday desert heat

Rashi discusses the meaning of the word Azazel. He says it is a combination of the word 'az' meaning severe and 'ayl' meaning strong and harsh; as in 'Hu har az vkosheh' - it is an austere and harsh mountain. The goat was sent to a high cliff which was cut at 90 degrees vertically so that when the goat was thrown off it was completely cut and destroyed into tiny pieces.

Why did the seir have to be sent to such a harsh area? The Chizkuni agrees with Rashi that it was a desolate area cut off from society. What was the value of having this ceremony so far away?

Two answers are suggested by the Medresh. One answer refers to the land. The goat was broken into small pieces there was virtually nothing left of it. The land from which it was thrown was high so that just as the goat disintegrated, so did the sins of the people. This is the concept of kaparah, that Hashem will forget and forgive our sins and re-establish our relationship with Him. Hashem does not have a memory as we know it; there is no forgetfulness, no loss of memory. Therefore, how can He forget our sins? It

seems that we understand that kapara exists but not how it works and that is why the seir was sent so far away from man so that no one witnessed it, demonstrating that the mechanism of the kaparah is difficult to comprehend. To recap 1) We request kapara but don't know how it works and 2) We understand the concept that the human mind can forget but do not understand how Hashem may do so.

However, there is another midrashic idea that when Aaron said viduy over the seir, Klal Yisrael were removing themselves from the yetzer hara. The seir was travelling through the desert with all the sins of klal yisrael. But can you transfer sins onto an animal i.e. put them into a physical entity? The medresh says that it is not a Jewish concept but we use the seir as a way of sending our sins far away without really understanding it.

So the destruction of the Azazel releases us from the yetzer hara. The Rambam says that when korbanos were brought to Hashem in the Beis Hamikdash we could identify with the animals. The animal is a living thing like us and as it was being shechted it was like we were shechting ourselves. The Rambam adds that even if one does not do teshuva, the seir provides kaparah, even for certain sins that you do not do teshuva for. It is a moment of separation from sin. This identification with the seir shows a level of perfection and allows Klal Yisrael to view their sins properly. Another reason for doing it in a desolate area so that there could be a true separation; that even for just one moment on Yom Kippur you could remove yourself from the yetzer hara.

The gemarah (Yuma 67b) says that Azazel atones for the act of Uza and Azazel. These are two angels of destruction who came to earth in the days of Naamah (the sister of Tuval Kayin). They proceeded to have relations with women just as the sons of the leaders of those generations between Adom and Noach did. The angels represented the sin of adultery (for which the seir, inter alia, atones) as well as other arayos committed during that period.

May we see the return of the Temple with its means of achieving kaparah speedily in our days.

