



The Goat Man

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Parashat Aharei Mot 5784

With the *mishkan* operational and the priesthood now in place, Parashat Aharei Mot begins with a description of the service that will be the pinnacle of that system: the Yom Kippur Avodah.

At first, the sacrifices involved appear to be typical of what we have seen in Leviticus so far: a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. Then come two goats, also named as sin offerings. But here, the Torah takes a surprising turn:

ויקרא טז:ח

וַיִּתֵּן אֶהָרִן עַל שְׁנֵי הַשְּׁעִירִים גִּרְלוֹת גּוֹרֵל אֶחָד לַיהוָה וְגּוֹרֵל אֶחָד לְעִזָּאֵזֶל.

Leviticus 16:8

Aharon shall place lots on the two goats, one marked for the Eternal, and one marked for Azazel.

This procedure appears to contravene basic Jewish theology. Why are we suddenly drawing lots, as if casting our offerings into the hands of fate? And who is this Azazel, with a name that sounds like a god? None of this seems “kosher.”



The 20th century Rosh Yeshivah of Chaim Berlin, R. Yitzhak Hutner, in his signature work on the holidays, *Pahad Yitzhak*, briefly suggests a connection that has the potential to completely reframe our understanding of this central Yom Kippur ritual:

פחד יצחק פורים ו

והנה השעיר הקדום לשני שעירי יום כפור הללו, הוא איש שעיר הראשון, הלא הוא עשו איש שעיר.

Pahad Yitzhak Purim 6

The goat that preceded these two goats of Yom Kippur is the first “goat man” (*ish sa’ir*)—none other than Esav, the “*ish sa’ir*.”

R. Hutner appears at first to be taking some creative license, for the connection he makes between Esav and goats is based on a bit of wordplay. It is true, Esav was described as an “*ish sa’ir*” back in Genesis, but that meant something else entirely. When Rivkah comes up with a plan to send Ya’akov in to his father Yitzhak to steal a blessing meant for Esav, Ya’akov protests that this trickery will never work:

בראשית כז:יא-יב

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל רִבְקָה אִמּוֹ הֵן עָשׂוֹ אָחִי אִישׁ שֹׁעַר וְאֶנְכִי אִישׁ חֲלָק. אוֹלֵי יְמֵשָׁנִי אָבִי וְהָיִיתִי בְּעֵינָיו
כְּמַתְעֵתֶעַ וְהִבֵּאתִי עָלַי קָלָלָה וְלֹא בִרְכָה

Genesis 27:11-12

Ya’akov said to his mother Rivkah, “But my brother Esav is a **hairy man** (*ish sa’ir*) and I am a smooth man! Perhaps my father will feel me and I shall appear to him as a trickster, and then I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing.”

When we see the description of Esav in context, it becomes clear that R. Hunter is playing a bit loose with the language. *Sa’ir* here does not mean “goat” (a noun) but “hairy” (an adjective).



The link between the words is not coincidental. A male goat (a buck) is called a *sa'ir* because he is a hairy creature. But that doesn't make hairy Esav a goat-like man.

Yet if we look just two verses earlier in the same scene, we find there **is** a rather remarkable “goat connection” in this story. When Rivkah begins explaining her plan, her first instructions to Ya'akov are:

בראשית כז:ט

לך נא אל הצאן וקח לי משם שני גדיי עדים טובים ואעשה אתם מטעמים לאביך כאשר אהב.

Genesis 27:9

Go to the flock and **take** for me **two young goats**, good ones, and I will make them into a dish for your father, just the way he likes.

Now we have not just one goat, but a pair of goats in this story and a pair of goats in the Yom Kippur ritual:

ויקרא טז:ז

ומאת עדת בני ישראל יקח שני שעירי עדים לחטאת ואיל אחד לעלה.

Leviticus 16:7

And from the congregation of the Children of Israel **take two male goats** as a sin offering and one ram as a burnt offering.

“Take for me two young goats” and “take two male goats”—not only is the phrasing similar, but these are the **only** two pairs of goats mentioned in the Torah! Now it seems the Pahad Yitzhak is onto something. In fact, he has precedent, for his connection was made many centuries earlier in a *midrash* from Bereishit Rabbah:

בראשית רבה סה:יד

וּלְקַח לִי מִשָּׁם שְׁנֵי גְדֵי עִזִּים טָבִים... רַבִּי חֵלְבּוֹ אָמַר טוֹבִים לָהּ, שֶׁעַל יָדָן אֶת נוֹטֵל אֶת הַבְּרָכוֹת. וְטוֹבִים
לְבָנֶיהָ, שֶׁעַל יָדָן הוּא מִתְּכַפֵּר לָהֶם בְּיוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים

Bereishit Rabbah 65:14

“Take for me two young goats, good ones...” R. Helbo said: “good ones,” [in the plural], meaning good for you (= Ya’akov), for through them you will take the blessings [from your father], and good for your descendants, for through [these goats] they will be atoned on Yom Kippur.

R. Helbo notices the parallel, and suggests that the two goats that Ya’akov uses to secure his father’s blessing are a precursor to the two goats at the center of the Yom Kippur service. Further on in the same *midrash*, R. Yitzhak takes the connection a step further, making the same connection to Esav we saw R. Hutner propose above, and then introducing yet another play on the words in our *parashah*, one that serves to bring Ya’akov, too, into the mix:

בראשית רבה סה:טו

וְנִשְׂא הַשְּׁעִיר עָלָיו (ויקרא טז, כב), זֶה עֲשׂוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: הֵן עֲשׂוֹ אָחִי אִישׁ שָׁעִר.
אֶת כָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָם, עֲוֹנוֹת תָּם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (בראשית כה, כז): וַיַּעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם.

Bereishit Rabbah 65:15

“The **sa’ir** [that goes to Azazel] carries upon itself...” (Leviticus 16:22)—this is Esav, as it is said, “This is Esav my brother, a hairy man (*ish sa’ir*).”
“... all of their sins (*avonot tam*)”—the sins of the quiet one (*avonot tam*), as it is said,
“Ya’akov was a quiet man (*ish tam*)” (Genesis 25:27).

That last move is extremely clever. The last letter that makes the plural for “sins” (ת) combined with the letter for the suffix meaning “their” (ם) together make up the sound, “*tam*”



(תם). Taken as a separate word that means, “quiet,” “simple,” or “pure”—and is a word that the Torah once used to describe Ya’akov. So now we have Esav, *ish sa’ir*, the hairy man (or the goat man), and Ya’akov, *ish tam*, the quiet man (or the pure man). Read into the verse in our *parashah*, it means that the goat that goes to Azazel will carry off the sins of the “pure” man (an ironic usage)—that is, the sins of Ya’akov, which now means all sins of Israel. And that is just what this goat in the Yom Kippur ritual does.¹

Those linguistic connections might awaken us to a larger parallel between the scene of blessing theft in Genesis and the Avodah service of Yom Kippur. For both settings involve a selection between two fates, one of which leads to God, and the other away from the covenantal community.

How, then, do we read that connection into our understanding of the Yom Kippur Avodah? If one of the goats represents Esav, then the other surely represents his twin brother Ya’akov. Just as Ya’akov once secured the covenant with God, the goat that is selected to be dedicated to God (לה') represents the continuation of that covenant

Where does the other one, “Esav’s goat,” go? It is, remember, strangely designated “to Azazel” (לעזאזל). But what (or who) is Azazel? Rashi tells us it was the name of a place, “ארץ גזרה - a jagged land.” But the name has unsettled our commentators, because it sounds eerily like a foreign God; the word itself could be read to mean “powerful (*az*) god (*el*).” But whose god

¹ There is one other prominent usage of the word שעיר in the Torah (though vowelized slightly differently). It is the name of a place, “ארץ שעיר - the Land of Seir,” where Esav eventually makes his home: “וַיָּשֶׁב עִשָּׂו בְּהַר שְׁעִיר” - Esav settled on Mount **Se’ir**” (Genesis 36:8). Esav, who was described as an *ish sa’ir*, literally became a man of Se’ir. Indeed, the Book of Genesis makes mention Esav’s association with the land of Se’ir no less than eight times. The Torah goes out of its way to emphasize Esav’s association with Se’ir, which itself echoes the original description of him as an *Ish sa’ir*. So by the time we come to the Book of Leviticus and begin reading about offerings of *se’irim* (some kind of goat demon; see below), perhaps we are already, somewhere in our minds, beginning to think of Esav. Then, when we come to the unusual Yom Kippur ritual that features **two** male goats, “שני שעירי עזים - *shenei se’irei izzim*,” in that short phrase we have two references back to the earlier scene in Genesis: the two goats, *shenei izzim*, that won the blessing, and the goat man, *ish sa’ir*, who lost it.



would that be? With all this talk of goats (“עִזִּים - *izzim*”) perhaps we will notice that the word, Azazel (עֲזָאזֵל), also functions as kind of visual pun, for it looks like it might mean, “the goat god.”

The mention of goat gods brings us to one final meaning of the word we have been tracking all along, שַׁעִיר, that comes just a chapter later in our *parashah*:²

ויקרא יז:

וְלֹא יִזְבְּחוּ עוֹד אֶת־זִבְחֵיהֶם לְשַׁעִירִם אֲשֶׁר הֵם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה זֹאת לָהֶם לְדֹרֹתָם.

Leviticus 17:7

And they [the Israelites] must no longer make sacrifices to the *se'irim* that they lust after—that is a fixed law for them, throughout the generations.

Se'irim here means more than goats, but something like “satyrs,” or “goat-demons,” as it has sometimes been translated. It seems to be a reference to one of the local deities, a kind of ancient near eastern version of Pan or Baphomet. The idea of goat-worship was clearly known to the Israelites—they had even, somewhere in their checkered past, fallen prey to it.

So they would recognize that if one goat represented their own bond to God—one that was promised to them eternally, despite their sins, and despite the sins of their “quiet” forefather—then the other goat represented the brother, and then the nations, that were not selected by God and wandered off, instead, down the path to idolatry.

² It is the Ibn Ezra who provides us with this connection, albeit in his mischievous, cryptic way. He writes: “And if you were able to understand the secret of the word, 'Azazel,' you would know its secret, and the secret of the name, because it has parallels in the Bible. And I will reveal to you a bit of the secret with this hint: 'When you are 33 years old, you will know it.'” The Ramban reveals what the Ibn Ezra means by that hint, with some mischievousness of his own: “R. Abraham [Ibn Ezra], faithful of spirit, covered up this matter. But I am a gossip, so I will reveal his secret.” The verse about the *se'irim* in chapter 17, it turns out, comes 33 verses after the first mention of Azazel.



However—and this is the critical thing about the Yom Kippur ritual—the two goats are selected for their two very different fates **at random**. The Mishnah (Yoma 6:1) tells us they were supposed to be nearly identical beforehand, equal in size and in value—interchangeable. Then two lots are drawn, and now one is dedicated to God and one is off in the wilderness, following after false deities. One of these creatures has been chosen and one has not.

On happier festivals, we often celebrate our chosenness by God. But the Yom Kippur ritual, with its strange reliance on chance, reminds us that our chosenness was not necessarily deserved.³ And the linguistic echoes that take us back to the first selection of Ya'akov over Esav force us to wonder if, in fact, our chosenness is **undeserved**. It was Ya'akov who actually sinned, but Esav who—like his goat—bears the burden. No wonder we seek atonement on this day.

The Yom Kippur Avodah is thus meant both to celebrate our gratitude for the covenant, **and** to keep us humble as we contemplate it. We are to remind ourselves, every year, that we are not deserving, but fortunate to have been chosen. But for a simple twist of fate, we might well have been off in some jagged land, worshiping goats.

³ My colleague, R. Micha'el Rosenberg makes this point quite elegantly in his essay, "Yitzhak and Yishmael: The Arbitrariness of Our Fate," available here:

<https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/yitzhak-and-yishmael-arbitrariness-our-fate>. He writes: "The Temple ritual of Yom Kippur, then—the exiling of a goat **selected by lot** to be excluded, and the inverse selection of an identical animal to be God's choice—demands that we come to terms with the very arbitrariness that has brought us to this moment, for better or worse."

I should note that R. Hutner himself draws a very different conclusion from the similarity of the two brothers and goats: "כשאנו מבחינים בהבדל הנמצא בין שני עינים דומים בחיצוניותם – כי אז על כרחך כי ההבדל הניתן בהם שריו הוא בפנימיותם. ככל אשר תרבינה השכבות העליונות אשר בהם שולט הדמיון; כן לעמת זה, להתברר לפנינו עומק מקומה של נקודת ההבדלה."

