



“Aharon shall place lots upon the two he-goats” A Novel Interpretation regarding the Atonement Afforded by the Two He-goats Based on the Incredible Explanation of the Meshech Chochmah

In honor of Yom HaKippurim, which approaches auspiciously, it is fitting that we examine the sacred avodah performed by the Kohen Gadol involving the two “se’irim”—he-goats. One was designated for Hashem, and one was designated for Azazel, as described in the Torah in parshas Acharei Mot (Vayikra 16, 5):

”ומאת עדת בני ישראל יקח שני שעירי עזים לחטאת... ולקח את שני השעירים והעמיד אותם לפני ה' פתח אהל מועד, ונתן אהרן על שני השעירים גורלות גורל אחד לה' וגורל אחד לעזאזל, והקריב אהרן את השעיר אשר עלה עליו הגורל לה' ועשהו חטאת, והשעיר אשר עלה עליו הגורל לעזאזל יעמד חי לפני ה' לכפר עליו לשלח אותו לעזאזל המדברה”

—from the assembly of Bnei Yisrael, he shall take two he-goats for a sin-offering . . . He shall take the two he-goats and stand them before Hashem at the entrance to the Ohel Moed. Aharon shall place lots on the two he-goats — one lot for Hashem and one lot for Azazel. Aharon shall bring near the he-goat designated by the lot for Hashem and make it a sin-offering; and the he-goat designated by the lot for Azazel, shall be stood alive before Hashem to provide atonement through it, to be sent to Azazel to the Wilderness.

It is essential that we comprehend the significance of the two “se’irim” that HKB”H commanded us to bring on Yom HaKippurim—one “for Hashem” and one “for Azazel.” Unfortunately, we no longer have a Beis HaMikdash, due to our countless sins, and, as a consequence, we no longer have a Kohen Gadol actually performing the Yom Kippur service involving the two he-goats. Nevertheless, the two se’irim teach us an important lesson that is relevant even today. Clearly, we only perform this service today tangentially by reciting the appropriate passages found in our machzorim, in keeping with the dictum found in Hoshea (14, 3): “ונשלמה פרים” —and let our lips substitute for bulls.

It is fitting, therefore, that we examine the “avodah” performed by the Kohen Gadol involving the two he-goats as “chatas” offerings—one designated for Hashem and one designated for Azazel. The latter is commonly referred to as “שעיר המשתלח”—“the he-goat that is sent away.” It is especially worthwhile for us to examine the function of the “שעיר המשתלח” that afforded atonement for all transgressions—from the most minor to the most major. The Mishnah expresses this fact as follows (Shevuos 2b): “על שאר עבירות שבתורה, הקלות והחמורות, הזדונות והשגגות, הודע ולא הודע, —עשה ולא תעשה, כרתות ומיתות בית דין, שעיר המשתלח מכפר” —for all other transgressions mentioned in the Torah, whether they are minor or major, deliberate transgressions or unwitting ones, whether he became aware or did not become aware, positive commandments or prohibitions, those punishable by “karet” and those punishable by a court-imposed death penalty, the “he-goat sent away” (to Azazel) atones.

A Tall Mountain and a Deep Abyss Separate the Two He-goats

It is apparent from the pesukim that follow that the purpose of both he-goats is to afford Yisrael atonement for their sins and iniquities. After all, the Torah refers to them as “two he-goats for a chatas-offering.” Notwithstanding, they are separated by a tall mountain and a deep abyss. For, the he-goat designated “for Hashem” was sacrificed by the Kohen Gadol on the mizbeiach, and its blood was sprinkled in the Kodosh HaKodashim. This is described in the following pesukim (ibid. 15): “ושחט את שעיר החטאת אשר לעם והביא את דמו אל מבית לפרוכת... והזה אותו על הכפורת ולפני הכפורת, —he shall slaughter the chatas he-goat of the people and bring its blood within the Parochet (the curtain between the

whenever I shall make an accounting of Yisrael's sins against them, I will hold them accountable to some small degree for this sin along with the other sins; there is no punishment that comes upon Yisrael which does not have in it some retribution for the sin of the eigel. Therefore, the Kohen Gadol is prohibited from performing the avodah in the Kodesh HaKodashim in the golden garments, so as not to evoke the memory of the "cheit ha'eigel," that is recalled in every generation.

In truth, it is vital that we recognize that just as the "cheit ha'eigel" resurfaces in every generation; so, too, does the sin of "mechiras Yosef"—the selling of Yosef. The latter sin stemmed from brotherly hatred, as explained in the Midrash Shochar Tov (Mishlei 1): "אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי, לא נמשכו עשרה הרוגי מלכות אלא בחטא מכירתו של יוסף. רבי אבין אומר, בכל דור עדיין החטא קיים"—according to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, the ten martyrs were killed as retribution for the sin of "mechiras Yosef"; Rabbi Avin adds that a taint of that sin remains in every generation.

Cheit HaEigel Was between Man and G-d the Sin of Mechiras Yosef Was between Man and His Fellow Man

The Gemara (Berachos 7a) poses a contradiction between two pesukim. One passuk states (Shemos 20, 5): "פוקד עון—**Who visits the sin of fathers upon children;** while another passuk states (Devarim 24, 16): "ובנים לא יומתו—**and sons shall not be put to death because of fathers.** They answer: "הא כשאוחזין מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם"—the first passuk refers to when the sons continue in the evil ways of their fathers; hence, HKB"H visits the sin of the fathers upon the sons; «הא כשאין אוחזין מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם»—the second passuk refers to when the sons abandon the sinful practices of their fathers; in this situation, HKB"H does not put children to death on account of their fathers' sins.

Thus, we learn an important principle. When Yisrael are guilty of a sin between man and G-d, chas v'shalom, the "cheit ha'eigel"—the prototype of sins between man and G-d—resurfaces. When Yisrael are guilty of sins between man and his fellow man, chas v'shalom, the sin of "mechiras Yosef"—the prototype of sins between man and his fellow man -- resurfaces. These two sins— "cheit ha'eigel" and the sin of "mechiras Yosef"—encompass the sphere of all transgressions. For all transgressions can be categorized either as "between man and G-d" or "between man and his fellow man."

Now, on Yom Kippur, HKB"H commanded us to provide atonement for both of these categories of sins. We must attain atonement for the "cheit ha'eigel"—the prototype of

sins "bein adam laMakom"—and for the sin of "mechiras Yosef"—the prototype of sins "bein adam l'chaveiro." Accordingly, we find the following teaching in the Mishnah (Yoma 85b): "עבירות שבין אדם למקום יום הכיפורים מכפר, עבירות שבין אדם לאדם—**לחבירו אין יום הכיפורים מכפר עד שירצה את חבירו**"—**sins between man and G-d, Yom Kippur atones for; sins between man and his fellow man, Yom Kippur does not atone for until he appeases his fellow man.**

Based on what we have discussed, the Meshech Chochmah explains magnificently that which we have learned in the Gemara (Yoma 42a): The string that was tied between the horns of the "he-goat that was sent away" weighed two selas. He refers to the following teaching in the Gemara (Shabbas 10b): "לעולם אל ישנה אדם בנו בין הבנים, שבשכיל משקל שני סלעים מילת שנתן יעקב ליוסף יותר משאר בניו נתקנאו בו אחיו, ונתגלגל הדבר וירדו—**a person should never treat one son differently than his other sons; for on account of two selas weight of fine wool that Yaakov gave Yosef in excess of his other sons** (the "Kestones passim," striped tunic), **his brothers became jealous of him, and the matter evolved such that our forefathers descended to Mitzrayim.** This then is the reason they tied a string weighing two selas onto the dispatched he-goat; it was intended to atone for the sin of "mechiras Yosef," which was precipitated by two selas.

Atonement Took Place in the Portion of Binyamin Who Was Not a Participant in the Selling of Yosef

Following this line of reasoning, the Meshech Chochmah continues his magnificent explanation. The most crucial part of the Kohen Gadol's avodah on Yom Kippur took place in the Heichal and in the Kodesh HaKodashim. On the mizbeiach located in the Heichal, he sacrificed the special korbanos of the day. In the inner sanctum, he burned the incense, the Ketores.

Now, we have learned in the Gemara (Yoma 12a): "תניא מה היה בחלקו של יהודה, הר הבית הלשכות והעזרות, ומה היה בחלקו של בנימין, מה היה בחלקו של יהודה, הר הבית הלשכות והעזרות, ומה היה בחלקו של בנימין, **it was taught in a Baraisa: Which parts of the Temple were in the portion of Yehudah? The Temple-mount, the chambers, and the courtyards. And which parts of the Temple were in the portion of Binyamin? The antechamber ("oolahm"), the Heichal, and the chamber of the Kodesh HaKodashim.** Consequently, the Kohen Gadol could only achieve atonement for Yisrael in the Heichal and the Kodesh HaKodashim, which were located in the portion of Binyamin—for he played no part in the sin of "mechiras Yosef." The "azarah"—the courtyard—however, was located

in the portion of Yehudah, who advised his brothers to sell Yosef. Therefore, atonement could not be sought there; for, as we know, the prosecutor cannot become an advocate. This matter is discussed in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 6b):

”רבי מאיר אומר לא נאמר בוצע אלא כנגד יהודה, שנאמר ויאמר יהודה אל אחיו מה בצע כי נהרוג את אחינו, וכל המברך את יהודה הרי זה מנאץ, ועל זה נאמר ובוצע ברך ניאץ ה”

—Rabbi Meir says: A “compromiser” was only said with regards to Yehudah, as it is stated (Bereishis 37, 26): “And Yehudah said to his brothers, ‘What gain will there be if we kill our brother?’” And anyone who praises Yehudah is considered a blasphemer; concerning such a person, it is stated (Tehillim 10, 3): “One who praises a compromiser (Yehudah) has blasphemed Hashem.” Rashi comments: He should have said, “Let us return him to our father”—seeing as his brothers heeded his words.

The Meshech Chochmah substantiates his point by referring to an alarming passage in the Sifri (Zos HaBerachah):

”מפני מה זכה בנימן שתשרה שכינה בחלקו, כל השבטים היו במכירתו של יוסף ובנימן לא היה במכירתו של יוסף. אמר הקב”ה, אני אומר לאלו שיבנו בית הבחירה, לא כשיהיו מתפללים לפני, איני מבקש עליהם רחמים, איני משרה שכינתי בחלקם, שלא היו רחמנים על אחיהם.”

Why did Binyamin merit that the Shechinah should dwell in his portion? All of the other shevatim participated in the selling of Yosef; but Binyamin was not involved in the sale of Yosef. HKB”H said: “If I tell these to build the Temple, won’t I want to show them mercy when they pray before Me?! Instead, I will not have My Shechinah dwell in their portion, because they did not show their brother mercy.”

We now have cause to be elated, for we can finally comprehend the formula that we recite in the Yom Kippur tefilah: **”כי אתה סלחן לישראל ומחלן לשבטי ישורון בכל דור ודור: —for you are the Forgiver of Yisrael and the Pardoner of the tribes of Yeshurun in every generation.** Here are the sacred words of the Meshech Chochmah:

וזו שאמרו, כי אתה סלחן לישראל, היינו על כל החטאים שבין אדם למקום, שהרושם הוא משורש העגל, שנאמר (שמות לב-ד) אלה אלקיך ישראל, ושם נאמר סלחתי כדבריך, ומחלן לשבטי ישורון, הוא על חטאים שבין אדם לחבירו, ששורש שלהן הוא מחטא מכירת יוסף שחטאו שבטי ישורון.”

The phrase **”סלחן לישראל—Forgiver of Yisrael—**relates to all sins “between man and G-d”— “bein adam laMakom.” Those sins are influenced by the seminal sin involving the “eigel.” In relation to that sin, it states (Bamidbar 14, 20): **”סלחתי כדבריך—I have forgiven in**

accordance with your words. The phrase **”מחלן לשבטי ישורון—Pardoner of the tribes of Yeshurun—**relates to sins “between man and his fellow man”—“bein adam l’chaveiro—which stem from the sin of “mechiras Yosef,” perpetrated by the tribes of Yeshurun.

The He-goat to Hashem Atones for Sins “Bein Adam LaMakom” the Dispatched He-goat Atones for Sins “Bein Adam L’Chaveiro”

As a loyal servant in the presence of his master, I was struck by a wonderful idea, which can be insinuated from what the Meshech Chochmah wrote. For, based on his magnificent insight, we can suggest a wonderful explanation for the matter of the two he-goats—“se’irim.” As we have learned, HKB”H commanded that both be brought as “chatas-offerings.” The one “to Hashem” was sacrificed on the mizbeiach, and its blood was sprinkled before the “Kaporet” in the Kodosh HaKodashim. The one “to Azazel” was dispatched into the midbar.

We already asked why HKB”H commanded that two he-goats be brought. Why didn’t the one chatas “to Hashem” suffice to atone for all of Yisrael’s transgressions? Yet, according to what we have learned from the Meshech Chochmah, it is incredible! From the very onset, HKB”H delegated the atonement for Yisrael’s sins to two distinct “chatas” he-goats. For, the he-goat designated “to Hashem” was aimed at atoning for sins “between man and G-d”; whereas the he-goat “to Azazel” was aimed at atoning for sins “between man and his fellow man.”

This explains very nicely why the Kohen Gadol sacrificed the he-goat “to Hashem” on the mizbeiach and sprinkled its blood in the Kodosh HaKodashim—where HKB”H’s Shechinah dwells. As explained, its purpose was to atone for transgressions “bein adam laMakom.” Therefore, it was fitting that a gift be presented to HKB”H in the dwelling place of His Shechinah, and to ask for mercy and forgiveness for having sinned against Him.

In contrast, the he-goat “to Azazel” came to atone for sins “bein adam l’chaveiro.” It would have been inappropriate to sacrifice it in the Heichal and to sprinkle its blood in the Kodosh HaKodashim; for those structures were located in the portion of Binyamin, who was not involved in the selling of Yosef. Therefore, it was not possible to bring an atonement for the sin of “mechiras Yosef” there. For, instead of rachamim—divine mercy—the attribute of “din” would have been triggered, due to the fact that the brothers were unwilling to show Yosef mercy.

Accordingly, HKB”H commanded that it not be sacrificed in the Beis HaMikdash, in the portion of Binyamin; rather, He commanded that it be sent to Azazel in the midbar. For brotherly hatred does not belong in a holy place; it should be relegated to the desolate wilderness. This coincides wonderfully with the words of the Meshech Chochmah. As he explains, the reason they tied a strip weighing two selas to the he-goat was to atone for the sin of “mechiras Yosef”—which was provoked by the striped tunic Yaakov made for Yosef out of two selas of fine wool.

In this manner, we can also comprehend why HKB”H commanded that the dispatched he-goat be tumbled down a high cliff, as described in the aforementioned Mishnah: **“He would push it backwards, and it would tumble down, and it would not reach halfway down the mountain before it was torn limb from limb.”** This ceremonial act alludes to the fact that all sins “bein adam l’chaveiro” stem from the human trait of haughtiness—where a person sees himself as being superior to others, like a tall mountain. This notion is conveyed by the following Gemara (Sotah 5a): אמר רבי יוסף, לעולם ילמד אדם מדעת קונו, שהרי הקב”ה הניח כל הרים וגבעות והשרה שכינתו על יוסף—**Rabbi Yosef said: A person should always learn from the “da’as” of his Maker; for HKB”H passed over the taller mountains and hills and rested His Shechinah on Har Sinai.** Therefore, the designated person pushed the he-goat down the mountain, causing it to be torn apart limb from limb. This was meant to teach us that the quality of haughtiness destroys all that is good in a human being.

Sins “Bein Adam L’Chaveiro” Are the Source of Sins “Bein Adam LaMakom”

Nevertheless, we find an apparent contradiction to this crucial concept. In the Mishnah cited above (Shevuos 2b), we learned that the dispatched he-goat atoned for all sorts of transgressions: **“Whether they are minor or major, deliberate transgressions or unwitting ones, whether he became aware or did not become aware, positive commandments or prohibitions, those punishable by “karet” and those punishable by a court-imposed death penalty.”** So, how does this accord with our contention that the “he-goat sent away” atones primarily for sins between man and his fellow man? Let us explain. The characteristic of haughtiness and arrogance— “ga’avah”—which is the root of all sins “bein adam l’chaveiro,” is also the root of all sins “bein adam laMakom.” In Sha’arei Kedushah (2, 4), Rabbi Chaim Vital writes the following, which should rattle us to our inner cores:

“הגאווה היא שורש להרבה עבירות, אם בין אדם למקום ואם בין אדם לחבירו, כי גורם להזיק לחבירו ולשנאתו ולדבר לשון הרע עליו, וכאלה רבות, ואם בינו למקום, שכן כתיב ורם לבבך ושכחת את ה’ אלקיך, ואמרו רבותינו ז”ל כל שיש בו גסות הרוח נקרא תועבה, שנאמר תועבת ה’ כל גבה לב”.

“Ga’avah” is the root of many aveiros—whether they be between man and G-d or between man and his fellow man. For, it causes a person to harm his neighbor, to hate him, to speak ill of him (“lashon hara”), and do many other similar things. Regarding the category “between man and G-d,” it is written (Devarim 8, 14): “And your heart will become haughty, and you will forget Hashem, you G-d.” Our Rabbis of blessed memory said (Sotah 5a): “Anyone who is haughty is referred to as an abomination, as is states (Mishlei 16, 5): ‘Every haughty heart is an abomination of Hashem.’”

So, while it is true that the he-goat “to Hashem,” sacrificed in the Beis HaMikdash, was a korban atoning for all transgressions falling into the category of “bein adam laMakom”; nevertheless, until a korban was brought to atone for the transgressions “bein adam l’chaveiro,” the tikun for aveiros “between man and G-d” could not be accomplished. For, one could very easily backslide and violate all of the precepts of the Torah, chas v’shalom. Therefore, in His infinite wisdom, HKB”H commanded that two “se’irim” be brought. Although the he-goat “to Hashem” atoned for aveiros “between man and G-d,” it could not accomplish this goal without a concomitant atonement for aveiros “between man and his fellow man.” For this purpose, HKB”H commanded Yisrael to bring a he-goat “to Azazel.” It was pushed down the side of a tall mountain; its limbs were shattered in the process, alluding to the shattering of the human trait of “ga’avah.” Only then did Yisrael merit atonement for all of the major transgressions.

It is with great pleasure that we can now comprehend why HKB”H commanded the following only with regards to the dispatched he-goat: **“Aharon shall lean his two hands upon the head of the living he-goat and confess upon it all the iniquities of Bnei Yisrael, and all their rebellious sins among all their sins.”** For, only Aharon HaKohen, who lacked any trace of “ga’avah,” was suitable to perform this ceremony. HKB”H Himself attests to Aharon’s lack of “ga’avah” when He says to Moshe (Shemos 4, 14): **“וראך ושמה בלבן”—and he will see you and he will rejoice in his heart.** Rashi comments: **It is not as you (Moshe) think, that he (Aharon) will resent you, because you are rising to greatness.**

Additionally, we find the following testimonial regarding Aharon's character from Hillel HaNasi (Avos 1, 12): "הלל אומר: הווי מתלמידיו של אהרן, אוהב שלום ורודף שלום, אוהב את הבריות ומקרבן לתורה—**Hillel says: Be among the disciples of Aharon—love peace and promote peace, love your fellow creatures, and bring them closer to Torah.** Therefore, it was fitting for him to be the one to lean with his two holy hands on the head of the "he-goat to be sent away." For, that he-goat was meant to atone for the aveiros "between man and his fellow man"—emblematic of the opposite of peace ("shalom") and which stem from the trait of "ga'avah."

The Reason the Two He-goats Had to Be Equal in All Aspects

In this manner, let us rise to the occasion and explain the curious fact we learned in the Mishnah: "שני שעירי יום הכפורים—מצוותן שיהיו שווין במראה ובקומה ובדמים ובלקיהתן כאחד—**regarding the two he-goats of Yom Kippur, their mitzvah is that they be alike in appearance, in height, in value, and in their simultaneous purchase.** We shall refer to what the great Chafetz Chaim writes in Shemiras HaLashon (Part 2, Chapter 27). He addresses that which is written in parshas Ki Sisa (ibid. 31, 18): "ויתן אל משה ככלותו לדבר אתו בהר סיני שני לחת: **he gave to Moshe, when He finished speaking with him on Har Sinai, the two Tablets of the Testimony, stone tablets inscribed by the finger of G-d.** Rashi explains: **The plural word "לחת" is written defectively** (without the letter "vav," as if it was in the singular), **because both (tablets) were equal.** The source for this comment is the Midrash (S.R. 41, 6): "לחת כתיב מזוז" לא זו גדולה מזוז"—the defective spelling indicates that neither tablet was bigger than the other.

He refers to the commentary of the Ramban on parshas Yisro (ibid. 20, 13), where he explains that the two "luchos" were divided up into two sets. The first set of five commandments, which were inscribed on the first tablet, consisted of mitzvos "bein adam laMakom": "לא", "אנכי ה' אלקיך", "יהיה לך אלהים אחרים", "לא תשא את שם ה' אלקיך לשוא", "זכור את יום השבת לקדשו",

"כבד את אביך ואת אמך"—such as **"I am Hashem, your G-d,"** and **"You shall not bear the name of Hashem, your G-d, in vain."** In contrast, the set of five commandments inscribed on the second tablet consisted entirely of mitzvos "bein adam l'chaveiro": "לא תרצח", "לא תגנוב", "לא תנאף", "לא תענה ברעך", "לא תחמוד בית רעך"—such as **"You shall not kill"** and **"You shall not commit adultery."**

Now, there are people who are meticulous regarding the mitzvos of the right tablet. They observe the mitzvos "bein adam laMakom" to an extreme degree. On the other hand, they are lax in their observance of the mitzvos on the left tablet—the mitzvos "bein adam l'chaveiro." For instance, they are not careful with regards to "lashon hara," or they are not scrupulous in money matters. Conversely, there are people who are very careful in their observance of mitzvos "bein adam l'chaveiro." They give tzedakah generously and are always willing to aid anyone in need. Yet, these very same people are careless with regards to their observance of mitzvos "bein adam laMakom." Therefore, "לחת אבן" is written in the singular indicating that both sets are to be observed equally, without any difference or bias.

At this point, it is fitting to add a wonderful allusion from the great Rabbi of Komarna, zy"l, in Zohar Chai (Shemos, Part 2, page 164). He writes that the numerical value of the mitzvah to love Hashem (Devarim 6, 4): "ואהב"ת א"ת הויה" is exactly equal to the numerical value of the mitzvah to love Yisrael (Vayikra 19, 18): "ואהב"ת לרעך כמוך אגוי הויה". This teaches us that we should not differentiate between the love of Hashem—mitzvos "bein adam laMakom"—and love of Yisrael—mitzvos "bein adam l'chaveiro."

So, it is precisely for this reason that: **"Regarding the two he-goats of Yom Kippur, their mitzvah is that they be alike in appearance, in height, in value, and in their simultaneous purchase."** This peculiar requirement teaches us that there is no difference whatsoever between the he-goat "to Hashem" atoning for mitzvos "bein adam laMakom" and the he-goat sent away atoning for mitzvos "bein adam l'chaveiro." In the eyes of HKB"Y, the two are equal.

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