

# Why is the Goat Sent to Azazel?

## Introduction

### Who or What is Azazel?

Vayikra 16 describes at length the rituals of Yom HaKippurim. Among the various rites and sacrifices which come to atone for and purify the nation, one in particular stands out, the offering to Azazel:

(ה) וּמֵאֵת עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יִקַּח שְׁנֵי שְׁעִירֵי עִזִּים לְחֻטָּאת... (ז)  
וְלָקַח אֶת שְׁנֵי הַשְּׁעִירִים וְהֶעֱמִיד אֹתָם לִפְנֵי ה' פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד.  
(ח) וַנִּתֵּן אֶהָרֹן עַל שְׁנֵי הַשְּׁעִירִים גִּרְלוֹת גּוֹרֵל אֶחָד לַה' וְגּוֹרֵל אֶחָד  
לְעִזָּאֵל. (ט) וְהִקְרִיב אֶהָרֹן אֶת הַשְּׁעִיר אֲשֶׁר עָלָה עָלָיו הַגּוֹרֵל לַה'  
וַעֲשָׂהוּ חֻטָּאת. (י) וְהַשְּׁעִיר אֲשֶׁר עָלָה עָלָיו הַגּוֹרֵל לְעִזָּאֵל יַעֲמֵד  
חַי לִפְנֵי ה' לְכַפֵּר עָלָיו לְשַׁלַּח אֹתוֹ לְעִזָּאֵל הַמִּדְבָּרָה.

(5) And from the congregation of the Children of Israel he shall take two goats for a sin-offering... (7) And he shall take the two goats, and set them before Hashem, at the opening of the tent of meeting. (8) And Aharon shall cast lots on the two goats, one lot for Hashem and one lot for Azazel. (9) And Aharon shall bring forth the goat upon which Hashem's lot fell, and make it a sin-offering. (10) And the goat upon which Azazel's lot fell, shall stand alive before Hashem, to atone for him, to send it away to Azazel into the wilderness.

This procedure raises many puzzles, of which the first and foremost is the identity of "עִזָּאֵל" (Azazel).<sup>1</sup> To whom or where is the goat being sent? In verse 8, Azazel is juxtaposed with Hashem, suggesting that it might similarly be a proper noun, referring to a specific supernatural being. Verse 10, though, states that the goat is sent to the wilderness, perhaps implying instead that Azazel is a geographic location.<sup>2</sup> Either way, it is unclear why the goat is being sent away. If Azazel is some heavenly power, what purpose is served by offering him a goat? Moreover, does the Torah not prohibit offering a sacrifice to anyone other than Hashem?<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, if Azazel is a location, what is unique about this offering that permits it to be sent outside the confines of the Mikdash?<sup>4</sup>

### Dead or Alive?

A second ambiguity relates to the fate of the goat. The Torah repeatedly refers to it as "הַשְּׁעִיר הַחַי"<sup>5</sup> and speaks of it merely being sent away<sup>6</sup> rather than ritually slaughtered or killed. As such, this ritual would find a close parallel in the leprosy purification process described only two chapters earlier in Vayikra 14. There, the Torah similarly mandates the bringing of two birds,<sup>7</sup> one of which is slaughtered while the



second is set free.<sup>8</sup> Rabbinic tradition, however, dictates that the Azazel goat is to be thrown off a cliff.<sup>9</sup> What leads the Rabbis to adopt this position, and how can it be squared with the plain reading of the Biblical verses? Additionally, if the goat is indeed killed, does it have the status of a sacrifice?<sup>10</sup>

## Transfer of Sins

The verses of 16:21-22 speak of placing the nation's sins on the head of the goat so that it can carry them away to an "אֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה":

(כא) וְסָמַךְ אַהֲרֹן אֶת שְׁתֵּי יָדָיו עַל רֹאשׁ הַשְּׁעִיר הַחַי וְהִתְוֹדָה עָלָיו אֶת כָּל עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת כָּל פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל חַטָּאתָם וְנָתַן אֹתָם עַל רֹאשׁ הַשְּׁעִיר וְשָׁלַח בְּיַד אִישׁ עֵתִי הַמִּדְבָּרָה.  
(כב) וְנָשָׂא הַשְּׁעִיר עָלָיו אֶת כָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָם אֶל אֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה וְשָׁלַח אֶת הַשְּׁעִיר בַּמִּדְבָּר.

(21) And Aharon shall place his two hands on the head of the living goat, and he shall confess upon it all of the iniquities of the Children of Israel and all of their transgressions in all of their sins, and he shall place them upon the head of the goat and send it away by the hand of of a ready man to the wilderness. (22) And the goat shall bear upon him all of their iniquities to an uninhabited land, and he shall release the goat in the wilderness.

What is the meaning of "אֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה", and why are the sins being sent there? Is there a literal transference of sin, or is this to be understood merely symbolically? What significance, if any, lies in the choice of specifically a goat ("שְׁעִיר")?<sup>11</sup> Finally, how does this ceremony work in tandem with the atonement achieved via the sprinkling of the blood of the goat sacrificed to Hashem (verses 15-19),<sup>12</sup> and how do both of these relate to the (presumed) need for the nation to actually repent from their sins?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Azazel appears nowhere else in Tanakh besides Vayikra 16.

<sup>2</sup> "מִדְבָּר" and "עֵתִי" are used interchangeably throughout the chapter to describe the address to which the goat was sent (see 16:21,22,26), and this might support their identification as one and the same place. Alternatively, one could argue that the phrase "לְעֵזְאֵל הַמִּדְבָּרָה" in 16:10 should be rendered as a being who dwelt in the wilderness, and that the use of both words together in the same phrase proves that they are not identical.

<sup>3</sup> The conducting of a lottery is a further anomalous departure from usual sacrificial rite, and this also requires explanation.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, in the very next chapter of Vayikra 17, the Torah specifically prohibits the offering of any sacrifice (and perhaps even the profane slaughtering of meat) outside the Mishkan.

<sup>5</sup> See verses 16:10, 20-21. Alternatively, this designation can simply be explained as a contrast to the goat offered to Hashem which is sacrificed immediately.

<sup>6</sup> See 16:21-22.

<sup>7</sup> This process applies to the purification of both a person (Vayikra 14:4-7) and a home (Vayikra 14:49-53).

<sup>8</sup> Our chapter's formulation of "וְשָׁלַח אֶת הַשְּׁעִיר בַּמִּדְבָּר" is also reminiscent of the language employed in Vayikra 14:7 (see also Vayikra 14:53) of "וְשָׁלַח אֶת הַצֹּפֶר הַסִּיּוֹה עַל פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה".

<sup>9</sup> See Mishna Yoma 6:6.

<sup>10</sup> Verse 5 appears to state that both goats are taken "לְחֻטָּאת", but subsequently (see verses 9,15,25,27) the term is used only to describe the first goat offered to Hashem and not the goat designated for Azazel.

<sup>11</sup> Goats are offered as atonement sacrifices in many other instances (see Vayikra 4:23,28, 5:6, 9:3, and Bemidbar 15:24,27). However, see above that it is unclear whether the Azazel goat is indeed a sacrifice.

<sup>12</sup> Both verse 16 (regarding the sacrificed goat) and verse 21 (regarding the Azazel goat) speak of the same "פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל חַטָּאתָם" of the nation, thus highlighting the question of the relationship between the purposes of the two goats.

<sup>13</sup> This question leads some commentators to circumscribe the effectiveness of the Azazel goat to only particular categories of sins. However, the Torah's language of "קָל עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֵת כָּל פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל" "קָל עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֵת כָּל פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל חַטָּאתָם" appears to be fairly inclusive.

# Why is the Goat Sent to Azazel?

## Exegetical Approaches

### Overview

The different approaches to understanding the ritual of the sending of a goat to Azazel reflect fundamentally diverging world outlooks. Mystics, like Ramban, identify Azazel as a demonic being which needs to be appeased before the Day of Atonement so as not harm Israel when they are being judged. Rationalists, uncomfortable with the notion that such supernatural powers exist or that a sacrifice might be offered to them, look for alternative explanations. Thus, Rambam attempts to view the action as being part of the regular sacrificial service of the day, which only for technical reasons occurs at a distance from the Mikdash.

Others view the rite more symbolically. Rashbam, looking to the leper's purification for inspiration, views it as a sending away of impurities, and Ralbag explains that this enables the nation to start afresh with a clean slate. Abarbanel looks more comprehensively at the ritual as a whole, seeing in the entire lottery a representation of the people's choice to turn to God or away from Him.

### Offering to a Demonic Being

The goat is sent as an offering to a supernatural power named Azazel. This approach subdivides regarding both the purpose of the offering and whether Azazel really exists:

#### Bribery or Punishment of an Actual Satanic Power

The goat is sent either as a bribe to the Satan so that he will not hinder Israel from performing the Day of Atonement purification rite, or as a punishment to the demonic power of Azael for continuously instigating sin in the world.<sup>1</sup>

**SOURCES:** Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer,<sup>2</sup> Bereshit Rabbati, Yalkut Shimoni, Ramban

**Meaning and identity of "אַזָּזֵל"** – All of these sources understand the word to be a proper name referring to a supernatural power. They likely assume that the theophoric "אֵל" ending parallels the names of other angelic beings, and that the full name connotes a fierce (זָז) godly power.<sup>3</sup> They differ, though, regarding the exact identity of this being:

- **The angel Azael** – Bereshit Rabbati and Yalkut Shimoni suggest that the name is a variation of Azael, one of the fallen angels (mentioned already in Enoch), who had relations with humans and incited man to sin by encouraging licentiousness.<sup>4</sup>
- **Demon ruling over the wilderness** – Ramban, in contrast, thinks Azazel refers to a demonic power who ruled over the wilderness and other desolate places. He relates him to the "שְׁעִירִים" mentioned in Vayikra 17:7 to which the nation used to sacrifice.<sup>5</sup>
- **Satan** – Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer views the name Azazel as merely an alias of Satan or Samael.

**Belief in demonic beings** – This approach assumes that there exist demonic powers with the ability to harm humans,<sup>6</sup> and that the Torah prohibits sacrificing to demons precisely because they exist.

**"לה" vs. "לעזאזל"** – One of the advantages of this position is that it reads these two terms as parallel, with each referring to the proper name of an addressee who is to receive one of the goats.

**Is the goat a sacrifice?** Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer appears to maintain that the Azazel goat is a sin-offering.<sup>7</sup> However, most of these sources, presumably motivated by a desire to avoid the possibility that one would be allowed to sacrifice to demonic or idolatrous beings, posit that the goat is not considered a sacrifice at all. According to Bereshit Rabbati and Yalkut Shimoni the sin-laden offering is instead a means of punishing Azazel, while Ramban emphasizes that the people are simply acting as Hashem's servants to present a gift from Him to one of his ruling officers, much like a king would send a servant to reward a loyal vassal.<sup>8</sup>

**Is the goat left alive or killed?** Although these sources do not say so explicitly, they could assert that the goat was sent alive to Azazel, as the simple understanding of the term "השעיר הדי" might indicate.

**Relationship to Rabbinic tradition** – Enoch, the earliest extant source which speaks of the fallen angel Azael, speaks of him being imprisoned in "the desert of Dudael" and being covered with "jagged and rough rocks". It is possible that the Mishna Yoma also preserves elements of a similar tradition in its identification of "בית חדודו" as the place where the goat was pushed down a mountain and dismembered.

**Transfer of sins?** Bereshit Rabbati and Yalkut Shimoni appear to understand that there is a literal transfer of sins. The booby-trapped goat carries the sins back to their originator, who is ultimately responsible for the entire world's transgressions.<sup>9</sup> According to Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer and Ramban, the goat carries away the sins so that the Satan will see a sin-free nation and have nothing to say against them.<sup>10</sup>

**Efficacy of a bribe** – R. Moshe Alshikh challenges the approach of Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, questioning both the legitimacy and utility of a bribe. He notes that either the nation does not deserve a punishment, in which case the prosecution of the Satan should have no effect regardless, or the nation does deserve a punishment in which case even the silence of the Satan should not protect them. If it did that would be a travesty of justice!<sup>11</sup>

**A punishment?** One might also question how giving more sins to some demonic being who encourages sin regardless, serves to punish him. Why would this being care?<sup>12</sup>

**"אֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה"** – The goat is sent to the barren wilderness since that is the abode of demonic beings.<sup>13</sup>

**Role in Atonement?** According to Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer and Ramban, the offering to Azazel plays a significant role in the nation's attainment of forgiveness, as it ensures that no one will prosecute them before Hashem.



## Concession to Erroneous Human Fears of an Imagined Force

The goat is sent as a gift to Azazel, despite the fact that such a being neither exists nor has any power. The ceremony is intended merely to calm the nation who erroneously believed that this demonic creature would contaminate the Mikdash, and thereby sabotage the purification accomplished through the rituals of the Day of Atonement.

SOURCES: Hoil Moshe

**Meaning of "עֶזְאֵזֶל"** – The Hoil Moshe understands it to be a proper name referring to an evil deity. He suggests that it might be a combination of the two words, "עַז" and "אֵזֶל", meaning one who walks<sup>14</sup> with strength and cruelty.

**Belief in demonic beings** – According to the Hoil Moshe, although no such beings exist, the people in the time of Moshe strongly believed that evil spirits ruled over the wilderness, as evidenced by their practice of sacrificing to such "שְׁעִירִים".<sup>15</sup>

**"לָהּ" vs. "לְעֶזְאֵל"** – The parallel language of these two terms is a key factor which leads the Hoil Moshe to conclude that "עֶזְאֵל" must refer to the name of the being receiving the goat and not to a place.

**Context** – Hoil Moshe connects the background of the ritual to the opening words of the chapter, "אֲחֵרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אֶהֱרָן", positing that the nation attributed Nadav and Avihu's death and the ensuing impurity in the Mikdash to the jealousy of Azazel. It was this that necessitated a purification of the Mikdash and led to the nation's fear that Azazel might act again if not appeased.

**Is the goat a sacrifice?** The nation viewed the goat as a sacrifice to this evil spirit.

**Is the goat left alive or killed?** The Hoil Moshe could explain that while initially the goat was set free in the wilderness like the simple reading of the verses, by the time of the second Beit HaMikdash, Chazal instituted that the goat be pushed off a cliff and break apart in order to make it clear that Azazel was only a figment of the imagination and that there was no need to sacrifice to him.<sup>16</sup>

**Transfer of sins?** The Hoil Moshe does not explain what role the transfer of sins plays in the ceremony nor whether this was an actual act or a symbolic one. It would seem to be unnecessary if the sole purpose of the goat is simply to serve as a bribe to ease the nation's fears.

**"אֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה"** – The goat is sent to the wilderness, where the nation believed that Azazel ruled.

**Biblical parallels** – The Hoil Moshe suggests that numerous commandments were given as a concession to the nation's erroneous beliefs or low spiritual level,<sup>17</sup> and he points to the Rambam's understanding of the institution of sacrifices<sup>18</sup> as a prime example.<sup>19</sup> The Hoil Moshe's claim, though, is much more radical. While Rambam asserts that a concession is made to wean the people away from idolatry, Hoil Moshe asserts that the law actually allows some form of it!

**Role in Atonement?** According to the Hoil Moshe, the ceremony plays no role in achieving atonement, not even in the minds of the nation. It is rather about maintaining the purity of the Mikdash. This reflects his understanding of the entire day's ritual as being a means of purifying the Temple.<sup>20</sup>



## Extra-Sanctuarial Sacrifice to Hashem

The Azazel goat is a full-fledged sin offering sacrificed to Hashem. Its unique meeting of its fate outside of the Mikdash is merely for technical reasons.

**SOURCES:** R. Saadia Gaon, Rambam, Sforno

**Meaning of "עֶזְאֵל"** – R. Saadia Gaon suggests that the word refers to a mountain,<sup>21</sup> pointing to the fact that other mountains also contain the superlative "אֵל" as part of their name.<sup>22</sup> He suggests that the word is formed from the root עוּז,<sup>23</sup> with both the doubling of the "ר"<sup>24</sup> and the ending "אֵל" acting as markers of emphasis to connote an extremely strong or hard place.<sup>25</sup>

## Why not in the Mikdash?

- **For the masses whose abode is outside** – R. Saadia maintains that each of the two goats in the ceremony provides sacrificial atonement for a different group of people. The first goat atones for the sins of the priests,<sup>26</sup> and is thus sacrificed in their abode of the Mikdash, while the second goat atones for the nation as a whole and is thus sacrificed outside of the sanctuary where the nation resides.<sup>27</sup>
- **Too contaminated** – Rambam and Sforno, in contrast, suggest that this sin offering which is laden with all of the sins of the entire nation is simply too contaminated to be brought into the purity of the Mikdash.<sup>28</sup> Due to its great impurity it is sacrificed as far away as possible.<sup>29</sup>

**Belief in demonic beings** – As rationalist philosophers, R. Saadia and Rambam deny the existence of demons and the like,<sup>30</sup> and thus reject the possibility that Azazel refers to such a creature.<sup>31</sup>

**"לֵה" vs. "לְעִזָּאזֵל"** – To maintain the parallelism between the two terms,<sup>32</sup> R. Saadia asserts that each refers to a place – the House of Hashem and the Mountain of Azazel.<sup>33</sup>

**Is the goat a sacrifice?** This position views the goat as a regular sin-offering.

**Is the goat left alive or killed?** According to this approach, since it is a sin-offering, it must die just like other sacrifices.

**Relationship to Rabbinic tradition** – This position matches the Rabbinic tradition that the goat is pushed off a cliff.

**Transfer of sins?** Both R. Saadia and Rambam, like those who adopt the symbolic approach below,<sup>34</sup> reject the idea that there is a literal transfer of sins. Rambam interprets the verse metaphorically, while R. Saadia offers a more creative reading of "וְנָשָׂא הַשָּׂעִיר עָלָיו אֶת כָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָם", suggesting that it is the man accompanying the goat (rather than the goat itself) who is subject of the verb "וְנָשָׂא".<sup>35</sup>

**"אֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה"** – According to Rambam, this refers to unsettled territory, a location which can withstand the impurity of the offering without fear of contaminating others.<sup>36</sup>

**Biblical parallels** – Rambam points to the fact that other sin offerings as well, such as those brought for the sins of the high priest or entire nation, are burnt outside the camp. In contrast to a burnt offering (עולה) whose fragrance is pleasing to Hashem, the smoke of the sin offering, representing the guilt of the nation, is offensive. The Azazel sin offering differs from others only in the quantity of the sins that it bears and thus in the distance it needs to travel away from the Mikdash.

**Role in Atonement?** The goat serves to atone like all of the other ritual acts of the day.



## Symbolic Act of Purification

The sending away of the goat is meant either to signify that the nation is being given a clean slate or to symbolize the fate of the sinner and thereby motivate the nation to repent:

### Scapegoat or Proxy

The sending off of the sin-laden goat represents the cleansing of the impurity or sins of the nation, and it enables the people to feel that they have been given a fresh start rather than remaining mired in sin.

**SOURCES:** Rashbam, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Ralbag, Shadal, R. D"Z Hoffmann

**Meaning of "עֲזָזֵל"** – All these commentators agree that the goat is sent to a place rather than to some metaphysical being, but they differ in their exact understanding of the term Azazel:

- **Goats** – Rashbam asserts that the word is related to עֲזִים. The animal is sent to the grazing land of goats, the wilderness. He suggests that the "ל" at the end of the word is superfluous and points to other words which similarly end with an extra letter after the main root.<sup>37</sup>
- **Hard land** – R. Yosef Bekhor Shor maintains that the word is comprised of two roots, "עֲז" and "אֵל", both meaning hard or strong.<sup>38</sup> He suggests that the term is parallel to "אֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה" and "מִדְבָּר", the harsh, barren place to which the goat is sent.
- **Destruction** – According to Shadal, the word was originally used to refer to some demonic being ("אֵל עֲז" - a fierce god) but was later borrowed by monotheists to refer to any great evil or destruction. R. D"Z Hoffmann similarly suggests that "עֲזָזֵל" refers to a place of destruction, but posits that the word עֲזָל means to distance and thus the noun refers to a distant place of desolation and loss.<sup>39</sup>

**Belief in demonic beings** – The commentators in this position likely have different views on this issue, with some believing and some opposing.

**"לֵה" vs. "לְעֲזָזֵל"** – R. D"Z Hoffmann asserts that the two terms are opposites, with Hashem symbolizing eternal life, and Azazel referring to complete destruction.

**Is the goat a sacrifice?** Most of these sources would likely suggest that the goat is not considered a sacrifice but merely a symbol.<sup>40</sup>

**Is the goat killed or left alive?**

- **Killed** – According to most of these commentators the goat is killed.<sup>41</sup> R"Y Bekhor Shor emphasizes that the sin-laden goat takes the place of the sinning nation, and is thus killed in their stead.<sup>42</sup> He maintains that the word "הַמִּשְׁלֵחַ" of verse 26 comes from the word שֵׁלַח or sword and refers to an executioner.<sup>43</sup>
- **Alive** – Rashbam maintains that the goat is sent while still alive into the wilderness.<sup>44</sup> Like the live bird in the purification ritual of the מצורע, the Azazel goat is sent away and not killed.<sup>45</sup>

**Relationship to Rabbinic tradition** – Shadal attempts to resolve the discrepancy between the simple reading of the verses (that the goat was sent away alive) and Rabbinic tradition. He explains that, in the generation of the wilderness, the goat was sent to a desolate area where it died on its own. However, when the people entered Israel and spread throughout the land, there were no longer such uninhabited areas,<sup>46</sup> and therefore Chazal instituted that the goat be sent to its death off a cliff so that it not wander back into civilization.<sup>47</sup>

**Transfer of sins?** Ralbag views this as symbolic and explains that such an act is needed by the people so that they can feel as if they are forgiven and cleansed of their sins. Otherwise people would feel burdened by their sins to the extent that they might become lax in their service of Hashem, thinking that they are lost and contaminated regardless.<sup>48</sup>

**"אֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה"** – The sins/impurity of the nation must be carried far away from the people and thus the goat is sent to this barren, unsettled land.

**Biblical parallels**

- **Purification of the מצורע** – Rashbam points to the similarities between this rite of purification and that of the leper described in Vayikra 14. In both cases, two animals are brought, one of which is



killed while the other is sent away alive.

- **Sale of Yosef** – Jubilees<sup>49</sup> connects this ritual to the story of the sale of Yosef. In both stories there is a כְּתוּנָה, a dipping in blood, abundant usage of the verb שָׁלַח, and a שְׂעִיר עִזִּים. Moreover, in both cases the animal functions as a scapegoat, taking the blame for another's sins.<sup>50</sup>

**Ancient Near Eastern parallels** – Both Hittite and Mesopotamian cultures have similar rites of transfer or disposal in which evil is transferred to another object / person and disposed of elsewhere. In some of these, the object is considered a substitution for the original and is meant to suffer the consequences of the evil in place of the original sinner.<sup>51</sup>

**Role in Atonement?** The ritual is meant to help the people repent by giving them hope and a new lease on life.



## Life's Choices

The lottery of the goats and their diverging fates represent the nation's choice to stand either with Hashem or against Him, and thus to remain on their land or be exiled.

**SOURCES:** Abarbanel #2, R. S"R Hirsch

**Meaning of "עֲזָאזֵל"** – Azazel is comprised of two separate words, "עָז" and "אֵזֵל" and means the one who is defiant will go.

**"לֵה" vs. "לְעֲזָאזֵל"** – According to this approach, the lottery is symbolic of man's choice to be "לֵה" (for Hashem) or to be "עָז פָּנִים" (against Him). Choosing Hashem involves sacrifice, but also affords the reward of coming close to Hashem, while choosing defiance results in exile.

**Is the goat a sacrifice?** This approach views the sending of the goat as a symbolic ritual rather than a sacrifice.

**Is the goat left alive or killed?** Abarbanel maintains that the goat is left alive, symbolic of the fact that even those who are exiled will eventually return, for the exile itself will atone for their sins.<sup>52</sup>

**Transfer of sins** – The placing of sins on the goat represents the idea that the nation's sins will come to haunt them as they go into exile.

**"אֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה"** – Abarbanel posits that this refers to a land which was decreed to be barren when Israel is destroyed.

**Role in Atonement?** The entire procedure is set up to force the nation to reflect on their actions and choices, and thus lead them to return to Hashem and thereby gain atonement for their past sins.

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<sup>1</sup> The first option is adopted by Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer and Ramban, while the latter approach is taken by Bereshit Rabbati and Yalkut Shimoni.

<sup>2</sup> The roots of the Midrash can be found already in the Book of Enoch, which speaks of fallen angels, amongst whom is a certain Azazel who brings warfare, jewelry, and lust into the world. He is punished by being cast into a rocky desert and the angel Rafael is told to "record all sins against him". Although the Book of Enoch does not explicitly mention the Day of Atonement, it is clearly alluding to its rituals. See About Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer for more on its relationship to Pseudepigraphic works.

In a fragment from the Dead Sea Scrolls, 4Q180, the same story appears, but with the name of the angel being Azazel, as in the Biblical text. See also the School of R. Yishmael in Bavli Yoma 67b who are likely referring to the same ancient tradition when they suggest that the Azazel goat comes to atone for the sins of Uza and Azael. That this approach continued to have both proponents and opponents through the Geonic era is clear from R. Saadia below (see also the sources cited in the notes below).

<sup>3</sup> Some argue that the "ר" which separates between the letters of the word "אֶזָּזֵל" in the Masoretic text makes this reading untenable (cf. R. Mubashir HaLevi below). Interestingly, both Megillat HaMikdash from Qumran (see column 26, line 13 in the scroll itself) and the Samaritan Pentateuch contain the spelling "עזזאל". The small orthographical difference here between the versions may reflect a fundamental theological dispute.

<sup>4</sup> See the note above for other earlier sources (including the Bavli Yoma 67b) which record this tradition.

<sup>5</sup> According to Ramban, as this power rules over destruction and war, he is also connected to Esav (= שְׂעִיר) whose inheritance was the sword, and to Mars, the star connected to bloodshed.

<sup>6</sup> Thus, the dispute between the mystical approach of Ramban and the rationalist perspective of Rambam (see his position below) over how to understand the Azazel goat ritual reflects a more general divergence in their world outlooks. Cf. Rambam Hilkhos Avodah Zarah 11:15 and Ramban Devarim 18:9.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, it inexplicably states that "גורלו של הב"ה לקרבן עולה וגורלו של עזאזל שְׂעִיר חטאת", seemingly explicitly contradicting Vayikra 16:9 which says that the goat in Hashem's lot was brought as a sin-offering. [R. David Luria in his commentary (p.111a) proposes to emend the text to "גורלו של הב"ה קרבן חטאת", though he notes that R. Bachya's version is like the printed editions. He also notes that the Arukh's (s.v. "עזא") citation of Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer does not contain the word "עולה".]

<sup>8</sup> Ramban points to the role of the lottery to support the idea that it is really Hashem who is giving the goat, not the people. The nation initially gives **Hashem** two goats, of which Hashem then chooses one to share with his servant Azazel.

<sup>9</sup> One could take this a step further and claim that the Torah is really mocking the pagan beliefs in the existence of these demons by sending Azazel an animal defiled with sins rather than a unblemished sacrifice.

<sup>10</sup> Considering that it is the angel who is receiving the sin-laden goat, this is somewhat counterintuitive. What better proof than it of the nation's iniquities? This question leads R. Yechezkel Sofer, in his article, "74-63: (תשע"א) 180 שמעתין", to suggest that what is loaded on the goat is actually the *forgiven* sins. He notes that though the goat is chosen towards the beginning of the ceremony, it is not sent until after all the other ritual acts have already achieved atonement for the nation. It is also possible that the goat is bearing the people's guilt or punishment (with "עֲוֹנוֹתָם" meaning guilt) rather than their sins which have already been expiated.

<sup>11</sup> He further argues that giving a bribe would only provide the Satan with more material with which to accuse the nation. This discomfort is likely what leads Ramban to view the goat as a gift from Hashem to his servant, rather than a bribe from the nation. Nevertheless, it is not clear what purpose such a gift is meant to serve, if regardless of it the Satan's words are not capable of swaying God's judgment. It is possible that according to Ramban, Hashem is keeping His servant happy so that he will not bring harm to the nation on his own. This, though, would assume that the angel has power to act against Hashem's will.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Philo who asserts that it is actually the curses and punishments which are being sent away. See Kayin's cry "גְּדוֹל עוֹנֵי מִן־שָׂא" in Bereshit 4:13 for another instance where the word "עוֹן" may mean punishment rather than sin.

<sup>13</sup> See Vayikra 17:7

<sup>14</sup> "אָזַל" means "to go" in Aramaic, and this meaning may be attested to also in Biblical Hebrew. See Shemuel I 9:7, Mishlei 20:14 and Iyyov 14:11.

<sup>15</sup> See Vayikra 17:7.

<sup>16</sup> The Hoil Moshe suggests that these laws were meant to evolve as the nation grew out of their beliefs: "ומי יודע מה דבר הורה משה רבנו בעל פה לנשיאי העדה וזקניה להודיע לבאים אחריהם בהתחלף מצב האומה ואמונותיה". For other places where the Hoil Moshe similarly explains that commandments might evolve based on the nation's spiritual level, see "עֵין תַּחַת עֵין" – An Eye for an Eye, Altars of Earth, Stone, and Wood, and About R. Moshe Yitzchak Ashkenazi.

<sup>17</sup> See discussion of the Hoil Moshe's positions in "עֵין תַּחַת עֵין" – An Eye for an Eye, Altars of Earth, Stone, and Wood, and About R. Moshe Yitzchak Ashkenazi.

<sup>18</sup> See Purpose of the Sacrifices for elaboration on his position.

<sup>19</sup> Other exegetes take a similar approach to explain other laws. See, for instance, the Rambam also on the building of the Mishkan, Ibn Kaspi's approach to the smearing of the blood of the Pesach Sacrifice and Shadal's understanding of the giving of Half Shekels.

<sup>20</sup> In this the Hoil Moshe differs from Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer which emphasizes the attainment of forgiveness and the concern lest Azazel serve as a prosecutor against the nation. According to the Hoil Moshe, in contrast, the fear is that Azazel might contaminate the Mikdash.

<sup>21</sup> R. Saadia in his Tafsir suggests that it is simply a proper name, "הַר עֲזָאז", perhaps a known mountain in the time of Moshe. In his commentary (cited by R. Mubashir HaLevi), in contrast, he explains the etymology of the word.

<sup>22</sup> He cites the examples of "יִקְתָּאֵל" in Melakhim II 14:7, "יִבְנֶאֱל" in Yehoshua 15:11 and "יִרְפָּאֵל" in Yehoshua 18:27.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the second opinion in Bavli Yoma which also understands Azazel to refer to a hard place.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance the form "עֲזָז" in Yeshayahu 43:17.

<sup>25</sup> R. Mubashir HaLevi argues against this etymology, pointing to the fact that a "r" separates the two letters of the "אֵל" ending preventing them from being explained as a superlative. See above, though, that textual variants such as Megillat HaMikdash preserve a spelling of עֲזָאֵל.

<sup>26</sup> This approach encounters considerable difficulties from the simple reading of the verses which suggests that the first goat too is related to the sins and impurities of the nation. It is called "שְׂעִיר הַחַטָּאת" and the verse states explicitly that it comes to atone "עַל הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִטְמֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִפְשְׁעֵיהֶם לְכֹל" "חַטָּאתָם"

<sup>27</sup> R. Saadia's suggestion would work better if the goat was sacrificed in the midst of the Israelite camp rather than in the uninhabited territory of the wilderness.

<sup>28</sup> Sforno notes that this accounts for why the person who accompanies the Azazel goat becomes ritually impure.

<sup>29</sup> See below that Rambam compares this to some other sin offerings, which, due to their offensive nature, are also burnt outside the camp.

<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Sforno does not deny the existence of demons, and suggests that Hashem distances the nation from them since they are dangerous beings who are likely to lure the nation into sinful and useless acts.

<sup>31</sup> R. Saadia even states that such an interpretation that the Torah is commanding us to sacrifice to a demon is one of the factors that led some people to heresy. This likely gave R. Saadia additional motivation to combat this interpretation.

The heretics to whom R. Saadia refers likely included Hivi HaBalkhi, see J. Rosenthal, "Hivi al-Balkhi: A Comparative Study", JQR 38:3 (1948): 336. See note 83 there for sources that this was also one of the charges leveled by Julian the Apostate against Christian belief in the Old Testament.

<sup>32</sup> This factor is amplified in the fragment from R. Saadia's commentary on Vayikra 16 published by Hirschfeld in JQR 6:3 (1916): 373,383.

<sup>33</sup> The others do not address the issue and might not be particularly bothered by the lack of parallelism. They might suggest that other parallels, between the sending of the goat "to Azazel" and the sending of the goat "to the wilderness", support the interpretation that both terms are geographical locations.

<sup>34</sup> The main difference between the two approaches relates to their understanding of the purpose of the sending of the goat outside of the Mikdash (to Azazel). While R. Saadia and the Rambam maintain that it is sent away purely for technical reasons, the commentators below read symbolism into the act of sending as well.

<sup>35</sup> The verse in effect reads: "וְנִשָּׂא [אִישׁ הָעֵתִי אֶת] הַשְּׂעִיר עָלָיו אֶת [=בַּעַד] כָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָם אֶל אֶרֶץ גִּזְרָה". It is unclear how R. Saadia would interpret "וְנִתַּן אֲתָם עַל רֹאשׁ הַשְּׂעִיר" in the previous verse of 16:21.

<sup>36</sup> As mentioned above, R. Saadia's theory would be more convincing if the goat were sacrificed amongst the people rather than in the deserted wilderness.

<sup>37</sup> Rashbam, though, does not account for the fact that it is not just one extra letter but the entire ending of the word that is unrelated to the main root. N. Tur-Sinai, in "עֲזָזָל", Eretz Israel 1 (1951): 77-80 attempts to support Rashbam's reading and account for the extra letters by pointing out that in Akkadian the word "azlu" refers to a wild goat.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. R. Saadia Gaon above.

<sup>39</sup> Shadal compares this to the colloquial use of the word "שטן".

<sup>40</sup> Ralbag, though, maintains that the goat is a sacrifice. He points out that it is for this reason that the goat must die, as otherwise there would be a risk that it would be inadvertently taken by a person unaware of its holy status. Ralbag is likely motivated by a desire to uphold the Rabbinic understanding of the ceremony.

<sup>41</sup> See the note above regarding Ralbag.

<sup>42</sup> R. D"Z Hoffmann explains similarly, pointing out that punishment should have been visited upon the sinners, but Hashem accepts the nation's repentance and instead sends their sins to be destroyed.

<sup>43</sup> R"Y Bekhor Shor references Iyyov 36:12 and Kohelet 8:8. Cf. Radak Bereshit 37:32.

<sup>44</sup> See E. Touitou, הפשטות המתחדשים בכל יום, (Jerusalem, 2003): 187-188 who asserts that Rashbam's insistence on the fact that the goat remains alive might be motivated by polemical concerns. According to him, Rashbam was countering the Christian doctrine which viewed the Azazel goat as a prefiguration of Jesus and his dying to atone for the sins of the world.

<sup>45</sup> See below regarding the parallels between these two rites.

<sup>46</sup> This assumption is not necessarily true.

<sup>47</sup> For other cases, where Shadal employs a similar methodology, see About R. Shemuel David Luzzatto.

<sup>48</sup> A similar notion is advanced by R"Y Bekhor Shor Shemot 30:1 regarding the Yom HaKippurim atonement in general (but not regarding the Azazel goat).

<sup>49</sup> See also Rambam who connects the sale of Yosef with the goat sacrificed for regular sin-offerings.

<sup>50</sup> See C. Carmichael, Illuminating Leviticus, (Baltimore, 2006): 37-52, who develops the parallel and suggests that the Azazel ritual borrows an act that was originally done to cover up sin and utilizes it to help others atone.

<sup>51</sup> For a full discussion of the parallels and differences, see D. Wright, The Disposal of Impurity (Atlanta, 1987): 15-74.

<sup>52</sup> He reads "לְשַׁלַּח" in the phrase "לְכַפֵּר עָלֵינוּ לְשַׁלַּח אֹתוֹ לְעִזָּאֵזֶל הַמִּדְבָּרָה" as meaning "משלוח" or "עבור שלוח".  
I.e. the atonement will come via being sent to exile and suffering there.

