

A Yom Kippur Lottery and a Pesach Parallel

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Parashat Acharei Mot

A lottery to assign animals for different sacrifices.

A curious component of the “Yom HaKippurim” ritual as described in the beginning of Parashat Acharei Mot is the manner in which animals are assigned for a sin offering on the one hand and for “Azazel” on the other, i.e., by means of an apparently random lottery.¹

(VaYikra 16:8-10)

“And Aharon shall cast LOTS on the two goats, one LOT for the Lord and the other LOT for Azazel. And Aharon shall bring the goat upon which the Lord’s LOT fell and offer it up for a sin offering. But the goat upon which the LOT for Azazel fell shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over him, and to let him go to Azazel in the wilderness.”

Surveys of the possible significance of Azazel in an attempt to account for the necessity of a lottery as part of the Yom HaKippurim ritual.

One possible approach for attempting to ascertain why a lottery is employed in order to designate which goat will be used for which purpose, is that such a process is necessitated by the involvement of “Azazel” in the ritual. If the precise connotation of “Azazel” could be established, light may be thrown on why a lottery is required.

Commentators broadly debate the meaning of this word, particularly in light of the fact that “Azazel” appears in TaNaCh only in VaYikra 16, i.e., exclusively within the context of sending a goat into the wilderness on Yom Kippur. Were we to encounter “Azazel” elsewhere in the biblical text, hypotheses could be developed based upon common themes appearing in diverse contexts. This however is impossible when only a single example is available for analysis.

Two Tora commentaries by great German scholars, R. Yaakov Zvi Mecklenberg and R. David Zvi Hoffmann, summarize earlier interpretations for “Azazel” as well as offer approaches of their own. R. Mecklenberg, in his HaKetav VeHaKabba (pub. 1839) on VaYikra 16:8, lists the following understandings for “Azazel”:

¹ Lotteries appear in various contexts in TaNaCh. Usually, it would seem that they serve as a means by which God can Reveal His Will via what appears to be an impartial, process not subject to human manipulation. Examples of lotteries that are presumed to reflect a form of prophecy or revelation are: a) (BaMidbar 26:52 ff.; RaShI on 26:54) the division of the land of Israel; b) (Yehoshua 7:14-15) the indictment of Achan for having taken from the spoils of Yericho; c) (Yona 1:7) the indication that the storm that was threatening to inundate the vessel in which Yona was sailing was Yona’s fault. However, in the case of deciding the fate of the two identical goats in the “Yom HaKippurim” ritual, it would seem that rather than constituting a precise choice reflecting some sort of Divine Intervention determining the appropriateness of a land apportionment or the attribution of guilt, the lottery serves the purpose of removing an apparently arbitrary choice from the purview of man and transferring it to God’s Determination, even though the ultimate result would appear to the onlookers as essentially arbitrary.

- a. (Yoma 67b; Sifra) “A.” is the name of a forbidding and dangerous mountain. → A place from which the scapegoat is thrown.
- b. (R. Naftali Hertz Weisel—Bei’ur) “A.” refers to a strong desert wind which typically blows on the mountain to which the goat is brought, and due to the wind, the goat is blown off and falls to its death. → A meteorological phenomenon.
- c. (R. Mecklenberg’s own interpretation) “A.” describes the disparaging treatment that is given to the goat, i.e., that it is killed in an unceremonial and ignominious manner. The scapegoat ritual resembles to some extent, but in the end constitutes a negation, of generic idolatrous practices and a fulfillment of VaYikra 17:7—“And they shall not continue to offer their sacrifices to the ‘Sheidim’ (demons, spirits) after whom they have gone astray.” Additional indications of Jewish tradition’s essentially negative perspective regarding this practice of sending a goat into the desert on “Yom HaKippurim” is the fact that the individual who accompanies the goat becomes ritually impure and must subsequently wash his body and clothes (16:26).² Upon the successful completion of the scapegoat ritual which represents a repudiation of idolatry, the people’s sins are considered forgiven and atoned for. → a ritual of disparagement.
- d. (Anonymous point of view) “A.” implies depths, and therefore reflects the extent of the goat’s fall. → the distance from the place where the goat is thrown to where it ultimately lands.
- e. (Mechilta D’Rav Shimon bar Yochai, Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer, Ibn Ezra, RaMBaN, Rabbeinu Bachya, etc.) R. Mecklenberg notes that these sources and commentators develop a different approach, but due to its mystical nature, it is difficult to understand and therefore better left unexplored.³

² When a particular ritual practice results in ritual impurity, it is presumed that such Divine Service, while Ordained by HaShem, is reflective of some shortcoming in man’s nature and activities. After most sacrificial offerings, the “Kohanim” are not considered impure and therefore the case of the scapegoat is considered an exception rather than the rule.

³ It is interesting to consider why R. Mecklenberg would bother to mention that there is another approach that a number of significant Jewish sources and commentators present as the understanding of “Azazel”, yet he fails to explicate what this approach is. Was he too rational to be able to consider a more Kabbalistic approach? Did he worry that such an interpretation could be misunderstood and therefore is better left unreported? The RaMBaN’s commentary on the Tora is similarly criticized by Isaac Hirsch Weiss in *Dor Dor ve-Dorshav* (pub. 1871–91) in terms of how RaMBaN often alludes to mystical interpretations, but seldom goes into detail to help the reader understand what is being referred to. Instead, RaMBaN, after broaching a mystical perspective, writes, “Yesh Bo Sod, VeHaMeivin Yavin” (there is a secret in this matter, and s/he who understands, understands). In RaMBaN’s defense, the following Mishna could be referenced:

Chagiga 2:1

One should not give lectures regarding...the Creation to even two people (an audience of one is the only scenario allowed due to the esoteric nature of the subject matter and the consequent requirement of the student’s full attention, something which may prove difficult once there are additional students participating);

and not give lectures concerning the “Chariot” (a reference to the vision of Yechezkel as described in Chapter 1 of the prophetic book by that name; the “Chariot” is understood to obliquely explicate the nature of God and for this reason is one of the main foci of the Zohar, the primary book of Jewish mysticism) to even one person, unless s/he is a scholarly individual and is able to intuitively understand an extremely terse presentation of the subject matter...

R. Hoffmann, in his classical commentary, entitled *Sefer VaYikra* (pub. 1905-6, pp. 304-5), similarly grapples with different approaches to the meaning of “Azazel”, and adds the following to the list offered by R. Mecklenberg:

- f. (Tanna Devai Rabbi Yishmael in Yoma 67b) “A.” connotes the specific sin of sexual immorality, since the term is comprised of the names of the angels that descended from Heaven to cohabit with humans, as suggested in Beraishit 6:2.⁴
- g. (Lundt)⁵ “A.” is the name of a particular area in the desert.⁶ → the place where the goat ultimately lands (as opposed to where it begins its fall, as in a) above).
- h. (Luthor, Patter) “A.” is actually a reference to the goat itself, i.e., “Ez” (goat) “Azal” (goes). → the animal that is destroyed.
- i. (Y. D. Michaels, Bier, Wiener) “A.” connotes achieving freedom, or, ironically, total destruction. → a description of the final state of the goat.
- j. (R. Hoffmann’s own interpretation) “A.” signifies destruction, the grave, finitude and mortality. In this sense, the term stands in extreme contrast to the qualities of HaShem Who is associated with life, eternity, and true existence. Consequently, the commentator contends, those who worship “Azazel” and other similar deities are attaching themselves to nothingness, while those believing in and worshipping HaShem, are adhering to a life-giving, eternal power. Symbolically on “Yom HaKippurim”, the people first offer a sin offering, thereby admitting their past errors and achieving a rapprochement with God, followed by sending off a goat into the desert signifying that they are prepared to have their sins destroyed, thereby clearing and saving themselves from punishment.^{7 8} → the final state of the sins of the Jewish people.

Nevertheless, Weiss contends that RaMBaN shouldn’t mention the mystical perspective at all in his commentary so that the reader does not become frustrated by being told that there is an important additional understanding, but that he is not going to make it available.

⁴ R. Hoffmann recognizes the problem with such an interpretation since “Yom HaKippurim” and its rituals would appear to be designed to atone for all possible sins rather than only those of a sexual nature. However he suggests that all sins could in fact be viewed as metaphorical promiscuity in the sense of disloyalty to HaShem Who is often depicted as the husband to whom his spouse has been unfaithful. See e.g., Hoshea Chapt. 1.

⁵ Both R. Mecklenberg and R. Hoffmann were very committed to trying to demonstrate that the Oral Tradition’s understanding of the Written Tradition was consistent with the “Peshat” (simple meaning of the text) rather than constituting an alteration of the Tora’s original meaning. R. Hoffmann in particular devoted his Chumash commentary to answering Bible critics’ attacks on the general veracity of the Tora and therefore regularly cites them and their views during the course of his own commentary. This style of commentary parallels Ibn Ezra’s hundreds of years earlier when, in the interests of determining the “Peshat” of Biblical verses, he often quoted Karaite scholars who themselves claimed to exclusively represent the true meaning of the Tora, with Ibn Ezra then demonstrating how their interpretations were invalid. Yet while Ibn Ezra never opposed the Halachic interpretations of the Midrash and the Talmud, he sometimes took on even the Rabbis with respect to the “Aggadic” portions of the Tora when he thought that they had improperly explained the connotation of a particular story or piece of dialogue.

⁶ This approach would appear to be a variant of the first interpretation cited by R. Mecklenberg, where rather than referring to a particular mountain, “A.” represents a general geographical area in which such a mountain(s) can be found.

⁷ R. Hoffmann’s interpretation is similar to that offered by RaMBaN concerning sacrifices in general in his comments to VaYikra 1:9, where he maintains that the offering up of any sacrifice represents the realization on the

Explaining the mystical approach to Azazel.

In addition to R. Hoffmann's own interpretation of "Azazel", the commentator chooses to go into detail regarding the interpretation of the RaMBaN et al, apparently not being concerned by the apprehensions of the likes of R. Mecklenberg regarding publicizing mystical ideas. The Midrashic collection Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 45 serves as the jumping off point for the understanding of this group of commentators, and it teaches:

...Said Samoel (a term that is used interchangeably with Satan who looks to entrap and then accuse human beings before HaShem)⁹ before HaShem: Master of the Universe! Over all of the nations of the world You have Given me permission (to try to cause them to sin), but over Israel You have not Given me such license. He Said to him: You have permission on "Yom HaKippurim" if you can find among them sin. However, if you cannot, then you have no permission. Therefore he (Samoel) is given a bribe (the scapegoat) on "Yom HaKippurim" in order that he not cause the Jews to fail to offer their sacrifice... He said before Him: Master of the Universe! You have one nation that resembles the Ministering Angels in Heaven. Just like the Ministering Angels do not eat and drink, so too the Jewish people on "Yom HaKippurim" do not eat and drink. Just like the Ministering Angels do not wear shoes, so too the Jewish people on "Yom HaKippurim".

part of the one bringing the sacrifice that according to the strict letter of the law, HaShem could take his/her life due to the inevitable shortcomings that are associated with human existence. It is only God's Compassion that allows us to reflect this feeling of personal inadequacy and readiness for commitment to HaShem by vicariously offering ourselves up to HaShem by means of a sacrifice. If this is the case with regard to all personal offerings, on "Yom HaKippurim", a day devoted to personal as well as communal atonement, this theme will be emphasized to that much greater an extent, and manifested in the two goats, one as a "Chatat" (sin offering) and one to "Azazel". See <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Vayikra.html>

for additional development of RaMBaN's conception of sacrifices.

⁸ R. Hoffmann then attempts to take all of the other possible interpretations that have been proposed over the years and fold them into his own, i.e., "A." could be the mountain from which the goat is thrown, the angel that attempts to find fault with the Jewish people and who we are attempting to "bribe" (this is RaMBaN's interpretation based upon Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 45 that will be discussed further along in this essay), the place of the destruction of the goat, the sins of idolatry itself, the spirit that is demanding that the sinners themselves be handed over to it. Suggested in this last section of R. Hoffmann's commentary concerning "A." is that an ambiguous, even mysterious word that can be viewed as having multiple connotations, does not have to be reduced to a single understanding, but rather multiple understandings can all coexist simultaneously, thereby lending texture and complexity to the concept being represented.

⁹ Consider Bava Batra 16a:

Reish Lakish said: Satan, the Yetzer HaRa (Evil Inclination) and the Malach HaMavet (angel of death) are all one.

The assumption of Reish Lakish is that first a plan is devised by Satan to create a situation which can lead to an accusation of malfeasance; the Evil Inclination tempts the individual to make the wrong choice in this situation, and the angel of death stands in waiting to mete out difficult punishment. In effect this is another way of putting what is said by HaShem to Kayin after his sacrifice has been rejected in favor of that of his younger brother: (Beraishit 4:7) "If you do good you will be raised up/forgiven; but if you do not do good, sin crouches at the door, and towards you is its desire, but you are capable of ruling over it."

Just like the Ministering Angels never sit, so too the Jewish people on “Yom HaKippurim”. Just like there is peace among the Ministering Angels, so too the Jewish people on “Yom HaKippurim”. Just like the Ministering Angels are free of sin, so too the Jewish people on “Yom HaKippurim”.

When the Holy One Blessed Be He Hears the praises of the Jewish people from their Prosecutor, He Causes the altar, the Holy of Holies, the “Kohanim”, the entire Jewish people from the youngest to the oldest, as well as all of their sins, to be forgiven and atoned for.

During the course of the RaMBaN’s discussion of this passage from Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer, the commentator offers an intriguing parable in order to further account for the goat being sent to “Azazel” = Samoel.

The parable in this matter is as follows: It is like one (the Jewish people) who prepares a festive meal (the “Avoda” on “Yom HaKippurim”) for the Master (HaShem), after which the Master then Commands the individual who has made the food to send a portion to the Master’s Servant (Samoel). The person who prepared the food would never have thought to do so on his own volition, and is not personally honoring this servant even now by following the Master’s Command. But rather, all is being given to the Master, and it is He who in turn is Redistributing part of what He has Received and Sending it along to whomever He has Chosen. The Master, out of Concern for the one preparing the food, Wishes all of his servants, including those who may be inclined to be most critical of the one preparing the food, to think well of him/her and therefore provides a pretense for them to praise the food preparer.

RaMBaN then brings the discussion full circle when he insists that in light of the above explanation, there is now a clear basis for choosing the animals by means of lottery rather than any other process. The two identical goats that are presented potentially for either one of the designated purposes, i.e., a sin offering and an offering sent into the desert, are essentially being turned over to HaShem for His Determination regarding which will be which. The lottery, however it turns out, is understood to reflect God’s Will, i.e., it is HaShem Himself, as it were, Who is Designating an offering for “Azazel” rather than the Kohen who merely acts as the representative of the Jewish people en masse.

Aside from RaMBaN, can some of the other explanations summarized above also account for the need for a lottery process?

However, it is unnecessary to assume that only RaMBaN’s view lends itself to explaining the purpose of a lottery in the determination of the ultimate usage of each of the two goats on “Yom HaKippurim”. Both of the original perspectives offered by R. Mecklenberg and R. Hoffmann respectively (c) and j)) can similarly be appropriated for accounting for the “Goral” (lottery). With respect to R. Mecklenberg’s view, the ultimate degradation of the goat sent into the desert could on a certain level be viewed as “Bizui Kodashim” (maltreatment of objects dedicated for holy purposes). To deliberately and directly be responsible for the terrible treatment of a potential sacrifice would appear to be a violation of the principle of “Ma’alin BaKodesh VeEinan Moridin” (one should raise the holiness level of things rather than retrogress and lower them). Even if one would stop short of declaring that however the lottery turns out, this must be God’s Will, the mere fact that this is not the decision of any particular “Kohen”

sparing human beings of being responsible for the disparagement and disrespectful treatment of potential holy sacrifices—had the lottery been reversed, the animal being thrown off the cliff would have been the sin offering sacrificed in the Mishkan—something that especially the “Kohanim” have been trained to always treat with the highest standard of deference and consideration.

As for R. Hoffmann’s interpretation, i.e., the ultimate usage of the two identical animals for such disparate purposes as a sin offering in the Tabernacle and the role of scapegoat in the desert, it would appear to reflect the subtlety involved in the process of repentance. On the one hand, an identification between sinner and sin is logical since the former has chosen in one way or another¹⁰ to embark on a particular course of action leading to a reprehensible transgression. However, now that he looks back at what has taken place, he is afforded the opportunity to separate his essence and individuality from the transgression that was perpetrated. The ability to make such a distinction is a gift of God’s Chesed (Compassion) rather than an obvious option forever in man’s purview. Consequently, the opportunity for repentance, as symbolized by the determination of which animal is to serve which purpose, is not logically under man’s control, but rather a Divine Gift from above, hence determined in part by lottery rather than exclusively by human choice.

Parallel symbolism in Yom HaKippurim and a Biblical story associated with Pesach.

While the first portion of Parashat Acharei Mot is clearly devoted to Yom Kippur practices, Klee Yakar on VaYikra 16:8 understands the theme of the lottery regarding the two goats of the Yom Kippur service in the “Mishkan”/“Mikdash” as a veiled reference to the goats that were prepared by Rivka and Yaakov prior to Yaakov’s obtaining the blessing from Yitzchak in Beraishit 27:14 ff. which according to Pirkei D’R. Eliezer, Chapt. 31, quoted by RaShI, took place on Pesach. Noting that Rivka requested that two goats be brought to her (27:9) when plotting with Yaakov to guilefully obtain Yitzchak’s blessing intended for Eisav, the commentator assumes that the goats were each used for very different purposes, significantly altering the Midrash’s contention that in addition to one animal being designated for a Pesach sacrifice, the other was to serve as a Korban Chagiga.¹¹ Klee Yakar posits that the goat that was prepared for Yitzchak’s food and that fortified him in order to bestow the intended blessing upon the son that turned out to be Yaakov, is to be equated with Samoel’s portion, the diversion offered up in order that Yaakov be allowed in the end to receive the blessing that he rightfully deserved, despite Yitzchak’s intentions to bless his brother Eisav. The second goat, on the other hand, is assumed to have constituted a Pesach offering, since the time of the bestowal of the blessings by Yitzchak upon his sons is presumed by this Midrash to have taken place on the 15th of Nissan. The Midrash supports this hypothesis by invoking Beraishit 27:28 where as part of Yitzchak’s blessing to Yaakov, dew is mentioned—“And HaShem should Give you from the Dew of heaven...”—summoning up the image of the prayer for dew that takes place on the first day of

¹⁰ Even inadvertent sin is to some extent the result of a choice to the extent that the sinner chose not to be introspective and reflective regarding his/her actions.

¹¹ The apparently anachronistic assumption underlying the idea that such sacrifices were offered prior to the Tora being given, or even the Exodus, the basis for the Pesach sacrifice, taking place, is in keeping with the Rabbinic tradition that the Forefathers and Foremothers observed the laws of the Tora prior to their Revelation on Sinai—see e.g., Mishna Kiddushin 4:14 and RaShI on Beraishit 26:5.

Pesach.¹² Klee Yakar concludes his comment on VaYikra 16:8 by citing Beraishit Rabba 65:14 which further ties together the “Yom HaKippurim” ritual of the two goats with the story of Yaakov’s purloined blessing, with R. Chelbo in the Midrash interpreting Rivka’s instructions to Yaakov regarding the animals that she will need to carry out her plan, (Beraishit 27:9) “Shnai Izim Tovim” (two good goats) as: “the goats will be good for you, for by means of them (the goats) you will obtain Yitzchak’s blessings, and they will be good for your descendants, since by means of them (the goats) your descendants will achieve atonement on “Yom HaKippurim.” Consequently, according to Klee Yakar, the “Yom HaKippurim” rite of assigning goats to HaShem and Azazel, constitutes a resonance of the earlier story in Beraishit that coincided with Pesach, or another instance of “Ma’asei Avot Simon LaBanim” (the actions of the ancestors constitute foreshadowing of what will be expected of their descendants). As opposed to thinking that obviously the goat that will be an authentic sacrifice is of greater significance than the one that will advance the purposes of a particular individual, the lottery suggests that they have equal importance, at least on a certain plane.¹³

Conclusion.

Although the rituals of the Temple service are relegated to the category of Chukim (laws which either are completely indiscernible to human comprehension, or, at best, have extremely obscure meanings), some sacrificial rites have clear symbolic meaning, as in the case of the symmetry existing between the goats dedicated to HaShem and, LeHavdil, Azazel respectively. And when Temple rites can be understood as extensions of formative events in Beraishit involving the Avot and Imahot (forefathers and foremothers), as in the case of the blessings intended for Yaakov and Eisav, additional layers of meaning suddenly come into focus, and disparate ritual details and historical events take on unified significance.

¹² The first day of Pesach is when the standard prayers change in terms of the omission of “Mashiv HaRuach U’Morid HaGashem” (Cause the wind to blow and Bring down the rain) as well as the changeover in the liturgy from the expression “VeTen Tal U’Matar LeVeracha” (and He should Give dew and rain for a blessing) during the fall and winter, to “VeTen Beracha” (and He should Give a blessing) in the spring and summer.

¹³ Klee Yakar’s dichotomy of the purposes of the two animals that Rivka requested calls to mind the disagreement between R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua in Beitza 15b. R. Eliezer takes the view that one must be totally consistent, and either dedicate himself wholly to God or wholly to his personal interests, while R. Yehoshau famously responds, “Chatzi LaShem U’Chatzi Lachem” (half to God and half to you). Should both animals be sacrifices to God (Pirkei D’R. Eliezer) or one for God and one for Yaakov (Klee Yakar)?