

"And Aharon shall place lots upon the two he-goats, one lot for Hashem, and one lot for Azazel." (16:8)

The ritual of the *Yom Kippur* sacrificial service has served as a paradigm of nobility and splendor. Its symbolic interpretation and resolution is veiled in secrecy and ambiguity. Especially notable is the ritual of the two he-goats. While one goat is offered as a sacrifice, its blood sprinkled in the Sanctuary, the other is sent away into the wilderness, bearing the sins of the people. These two goats are to be purchased at the same time and are to be identical in appearance, size, and value. Everything is the same - except their ultimate fate.

The two goats represent two identical potentials living out two diametrically opposed destinies. The animal marked for Hashem becomes an offering, its blood immediately effecting atonement and consecration. The animal marked *Azazel*, however, remains intact, while its companion is slaughtered. It is afterward taken to a high rock, where it stands alive, free, and erect, flaunting destiny. Suddenly, it is pushed, causing it to topple backwards, ignorant of the final doom that awaits it.

Horav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch Z"l movingly describes this scenario. The goat that stands erect while the other one is sacrificed does not realize the advent of its own fate. It momentarily stands free and erect, proud and arrogant in being able to foil death. Little does it perceive the future that awaits it. *Horav Hirsch* points out the symbolic value inherent in the lives and plights of these two goats. They represent the two paths open to each of us. Through the principle of free-will we maintain the option to decide our own future destiny to be marked either *I'Hashem* or to *Azazel*. The path *I'Hashem* begins with self-sacrifice. By abdicating all egotism and renouncing all self-centered existence, one becomes constantly prepared to sacrifice oneself for Hashem. What purports to be subservience and enslavement is essentially a proclamation of obedience, which results in one's entry into a higher and more genuine form of existence. What appears to be a loss of one's nobility is in reality the highest form of service of the Almighty.

The path to *Azazel* begins in an apparently contrasting manner. The second goat seems to be immune to the sacrificial ritual. He represents the individual who seeks to affirm his independence by rejecting all forms of sacrifice and devotion. He obstinately eludes any possibility of loss or death. He persistently rejects any claim upon him from any higher, holier authority. The oasis that appears to represent the affluent, fulfilled way of life may be the route to a wretched and tragic death. What seems to be the path to freedom is, in fact, the road away from Hashem, towards a

dreadful end in the wilderness. The goat who escapes being sacrificed in Hashem's Sanctuary stands tall, arrogant and secure, looking down where his unknowing companion lay bleeding to death. He is, however, ignorant of the abrupt precipice that will open behind him causing his own sudden death.

Each one of us has two paths in life from which to choose. We all start out the same in regard to free-will. No one is coerced to take the path to *Azazel*. True, there are many temptations to sin, but without them, virtue and reward would have no meaning or value. How often do people look with disdain and contempt at those who have chosen the path to Hashem, only to tragically become aware of their own folly in choosing the opposing path to *Azazel*. The ritual of the he-goats, although cloaked in mystery and ambiguity maintains a timely message which is very clear. Fortunate is the one who understands its message and makes the redemptive choice in favor of the goral *l'Hashem*.