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## THE ULTIMATE REWARD FOR HAKHEIL

by *Rabbi Ezra Wiener*

It is most befitting to speak of the Mitzvah of Hakheil, which would be fulfilled this coming Chol HaMoed Sukkot, during the year immediately following the Shemitah year, if the Beit HaMikdash remained standing. Hakheil is a unique Mitzvah in that "HaAnashim, VeHaNashim, VeHaTaf," "the men, the women and the children" are to make an appearance in the Beit HaMikdash to fulfill this Mitzvah (Devarim 31:12). All must ascend to Yerushalayim to hear the Jewish King read from Sefer Devarim.

As "Taf" is a general term for children, we must clarify the Torah's intention in using it. Does the term "Taf" encompass all children, including very young toddlers, or does it refer only to children with a certain degree of intellectual ability and understanding? Ramban (31:13) asserts that "Taf" are the children who have the ability to ask questions, those approaching the age of Chinuch. Although these children will not completely understand the Pesukim that are being read, they will certainly appreciate the Mitzvot and even the rebuke found in Sefer Devarim if their parents guide them by explaining the difficult concepts.

However, Ramban concedes that his understanding of the word "Taf" is inconsistent with the following statement of Chazal regarding Hakheil: "*HaAnashim Lilmod VeHaNashim Lishmo'a VeHaTaf... Litein Sechar LeMeviaihen*," "The men come to learn, the women to hear, and the children to give reward to those who bring them" (Chagigah 3a). From Chazal's words, it appears as though "Taf" refers to infants and toddlers, children who will gain almost nothing from the experience of Hakheil; despite this, the parents are rewarded for bringing their children. If the children don't stand to gain anything from the experience of Hakheil, why does Hashem reward their parents for bringing them?

This question can be answered quite practically. Indeed, the infants and toddlers will gain nothing from Hakheil, but they certainly cannot be left home alone when their parents go to the Beit HaMikdash. The strollers, the attendance of so many children, and the need to carry them when they become irritable all contribute to the reward that the parents receive for coming to study Sefer Devarim. This answer is in agreement with Ben Hei Hei's statement that "*Lefum Tza'ara Agra*," "according to the suffering is the reward" (Avot 5:23).

It is possible however, that Chazal felt that the parents' reward for bringing their young children to Hakheil is of a different form.

Although the infants in attendance may gain very little from the experience, the mere fact that the Torah enjoins the parents to bring their children will serve to set the stage for the parents' ultimate reward. The most gratifying reward for a Jewish parent is to see his or her children embracing the Torah lifestyle. The bringing of the children is a reminder to the parents that the ultimate reward of seeing their children embrace Judaism will have a direct correlation to the effort and energy that they expend in inculcating the lessons of Sefer Devarim into them. We can take almost any mundane experience and turn it into one with Chinuch value. From when our children are very young and through adulthood, their Avodat Hashem all depends on our attitude.

## SE'IR HAMISHTALEI'ACH: SYMBOLISM AND SIGNIFICANCE

by *Yaakov Zinberg ('18)*

The ritual of the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach, the scapegoat, was performed once a year on Yom Kippur. Identical in size and appearance, two goats were presented before the Kohein Gadol, who would conduct a lottery to determine their fates. One goat would be designated for Hashem and offered as a Chatat, while the other would be for Azazel, and would be sent (Mishtalei'ach) into the wilderness after the Kohein Gadol confessed the sins of Bnei Yisrael over it.

Two main questions arise from this unique procedure: What is the meaning of Azazel, and what is the meaning of this ritual?

Rashi (16:8 s.v. Azazel) writes that Azazel, a word that appears nowhere else in Tanach, means a "strong and harsh mountain with a high cliff." For Rashi, Azazel is a description of the goat's destination. The Mishnah (Yoma 67a) explains that the goat would be led up a mountain and pushed off the side of a steep cliff, where it would fall to its death.

Using a Kabbalistic approach, Ramban suggests that Azazel refers to a demon that had the power of negating the Avodah and preventing Bnei Yisrael from receiving atonement. The Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach was a bribe of sorts that would allow Bnei Yisrael to be forgiven. Quick to defend himself, Ramban insists that this practice is not Avodah Zarah. He compares this ritual to someone who prepares a feast for a king, and the king orders the host to provide some food for his slave. Similarly, the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach is really intended for Hashem, but He orders us to offer it to the demon, who is, of course, subservient to Him. This, according to Ramban, is the meaning of the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach.

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Rambam takes a more rational approach in explaining the significance of the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach. He writes in Moreh Nevuchim, "There is no doubt that sins cannot be carried like a burden, and taken off the shoulder of one being to be laid on that of another being. But these ceremonies are of a symbolic character, and serve to impress people with a certain idea, and to induce them to repent – as if to say, we have freed ourselves of our previous deeds, have cast them behind our backs, and removed them from us as far as possible" (III: 46). The sins of Bnei Yisrael were not actually transferred to the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach; rather its banishment to the desert symbolizes the removal of sin. Only through this dramatic ritual would Bnei Yisrael feel as though they had distanced themselves from their past wrongdoings and would feel compelled to completely rededicate themselves to the Mitzvot.

The idea of abandoning past sins is also found in Mishneh Torah: "What is Teshuvah?" Rambam asks. "It is that the sinner abandons his sin and removes it from his thought and resolves in his heart never to commit it again" (Hilchot Teshuvah 2:2). Teshuvah is a transformative process. Rambam writes, "Among the means of Teshuvah are for the penitent to constantly shout before God with crying and pleading... and to distance himself very far from the thing in which he sinned, and to change his name, meaning to say, 'I am someone else and I am not the same person who did those things...'" (2:4). Teshuvah requires an absolute change in behavior and a banishment of sinful activities, which is the idea that the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach represents.

In one of his famous Teshuvah lectures, the Rav distinguished between Kapparah and Taharah. Kapparah, atonement, can be achieved by the Avodah without any effort on the part of the sinner to repent. His sin is removed and he is protected from divine punishment. "However, his personality remains contaminated, and this condition may be remedied only through 'Tevilah,' that is, by wholehearted repentance... without personal repentance Taharah is unthinkable" (Pinchas Peli translation of *Al ha-Teshuva*). The Rav elaborates on this idea, quoting the Gemara from Sanhedrin that discusses those who are disqualified as witnesses (gamblers, usurers, and pigeon racers are among that list). "When are they considered to have repented (and thus become qualified to be witnesses)? Gamblers... when they break up their dice and undergo a complete reformation to the extent that they will not even play recreationally. Usurers – when they tear up their bills and undergo a complete reformation to the extent that they will not lend interest even to a Nochri. Pigeon racers... when they break their pigeon traps and undergo a complete reformation to the extent that they will not even race in the desert (where there is no one to see or pay)" (Sanhedrin 25b). Taharah, the complete forgiveness of sin, is possible only once one commits to distance oneself as far away as possible from those misdeeds.

The Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach perfectly symbolizes the idea of Teshuvah Shel Taharah: the firm resolve to banish all sinful acts from one's behavior and to devote oneself to

Hashem and His Mitzvot. In Selichot we recite the Pasuk from Yeshayahu: "*Machiti Cha'av Pesha'echa VeCheAnan Chatotecha Shuvah Eilay Ki Ge'alticha,*" "I have erased your sins as a mist and your transgressions as a cloud, return to Me for I have redeemed you! (44:22). When the effort is made to purify the personality from sin and completely transform one's very being, sins will be forgiven and forgotten, allowing us to return fully to Hashem.

## THE SE'IR HAMISHTALEI'ACH, RAV SOLOVEITCHIK AND *THE OTHER WES MOORE* by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

It is amongst the most difficult laws in the Torah to understand. The Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach ceremony that is performed as part of the Yom Kippur Beit HaMikdash ritual appears primitive and brutal and even seems to run counter to basic Torah values. The notion of taking a goat and hurling it down a cliff, thereby achieving forgiveness for our sins, is difficult for us to accept. Indeed, Meforashim throughout the generations have struggled to understand the meaning behind what appears to be a peculiar ritual. However, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik offers an eye opening explanation that reveals the profound message of this mysterious Mitzvah. Moreover, the eye opening book *The Other Wes Moore* brings Rav Soloveitchik's interpretation to life and helps us grasp the elusive meaning of the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach.

### *The Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach Ritual*

The Torah (VaYikra 16:5-10) describes the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach ritual as follows (translation from Mechon Mamre):

And he shall take of the congregation of the children of Israel two he-goats for a sin-offering, and one ram for a burnt-offering. And Aaron shall present the bullock of the sin-offering, which is for himself, and make atonement for himself, and for his house. And he shall take the two goats, and set them before the Lord at the door of the tent of meeting. And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats: one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for Azazel. And Aaron shall present the goat upon which the lot fell for the Lord, and offer him for a sin-offering. But the goat, on which the lot fell for Azazel, shall be set alive before the Lord, to make atonement over him, to send him away for Azazel into the wilderness.

The Torah (ad loc. 21-22) continues:

And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, even all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of an appointed man into the wilderness. And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land which is cut off; and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.

The Mishnah (Yoma 6:6) describes the scene at the mountain:

“The Kohein who brought the goat to the desert tied a strip of crimson between the horns of the goat and then pushed the goat backwards down the cliff. The goat would roll down the mountain and be dismembered by the time it reached halfway down the mountain”.

Rav Shmuel Goldin, in his *Unlocking the Torah Text: Vayikra* (page 114), eloquently articulates three questions that will help us unlock the meaning of this mysterious ritual:

What is the significance of the simultaneous selection of two goats? This question becomes even more intriguing in light of the Mishnaic dictate (Yoma 6:1) that the goats chosen should be as similar as possible in stature, appearance and in cost.

Why are lots drawn to determine the fate of each goat? Why not simply designate without resorting to a ceremony of chance?

Are the sins of the people truly transferred to the “head of the goat,” as the text seems to indicate? Does the animal really become a scapegoat for our sins? Such an idea seems completely antithetical to Jewish Law and its prohibition of superstitious practice... To suggest that the Teshuva process can somehow be short-circuited through a magical act of transference of sins seems to fly in the face of all we believe.

*Four Classic Approaches to the Se’ir HaMishtalei’ach – Chazal, Abarbanel, Rav Hirsch and Ramban*

The Gemara (Yoma 67b) lists the Se’ir HaMishtalei’ach among five other examples of a Chok, a Mitzvah for which we do not have a rational explanation. Included in this list are other puzzling rituals such as Chalitzah and the Sha’atneiz prohibition. This passage in the Gemara concludes that one should not regard these Mitzvot as an exercise in nonsense, since they were commanded by Hashem in His infinite wisdom. Thus, one can simply opt out of trying to discover meaning to the Se’ir HaMishtalei’ach since it is a Chok.

Nonetheless, Meforashim endeavor to discover a reason for this Mitzvah. Abarbanel (VaYikra 16:1-22) argues that the two goats whose appearance is very similar represent the twin brothers Ya’akov and Eisav, one of whom is chosen to serve as the ancestor of God’s nation and the other destined to live a turbulent and violent existence. This ritual is conducted on Yom Kippur to remind us of our special role as descendants of Ya’akov Avinu.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (VaYikra 16:10) notes that on the one hand, one goat’s blood reaches a more holy spot than the blood of any other Korban. On the other hand, the Se’ir HaMishtalei’ach is sent much further outside the Beit HaMikdash than any other rejected Korban. The Torah is teaching that Hashem creates a level spiritual field in which we function. Whenever there is greater

spiritual opportunity there is also a parallel greater potential for falling into a spiritual abyss. The opposite destinations of the two goats express the choice and free will that Hashem has bestowed upon us – a core lesson of spiritual improvement central to Yom Kippur.

Ramban (VaYikra 16:8) offers an incredibly bold suggestion to explain the Se’ir HaMishtalei’ach:

On Yom Kippur, however, Hashem commanded us that we send a goat to the wilderness, to the “force” that rules in desolate places...and under whose authority are the demons referred to by Chazal as “Mazikim” (destroyers) and in the Chumash as “Se’irim,” male goats.

Ramban clarifies that the Se’ir HaMishtalei’ach is not an independent offering to the “force” of the wilderness. The gift to the wilderness, rather, is a fulfillment of God’s will, comparable to a food provided by the caterer of a banquet to a servant at the host’s request.

Rav Goldin (op. cit. p. 122) offers a compelling explanation of Ramban. He writes the following:

“[The gift constitutes] A healthy respect for the potentially destructive forces that inhabit our inner world. We must recognize the strength of our Yeitzer Hara (base instincts) and its unerring ability to undermine all valiant attempts at self-betterment. Attempted sublimation of the Yeitzer Hara is the surest way to grant it power over our actions. Instead we must acknowledge our “adversary”; respect its strength; and then turn that strength to our benefit.

*Rav Soloveitchik’s Approach to the Se’ir HaMishtalei’ach*

While these and other classic explanations of the Se’ir HaMishtalei’ach shed significant light and represent significant contributions to the age-old endeavor to explain this mysterious ritual, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik’s approach (presented in *Reflections of the Rav*, volume 1 chapter 4, especially page 46) appears the most satisfying and compelling.

Rav Soloveitchik explains that the two male goats were identical but their fates lead them in opposite directions, as determined by chance (“Goral,” the lottery) decisions entirely beyond their control. The casting of lots decreed which was to go “LaShem,” to be sacrificed within the Temple, and which to “Azazel,” to be cast out of the camp of Israel, ignominiously to be destroyed. The secret of atonement is thus indicated in the ceremonious casting of the lots. It reflects the basis for the penitent’s claim to forgiveness, that his moral directions were similarly influenced by forces beyond his control, that his sinning was not entirely a free and voluntary choice. Only the Almighty can evaluate the extent of human culpability in

situations which are not entirely of man's making. Only God knows to what extent a man was a free agent in making his decisions. The Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach is thus a psychodramatic representation of the penitent's state of mind and his emotional need. Only by entering such a plea can man be declared "not guilty."

Rav Soloveitchik builds on Abarbanel's and Rav Hirsch's approaches of the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach representing the two paths from which we choose in life, taking it to the next level by showing how the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach expresses our plea for forgiveness to Hashem on Yom Kippur. While the Rav's approach does not excuse a sinner from his actions, it does offer hope and opportunity for understanding and forgiveness on the one hand, and the opportunity to improve on the other. Rav Soloveitchik's approach also fits with Ramban's idea of respecting the power of the Yeitzer HaRa, which also constitutes a basis for forgiveness on the one hand, and a basis for opportunities to improve on the other.

#### *The Other Wes Moore*

Rav Soloveitchik's approach to the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach is brought to life by the highly regarded work published (by Random House) in 2010, *The Other Wes Moore – One Name, Two Fates*. The author summarizes the message of his book as follows:

Two kids with the same name, living in the same city. One grew up to be a Rhodes Scholar, decorated combat veteran, White House Fellow, and business leader. The other is serving a life sentence in prison for felony murder. Here is the story of two boys and the journey of a generation.

In December 2000, the Baltimore Sun ran a small piece about Wes Moore, a local student who had just received a Rhodes Scholarship. The same paper also ran a series of articles about four young men who had allegedly killed a police officer in a spectacularly botched armed robbery. The police were still hunting for two of the suspects who had gone on the lam, a pair of brothers. One was named Wes Moore.

Wes just couldn't shake off the unsettling coincidence, or the inkling that the two shared much more than space in the same newspaper. After following the story of the robbery, the manhunt, and the trial to its conclusion, he wrote a letter to the other Wes, now a convicted murderer serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole. His letter tentatively asked the questions that had been haunting him: Who are you? How did this happen?

That letter led to a correspondence and relationship that has lasted for several years. Over dozens of letters and prison visits, Wes discovered that the other Wes had a life not unlike his own: Both had grown up in similar neighborhoods and had difficult childhoods, both were fatherless; they'd hung out on similar corners with similar crews, and both had run into trouble with the police. At each stage of their young lives they had come across similar moments of decision, yet their choices and the people in their lives would lead them to astonishingly different destinies.

Told in alternating dramatic narratives that take readers from heart-wrenching losses to moments of surprising redemption, *The Other Wes Moore* tells the story of a generation of boys trying to find their way in a challenging and at times, hostile world.

Quality books allow one to vicariously enter and experience environments in which one would otherwise not have the opportunity to access. The intended power of *The Other Wes Moore* is to allow us to vicariously experience the challenges faced by those who struggle with being raised in inner city environments. From a Torah perspective, *The Other Wes Moore* provides a rare window of opportunity to vicariously experience the central theme and profoundly poignant power of message communicated by the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach – two people come from nearly the same background and environment, yet one merges as a spectacular success and one as a resounding failure. While one can never excuse *The Other Wes Moore* for the choices he made, experiencing and understanding his background helps us at least have some compassion for his predicament. It also helps us grasp the essence of our plea on Yom Kippur for forgiveness and the opportunity for improvement and redemption.

#### *Conclusion*

Far from being primitive and brutal, the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach expresses a highly sophisticated and poignant message, which touches the heart of the human condition and the fundamental moral-spiritual tension between justice and mercy. Our careful search for meaning in what at a superficial glance appears to be foolish has yielded rich and abundant fruit. The same applies for every Mitzvah. Any and every aspect of Torah and Chazal is rich with meaning and significance. Never dismiss any part of our holy Torah. If we do not grasp the full meaning of part of the Torah, we are confident that others in either the current or future generations will unravel the mystery. Our successful search to discover the meaning of the Se'ir HaMishtalei'ach helps us accept Chazal's teaching (Yoma 67b) regarding such Chukim, "Lest one argue that these Chukim are a foolish waste, therefore the Torah states [in regard to Chukim] 'Ani Hashem' (I am God); you enjoy no right to dismiss His commands."

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