

Leviticus 16:1-10

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As Lord Rabbi Sacks writes, Judaism sets a high bar. The people of Israel are called to be holy as the Lord Himself is holy. Jesus reflects this theology in the New Covenant when He commands us to be ‘perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect’. Human frailty, such as it is, dictates that we will inevitably fail to reach such a high standard. What then can be done? The Hebraic answer is atonement in an incredible act of selfless love!

Leviticus 16 sets out the ceremonial instructions for the day of Yom Kippur without actually making a mention of the name Yom Kippur itself. The context of Leviticus 16 has been four chapters concerning distinguishing the clean from unclean, with the majority of commentators (ancient and modern) discussing the literal text in theological terms of sin, sickness, and fortune. God also speaks to Moses on the occasion following the death of the Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron. Nadav and Avihu approached the Lord at a strange time and with an inappropriate offering, thus God instructs Aaron when and how he may enter the Holy of Holies.

Inside the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant, and on the ark was the *kaporet*. It was here on the *kaporet* that the Lord says He will appear in the cloud. Most translations render this word *kaporet* as ‘mercy seat’. Although some modern translations, such as the JPS, CJB and some newer NIVs use the term ‘atonement cover’. *Kaporet* כַּפֹּרֶת; is basically the golden cover over the Ark of the Covenant flanked with *cherubim*. It is a separate piece of the Ark and is described as such in the text as the object that rested on the Ark and God rested on it. The word describes a covering such as in Genesis 6:14 when Noah covered the Ark in pitch, the word there is *kaparat*, same word with different vowels. We note that Noah didn’t cover the ark in mercy, he covered it in pitch. The word mercy in Hebrew is רַחֲמִים *rechemim* and is not initially connected to *kaporet* at all. The Greek Septuagint translated the word as *hilasterion*. *Hilasterion* ἱλαστήριον is used 27 times in 20 verses in the place of the word *kaporet* and always has the meaning of a covering object. Call it a seat if you will, as it is the place where the presence of God resides on the Yom Kippur. *Hilasterion* does not mean mercy but rather covering, with the word in Hebrew being the root word of atonement. So how did the concept of ‘mercy seat’ enter the vocabulary of the translators?

The translation journey continues into the Latin Vulgate, in which St Jerome in 386 AD used the word ‘*propitiatorio*’. This added the meaning of appeasement to the original Hebrew and Greek. Much later in 1523, it was translated in Luther's Bible as *gnadenstuhl* which is ‘seat of grace’ which actually took it a bit back from the concept of appeasement and closer to the original intent. Tyndale, in his English translation for which he paid the ultimate price to publish, introduced us to the phrase ‘mercy seat’ as he was quite influenced by the meaning of the Latin Vulgate. Thus in translation history, we have moved from Hebrew-Greek-Latin-German-English and at the end, the English no longer reflects the original literal Hebrew meaning of covering.

Paul the Apostle, in his Epistle to the Romans in 3:25, wrote that God has set the Messiah as a *hilasterion*. This is rendered in English as propitiation; the influence from the Latin is obvious. Modern scholarship, particularly those connected to the Jerusalem Perspective, note that Paul who knows the Hebrew and the Greek and not the Latin Vulgate version, actually probably here reflects that Jesus is our atoning covering and then also references Passover and not Yom Kippur when he writes ‘because in His divine forbearance He passed over former sins’. While

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both Passover and Yom Kippur are indeed referenced, the tendency in New Testament is to elevate Messiah as the Passover sacrifice. There are many sacrifices performed in the Tabernacle for Yom Kippur and atonement is being made continually and for multiple persons and things. Yet the highlight and major difference in Yom Kippur is not the sacrifice that died immediately but the one that took the sins of the Israelites out of the camp and away. John the Baptist makes the claim that when he sees Jesus he declares Him to be the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.

Returning to the plain text of Leviticus 16, we noted that while much detail is given regarding sacrifices and their proper performance, no mention is made of the heart of the people. In fact, on a literal reading, the Israelites are not participants in any great detail at all during the ceremony. All work for atonement is done by the High Priest, who largely remains completely unseen and hidden in his work within the Tabernacle and Holy of Holies. Initially Aaron the High Priest takes two offerings for himself, a bull and a ram. Jewish traditions says that these he must pay for from his own resources and not from the public coffers. He changes clothing into simple humble garments, forgoing his famous breastplate, the Urim and Thumim and the headpiece with the name of the Lord engraved. The sacrifices are for the personal atonement of the High Priest as well as his household. Household sin and sins of legacy are not something we often think about, but prior to entering the presence of the Lord, they must be dealt with through atonement. The Passover sacrifice was also a sacrifice for entire households and not solely for individuals. This theology of household sin and atonement may explain some of the Pauline texts in which the faith of a spouse can cover an unbelieving family member.

Two goats are presented from the Israelite community before the Lord and lots cast to choose which goat is for the Lord and which one is for Azazel. Azazel is another mysterious Hebrew word that precludes translation. Is Azazel the name of a person, a place or a reference to the goat itself? Through the Jewish exegetical tradition, it has come to mean all three. Azazel stands in the same place in word order and structure as the Lord. Thus initially it appears to reference a person, traditionally a fallen angel who was defeated by Michael and imprisoned in the desert. Thus comes the tradition of the desert as the abode of demons. Jesus makes a reference that following an exorcism the spirit wandered the dry places (deserts) and returned with friends to repossess the man again. Following the baptism of the Lord, the Spirit sends Jesus into the desert for His encounter with the accuser of man, Satan.

Rambam, from the middle ages, referred to Azazel as a place or another name for the wilderness, and many modern English translations have followed his lead. Using Hebrew wordplay, Azazel can be read as Az (goat) and Zuz (move). Thus is sometimes rendered as the scapegoat or the goat that moves. Which one is it? Well, it's probably all three! Welcome to Hebraic thought.

The goats are selected by lot as there is no actual physical difference between them. One is offered to the Lord as a sin offering. Recall that sin offerings are for unintentional sins. The High Priest then does a symbolic transfer of the sins of the Israelite community on the head of the live goat, the scapegoat as it has come to be known. It is then removed from the presence of the community and given over to the desert, to Azazel, either of which represents a source of evil. Which sins is the goat carrying? All of them, both unintentional and intentional! The

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Hebrew text in verse 10 actually reads that the 'goat will atone for him'. Who is the him? The only subjects in the sentence of the verse are either Azazel or the goat itself. Thus the question becomes is the atonement for a fallen angel or an animal? It is very unclear and translators differ in their choice of how the translation should read. What is going here in this ceremony? Are we trying to appease a desert demon? Are we taking the annual sins of the nation and dumping them on a rebellious fallen angel? Or is the action of removing the sins of the people as far away as possible, never to return, the theological point that the Lord is making? The mystery of the Hebrew language requires us to continually ask, seek and ultimately find those answers.