

CONFESSIONS OF A SCAPEGOAT A Devotional Meditation from

Leviticus 16:1-18:30; Ezekiel 20:2-20, 22:1-19; Matthew 5:17-48;
Romans 7:14-25; Hebrews 13:11-16

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What's the point of releasing perfectly good livestock out into the wilderness just to satisfy religious protocol? Isn't that the question we want to ask when we read about the scapegoat? It's one of the most peculiar ceremonies in the Torah, and it happens on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. That's the most solemn, most holy day of the year on the Hebrew calendar. Some say it's the day when God will judge the nations, just before He tabernacles with us in the blessed Messianic Age we long to see.



The Scapegoat, William Holman Hunt, 1854, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

But why a scapegoat? Why isn't it enough to offer one goat; why should there be two specified in the protocol? That's what it says:

Then [the High Priest] is to take from the congregation of *Bnei-Yisrael* two he-goats for a sin offering and one ram for a burnt offering. Then Aaron is to offer the bull for the sin offering which is for himself and make atonement for himself and his house. Then he is take the two goats and present them before *ADONAI* at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. Aaron will then cast lots for the two goats—one lot for *ADONAI*, and the other lot for the scapegoat. Aaron is to present the goat on which the lot for *ADONAI* fell and make it a sin offering. But the goat upon which the lot for the scapegoat fell is to be presented alive before *ADONAI*, to make atonement upon it, by sending it away as the scapegoat into the wilderness.

Leviticus 16:5-10 TLV

These two goats make a beautiful picture. One is offered in atonement for the sin of all Israel, and the other has all those sins confessed over it and then carries those sins away, never to return. That demonstrates the spiritual work of atonement done by our gracious, redeeming God through His Messiah. It's all there in Leviticus:

When he has finished atoning for the Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, then he is to present the live goat. Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of *Bnei-Yisrael* and all their transgressions, all their sins. He should place them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat will carry all their iniquities by itself into a solitary land and he is to leave the goat in the wilderness . . . The bull for the sin offering and the goat for the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the Holy Place, should be carried outside the camp, and their hides, their flesh, and their dung burned

with fire. The one who burns them is to wash his clothes and bathe his body in water. Then afterward he may come into the camp.

Leviticus 16:20-22, 27-28 TLV

If we need any more clarity on this point, the writer of Hebrews spells it out:

For the bodies of those animals—whose blood is brought into the Holies by the *kohen gadol* [high priest] as an offering for sin—are burned outside the camp. Therefore, to make the people holy through His own blood, *Yeshua* also suffered outside the gate. So let us go to Him outside the camp, bearing His disgrace. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come.

Hebrews 13:11-14 TLV

But still, why a scapegoat?

Actually, it's not "scapegoat" in the original Hebrew. That term was made up by William Tyndale in the 1530s as he was translating the scriptures into English. It's the best he could do with the peculiar Hebrew word, *azazel*. The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, explains three major theories about the meaning of *azazel*. It could mean "a steep, rocky or hard place," where the scapegoat would be taken. Or *Azazel* could be the name of one of the fallen angels referred to in Genesis 6:2 – a demonic goat-spirit that in Greek mythology is called Pan. Or perhaps *azazel* means simply that the goat was sent away. Rabbi Sacks, however, has his own explanation:

The Yom Kippur ritual dramatized the fact that we have within us two inclinations, one good (*yetser tov*), one bad (*yetser hara*). We have two minds, one emotional, one rational . . . The two goats . . . are both us. One we offer to God. But the other we disown. We let it go into the wilderness where it belongs and where it will meet a violent death. *Ez azal*: the goat has gone. We have relinquished the *yetser hara*, the instinct-driven impetuosity that leads to wrong. We do not deny our sins. We confess them. We own them. Then we let go of them. Let our sins, that might have led us into exile, be exiled. Let the wilderness reclaim the wild. Let us strive to stay close to God.*

This explanation resonates with me, just as it seems to have resonated with Paul, the rabbi-apostle who lamented that the good he wanted to do he could not, but the evil he did not want to do, he did. Better to send this evil inclination away than have it continue to corrupt the camp – not the congregational community, but the camp of my heart, where my God promises to tabernacle with me. But then, how can I send this goat away except that the pure and acceptable goat offered in my place has bought me some time?

This is where the analogy breaks down. Yes, there are aspects of that "good goat" in my being, but the rancid mixture of that "evil goat" makes it impossible to present either to the Holy God. As my Messiah explains, even the thoughts of my heart equate to having done the deed. How, then, can He coexist with the pornographic theater of my mind, or the slaughterhouse of my heart, where those who offend me are slain violently on a daily

* Rabbi Jonathan, "The Scapegoat: Atonement and Purification," Chabad.org, accessed April 27, 2022, https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1846869/jewish/The-Scapegoat-Atonement-and-Purification.htm.

basis? There is no escape for me, or for anyone, from the consuming fire that is the Holy One.

No escape, that is, unless He Himself takes my place on the execution stake. Because He is acceptable, I am free to go to the wilderness, where He, the Good Shepherd, can find me and bring me to the place where I may be cleansed from the wickedness of my being.

How sad if I am not allowed to be rescued and transformed while wandering in the dry wilderness of this fallen world. That's what happened to the scapegoats in ancient times. The Hebrews of those days understandably would not want the goat to return after having all the nasty realities of the nation confessed over its head. That's why the goats were either chased up a mountain and off a cliff, or led up and thrown off. Killing the scapegoat meant no longer having to deal with the consequences of those sins it represented, at least until the sin cycle began again – either on the next day, or in the next minute.

This tragic ending speaks to a quasi-holiness that denies the power of genuine godliness. On one hand, we goats are led off a cliff by false shepherds who promise that God's grace allows us to live as we please, heedless of His righteous standards. On the other hand, we are chased off the cliff by zealots who mistake haughtiness for holiness, and insist that they can never have anything to do with people they deem tainted beyond help. The tragedy is that no help can come in either case – not because our Redeemer doesn't want to intervene, but because fallen people keep Him from doing so.

Yet where there is life, there is hope. That is why we scapegoats, while navigating the perils of this wilderness of the peoples, try to follow the exhortation of scripture:

Through *Yeshua* then, let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips giving thanks to His name. Do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

Hebrews 13:15-16 TLV