

Parshat Acharei Mot - Kedoshim

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A Hairsbreadth Can Be The Whole Difference

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In this week's portion, the Torah tells us that Aharon (Aaron) the High Priest, cast lots upon two goats, "one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for Azazel." (Leviticus 16:8)

Rashi explains the procedure as follows: "One goat he (Aharon) placed on his right hand, the other on his left. He then put both hands in the urn, took one lot in each hand and placed it upon the corresponding goat. One of the lots was inscribed 'for the Lord' and the other 'for Azazel.'" Ibn Ezra explains that Azazel was a height from which the goat was hurled.

Sforno argues that the goat inscribed "for the Lord" was sacrificed as an offering to atone for sins committed in connection with the Sanctuary. The goat sent away was meant to expiate the sins of the community. (Sforno, Leviticus 16:5)

Other explanations come to mind. It can be suggested that the lots teach us that there are aspects of life that are based purely on *mazal*. This doesn't mean that we do not have the power to precipitate change. What it does teach however, is that in life we all face a certain fate over which we have no control. The Talmud says it this way "life, children and sustenance are not dependant upon merit but on *mazal*." (Moed Katan 28a) No wonder we read about the lots on Yom Kippur, the day in which we recognize that there are elements of life that are only in the hands of God.

The Talmud also notes that the goats were similar in appearance, height, size and value (Yoma 62 a, b). Yet, a slight shift of Aharon's hand brought about different destinies for the goats-one to the Lord, the other to Azazel.

It has been noted that life is a game of inches. This is even true in the world of sports. For example, a hard ground ball to the short stop could result in a double play. Had the ball gone an inch to the left or right, the winning run could have been driven in. So, too, in worldly affairs. It is often the case that an infinitesimal amount can be the difference between life and death, between belief and heresy, between doing the right and wrong thing.

This may be the deepest message of the lots. The slightest movement could make the difference between heaven and earth, between being sent to the Lord and being cast to Azazel.