

Parshat Acharei Mot

Before entering the Kodesh Kodeshim, the Holy of Holies to atone for the people the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest had to atone for his own sins that he may have committed during the year. He removed his ceremonial clothing, bathed and put on a plain linen turban. He brought a bull as a sin offering for himself and his household and two goats as a sin offering for the people.

Acharei Mot states that Aaron would take two he-goats and let them stand before God at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and Aaron placed lots upon the two goats, one marked for God and one marked for Azazel. The one marked for God was offered as a sin offering on the alter and the one marked for Azazel was sent off to the wilderness.

Who or what is Azazel? No one was really sure. Some Rabbis guessed that Azazel was the name of a place. The Greek version of the Bible translated Azazel as dismissal, or nowhere. Later Rashi said that Azazel was “a steep mountain.” But these ideas of a place were only one way of explaining Azazel.

Other ancient sources state that Azazel is a who rather than a what. Some say that Azazel is one of two angels who led a rebellion against God. Some modern scholars state that Azazel was the name of a demon, an evil power thought to live deep in the woods.

Once the sins of the Israelites were placed on the head of the goat marked for Azazel, the goat was sent into the wilderness. That made the goat dangerous. Anyone or anything coming in contact with the goat might accidentally become unclean. Or the goat could wonder back into the camp. Rashi tells us that in the days of the Second Temple the goat was pushed backwards over a cliff to its death. This was the only way to make sure that the goat didn't come back.

Acharei Mot concludes with a list of forbidden marriages. The list forbids the marriage of people who share the same blood or who are closely related. Also a commandment was given that forbid parents from offering up their children to Molech.

The law code in Acharei Mot repeats again many of the ideas about blood that we have already studied.