

Jacob and Esau

As we have already learned from our study of the brotherly dyads found in Genesis, scholars often attempt to connect the motif of election of biblical siblings with the selection of the cultic animals at Yom Kippur. In a manner similar to Karl Barth, Mary Douglas sees the motif of election as one of the most crucial links between the stories of the brotherly pairs and the two goats' ritual, wherein one animal was selected for the Lord and the other for Azazel. She argues that, in the Book of Genesis, "the theme of conspicuously uneven destinies occurs prominently. Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, of two brothers one is chosen and the other is not."⁵⁵ The mystery of election is paradoxically highlighted by a role reversal, as the expected recipient of the blessing, the elder son, is rejected, and the younger sibling somewhat unexpectedly receives the blessing. In this respect, Douglas further notes that:

the Leviticus rite of atonement points to the central theological theme of the Pentateuch, a chosen people and the contrast with the people who have not been chosen. The Genesis stories are about the eldest sons, for example, Ishmael and Esau, being superseded. Their respective younger brother, Isaac and Jacob, destined before birth to the disciplines of the Covenant, would parallel the goat on which the lot of the Lord fell. Ishmael and Esau would parallel the bird and the goat not chosen, set free in a remote uncultivated land.⁵⁶

This theme of election would eventually become a very important motif in a later eschatological reinterpretation of the Yom Kippur ritual found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. In this text, the celestial scapegoat will be associated with the lot of Azazel and the patriarch with the lot of the deity.

As has been already noticed in the course of our investigation, the biblical accounts of the two siblings repeatedly portray one of the brothers as being forced into exile from the divine presence, while the other sibling is drawn into the center of the sacred geographical realm. Gershon Hepner draws his attention to the similar spatial dynamics taking place in the biblical story of Jacob and Esau, where the peculiar destinations of both brothers are overlaid with some conspicuous allusions to the atoning rite. One of the important locales involves the conceptual developments found in Genesis 33. Thus,

55 Douglas, *Jacob's Tears*, 54.

56 Douglas, *Jacob's Tears*, 55.

Hepner notices that when Jacob and Esau are separated in Genesis 33, Esau is there depicted as leaving Canaan forever, heading to Seir: “So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir (שעירה).”⁵⁷ Hepner suggests that the mysterious place of Esau’s permanent departure from Canaan “echoes the שעיר, *goat*, that is dedicated to Azazel, the scapegoat.”⁵⁸ While one brother, like the proverbial scapegoat, departs from the sacred geographical habitat, the other, like the immolated goat, is drawn into this locale. In this respect, Hepner notes that, in contrast to Esau, who is leaving the Holy Land, Jacob returns to Canaan. Gen 33:17–18 reports the following:

But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house, and made booths for his cattle; therefore the place is called Succoth. Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram; and he camped before the city. (NRSV).

Hepner argues that the two movements, as in the atoning rite, are inter-related, and Esau’s exile to Seir allows Jacob to enter into the sacred realm. He argues that “unlike Esau, he [Jacob] escapes the role of scapegoat. Jacob receives expiation when Esau departs to Seir, because his journey to Succoth, narratively foreshadows the expiation obtained by Israelites on Yom Kippur (Lev. 23:26–33).”⁵⁹ Hepner sees in the stories of Jacob and Esau the reenactment of the atoning rite. He does so by arguing that

the partial reconciliation between Jacob and Esau echoing the reconciliation between God and the Israelites after the שעיר, *he-goat*, designated to Azazel has been sent out to the wilderness in a ritual that occurs five days before the festival of Succoth—“Booths” (23:33–34). The fact that he returns to the place from which he was expelled implies that he follows the ostracism paradigm rather than that of the scapegoat. . . .⁶⁰

The similarities between the biblical features of Esau’s story and the details of the scapegoat ritual might not be limited solely to the theme of the final destination of Jacob’s brother. John Dunnill draws his attention to the red color of Esau, seeing in that attribute a possible connection with the red color of the

57 Gen 33:16.

58 Hepner, *Legal Friction*, 540.

59 Hepner, *Legal Friction*, 540.

60 Hepner, *Legal Friction*, 540.

scapegoat's band.⁶¹ He also brings his attention to another brotherly pair in the Genesis narrative: Zerah and Perez, where the color symbolism of the red band also appears to suggest a connection with the scapegoat imagery.⁶² He notes that

the story of the birth of Zerah and Perez, sons of Judah and Tamar, has similarities to that of Esau and Jacob—Perez like Jacob supplanting his elder brother in the womb itself—with the curious addition that when Zerah puts out his hand from the womb the midwife ties round it a scarlet thread (Gen. 38:28), such a scarlet thread (κόκκινος) as was to be used in the leper-cleansing and the red-heifer rite (Lev. 14:4, Numb. 19:6), and which, according to *Mishnah Yoma* 4.2,20 was to be tied around the head of the scapegoat (and around the throat of the other goat) on the Day of Atonement; it was also what Rahab tied in her window (Josh. 2:18).⁶³

Dunnill further suggests that “the significance of this blood-symbol attached to extremities is not the rejection of the bearer, however, but the setting-apart by God of this particular liminal object or figure as the means for the reaffirming of the covenant: as such it may entail divine protection.”⁶⁴ Indeed, as in the aforementioned story of Cain where the endowment with the role of the

61 Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*, 158, note 21. Such an interpretation appears to be present also in *Zohar* 1.153a, which demonstrates parallels between Esau and Azazel, drawing on his red color: “Contrariwise, from the side of the North there issue a variety of grades, extending downwards, to the world below. This is the region of the dross of gold, which comes from the side of impurity and loathsomeness and which forms a link between the upper and nether regions; and there is the line where the male and female principles join, forming together the rider on the serpent, and symbolized by Azazel. Now from thence there spread many grades which dominate the world, all of them presenting sides of defilement and acting as chieftains and prefects in the world. Observe that Esau, when he emerged into the world, was red all over like a rose, and was hairy after the pattern of a goat (*sa'ir*), and from such a being came forth chieftains and prefects, fully armed, who dominate the world.” Sperling and Simon, *The Zohar*, 2.89–90. Calum Carmichael also connects Esau's color with Yom Kippur imagery, namely by the symbolism of the red heifer.

62 The Yom Kippur imagery might also be present in another brotherly pair, Manasseh and Ephraim. Thus, Gen 48:8–20, a passage which depicts Jacob putting Ephraim ahead of Manasseh, appears to allude to the ritual of selecting the goats. Several details are notable—the symbolism of left and right sides, laying hands, etc.

63 Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*, 157.

64 Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*, 157–8.

human scapegoat grants the antagonist the special protected status, in other biblical scapegoat stories we can see similar connections.

Our study so far has been drawing on the insights of a relatively small group of modern scholars who attempted to uncover a set of illusive connections between the brotherly pairs of Genesis and the goats of the atoning rite. Yet, by leaning on the arguments of Barth, Douglas, Hepner, and Dunnill, we should not assume that these conceptual links were only recognized in the modern exegetical enterprise. Already in pre-modern exegesis such correspondences between the siblings' narratives and the ritual became a prominent line of interpretation. In rabbinic literature, the story of Jacob and Esau has been repeatedly placed in the context of the Yom Kippur rite and interpreted through the two goats' imagery. One of these instances can be found in chapter 65 of *Genesis Rabbah*, a text that relays the following tradition:

And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother: Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man—*ish sa'ir* (XXVII, 11): he is demonic, as in the verse, And satyrs (*se'irim*) shall dance there (Isa. XIII, 21). And I am a smooth man—*halak* as in the verse, For the portion (*heleq*) of the Lord is His people (Deut. XXXII, 9). R. Levi and R. Isaac. R. Levi said: This may be illustrated by two men, one possessing a thick head of hair and the other bald-headed, who stood near a threshing-floor. When the chaff flew into the locks of the former, it became entangled in his hair; but when it flew on to the head of the bald man, he passed his hand over his head and removed it. Even so, the wicked Esau is polluted by sin throughout the year and has nought wherewith to procure forgiveness, whereas Jacob is defiled by sin throughout the year, but has the Day of Atonement wherewith to procure forgiveness. R. Isaac observed: This interpretation is farfetched [but the same idea may be deduced from this verse]: And the goat (*sa'ir*) shall bear upon him (Lev XVI, 22)—this alludes to Esau, as it says, Behold, Esau my brother is a man a *sa'ir*. All their iniquities unto a land which is cut off (Lev 16:22).

Reflecting on this passage David Halperin notes that “this midrash carries us, if the attributions to Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Isaac are to be trusted back to Palestine at the end of the third century. Both these Amoraim . . . make a connection between Yom Kippur and the conflict between Jacob and Esau.”⁶⁵

65 D.J. Halperin, “Origen and Seder Eliyahu: A Meeting of Midrashic Trajectories?” in: *Agendas for the Study of Midrash in the Twenty-First Century* (ed. M.L. Raphael; Williamsburg: College of William and Mary, 1999) 18–42 at 20.

Halperin further argues that “Rabbi Isaac understands one of the goats, the ‘goat for Azazel,’ as a representation of Esau himself.”⁶⁶ Moreover, it appears that the aforementioned passage from *Gen. Rab.* 65:15 operates with the imagery of not one, but two sacerdotal agents. Halperin therefore suggests that the implicit affirmation of Jacob as the immolated goat might also be present in this passage, as well. He offers the following hypothesis:

Does he take the other goat, the “goat for the Lord,” as a parallel representation of Jacob? He does not say so explicitly. But this seems a plausible understanding of Rabbi Isaac’s words, for two reasons. First, the anonymous midrash at the beginning of the passage seems to point in this direction. The words *se’ir* and *halaq* are understood to refer, not to the physical characteristics of Esau and Jacob—as in Rabbi Levi’s parable—but to their being a “demon-man” and the Lord’s portion, respectively. This seems to run parallel to the casting of the lots on the two goats, in Leviticus 16:8: one for the Lord, one for Azazel. If we will allow ourselves to interpret Rabbi Isaac’s midrash in accord with the anonymous preface, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that just as Esau corresponds to Azazel’s goat, so Jacob corresponds to the Lord’s.⁶⁷

Halperin notes that “by equating Azazel’s goat with Esau (and presumably the Lord’s goat with Jacob), Rabbi Isaac finds a meaning in the scapegoat ritual that goes beyond its statutory obligation.”⁶⁸ He further argues that the ritual itself represents “a metaphysical commentary on the relation between Jacob and Esau, and therefore presumably between the two peoples who derive from them.”⁶⁹ Halperin concludes his argument by observing that “Rabbi Isaac makes no attempt to explicate the details of the ritual on the basis of this premise; but, obviously, has opened the possibility of doing so.”⁷⁰

In his short study, Halperin offers a set of illuminating remarks on the broader biblical context of Esau and Jacob’s story by noting some suggestive allusions to the two goats’ imagery. One of these allusions is the twinship of

66 Halperin, “Origen and Seder Eliyahu,” 20.

67 Halperin, “Origen and Seder Eliyahu,” 20–21.

68 Halperin, “Origen and Seder Eliyahu,” 21.

69 Halperin, “Origen and Seder Eliyahu,” 21.

70 Halperin, “Origen and Seder Eliyahu,” 21.

the two brothers, which is, in Halperin's opinion, reminiscent of the twinship of the two goats of the atoning rite.⁷¹

It appears that the sacerdotal reinterpretation of the story of Jacob and Esau was a quite prominent line of interpretation in the midrashic literature. Thus, another testimony found in *Leviticus Rabbah* 21:11 again strives to overlay the story of the two brothers with distinctive cultic allusions. It offers the following interpretation:

A goat was brought in order to recall the merit of Jacob; as it is written, And fetch me from thence two good kids of the goats (Gen XXVII, 9). They are 'good', explained R. Berehiah in the name of R. Levi, for yourself, and they are 'good' for your descendants. They are good for yourself, for by their means you will receive the blessings, and they are good for your descendants, for by their means atonement will be made for them on the Day of Atonement, as is proved by the text, For on this day shall atonement be made for you (Lev XVI, 30). I now know that allusion was made to the merit of the Patriarchs.⁷²

71 He notes that "...Jacob and Esau are twins. Not identical twins, to be sure; the Bible is clear enough about that (Genesis 25:25, 27:11). Yet the rabbis found their twinship significant enough to associate Jacob and Esau with the constellation Gemini, and to draw homiletic conclusions. 'Notice what month I chose to give the Torah,' they represent God as saying to the Gentiles. 'The third month, under the constellation of the Twins; [to indicate that] if wicked Esau wants to convert and repent and come study Torah, let him come! I shall welcome him.' The essential difference between the twins is this: that Jacob is righteous, Esau wicked. The Mishnah, without any very solid Biblical grounding, prescribes that the two goats of Yom Kippur must be 'alike in appearance, height, and value, and the two must have been acquired at the same time' (*Yoma* 6:1). To someone who took this prescription for granted, as Rabbi Isaac surely must have done, it would be natural to think of the two goats as twins, distinguished only by their destinies: one for God, one for Azazel. Let one of these twins becomes identified with Esau, and it seems almost inevitable that the other will be identified with Jacob." Halperin, "Origen and Seder Eliyahu," 21.

72 A similar tradition is found also in *Pesikta de Rab Kahana* 9:9: "A goat, through the merit of Jacob: 'Go now to the flock, and fetch me from thence two good kids of the goats' (Gen. 27:9). Why did Rebekah say 'good?' Because she meant, explained R. Berehiah in the name of R. Helbo, they will be good for you, [O Jacob], and good for your children—good for you since through them you will receive [your father's] blessings; and good for your children, for, because of the offering of he-goats, atonement will be made for your children on Atonement Day: On this day shall atonement be made for you, etc. (Lev. 16:30)." W.G. Braude and I.J. Kapstein, *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana: R. Kahana's Compilation of Discourses for Sabbaths and Festal Days* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975) 181.

In this rabbinic testimony, the reader again encounters peculiar animal imagery. It refers to Jacob's account found in Gen 27:9, where Rebekah tells her son to bring out two young animals in order to prepare a savory meal for Isaac. Yet, the rabbinic passage appears to connect these "two kids of the goats" with the cultic animals of Leviticus 16. Commenting on this passage, Halperin argues that here the two goats of Yom Kippur, the one "for the Lord" and the one "for Azazel," are linked to the two goats that Jacob used in order to take for himself Esau's blessing.⁷³

Halperin also brings his attention to another rabbinic passage found in the additional chapters of *Seder Eliyyahu Zuta*, additions, which were "made to that text at an unknown date from an equally unknown source."⁷⁴ In this passage it appears that Esau is portrayed as the go-away goat, bearing the iniquities of Jacob-Israel. *Seder Eliyyahu Zuta* 19 reads:

But when Esau spoke up to the Holy One, saying, "Master of the universe, is my strength such that I can bear all of Jacob's iniquities that You load upon me?" The Holy One took all of Jacob's sins and put them on His own garments, so that their crimson became an intense scarlet. He will wash the garments, however, until they are made white as snow, as is said, His raiment was as white snow (Dan 7:9). All the foregoing discourse was initiated by the question Who is this that cometh from Edom? (Isa 63:1).⁷⁵

In this passage, one can find additional markers that are likewise noticeable in the scapegoat ordinance—most prominently, the reference to the crimson color of the scapegoat's band. The passage also seems to understand this scarlet band as the attire of human transgressions, purged during the atoning rite. Halperin sees this cultic interpretation as dependent on the previously mentioned statement of R. Isaac from *Gen. Rab.* 65:15. He argues that:

it is entirely obvious that the author of our midrash has made use of Rabbi Isaac's midrash, in *Gen. Rab.* 65:15. It is also clear that he has effected a

73 Halperin, "Origen and Seder Eliyahu," 19.

74 Halperin, "Origen and Seder Eliyahu," 23. Halperin notes that these additions "show certain stylistic affinities to *Eliyahu Rabbah* and *Zuta*. . . . And it is at least thinkable that they were added on to the text precisely because they were correctly perceived to derive from the same body of midrashic materials as the rest of the *Seder Eliyahu*." Halperin, "Origen and Seder Eliyahu," 23.

75 W. Braude and I. Kapstein, *Tanna Debe Eliyyahu: The Lore of the School of Elijah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981) 496.

stunning reversal of the message of his source. Rabbi Isaac's midrash had made Esau, in his role as "goat for Azazel," the permanent repository of "honest" Jacob's sins. Our midrash indeed goes this far, with Rabbi Isaac. But he takes the additional step—wholly unprecedented, in the aggadic tradition on the scapegoat ritual—of having God yield to Esau's pleas, and relieve him of his burden of sin. God then takes that burden upon Himself; or, strictly speaking, upon His clothing.⁷⁶

Later Jewish testimonies reflected in a prominent Jewish mystical compendium, known to us as the *Book of Zohar*, also attempt to connect Jacob and Esau with the two goats of the atoning rite. There one can find familiar interpretive lines, prominent also in *Midrash Rabbah*, including a reflection on Esau's designation as a hairy man—אִישׁ שְׁעָר.⁷⁷ Thus, at *Zohar* I.65a the following passage can be found:

Consider this. At every New Moon the "End of all flesh" is given a portion over and above that of the daily offering, so as to divert his attention from Israel, who are thus left entirely to themselves and in full freedom to commune with their King. This extra portion comes from the he-goat (*sa'ir*), being the portion of Esau, who is also called *sa'ir*, as it is written, "Behold Esau my brother is a hairy (*sa'ir*) man" (Gen XXVII, 11). Esau thus has his portion and Israel their portion. Hence it is written, "For the Lord hath chosen Jacob unto himself, and Israel for his own treasure" (Ps CXXXV, 4). Consider this point. The whole desire of this "End of all flesh" is for flesh only, and the tendency of flesh is ever towards him; it is for this reason that he is called "End of all flesh". Such power, however, as he does obtain is only over the body and not over the soul. The soul ascends to her place, and the body is given over to its place, in the same way as in an offering the devotion of him who offers ascends to one place, and the flesh to another. Hence the righteous man is, of a truth, himself an offering of atonement. But he who is not righteous is disqualified as an offering, for the reason that he suffers from a blemish, and is therefore like the defective animals of which it is written, "they shall not be accepted for you" (Lev XXII, 25). Hence it is that the righteous are an atonement and a sacrifice for the world.⁷⁸

76 Halperin, "Origen and Seder Eliyahu," 25.

77 See Gen 27:11: "But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, 'Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man (אִישׁ שְׁעָר), and I am a man of smooth skin.'" (NRSV).

78 Sperling and Simon, *The Zohar*, 1.213–214.

The Zoharic passage adds some new conceptual dimensions to patterns that are already familiar. Similar to the mishnaic descriptions of Yom Kippur, this passage mentions that two lots or portions are variously assigned: one to Esau and the other to Jacob. Esau is associated with the portion given to the Other Side, in order to pacify it, which is how the scapegoat ritual is understood in this mystical compendium. Association of the human scapegoat with the portion given to the Other Side is especially noteworthy, since it becomes an emblematic feature of the Zoharic understanding of the scapegoat ordinance as a distraction for the demonic side during the Yom Kippur festival.

In another speculation found in *Zohar* 1.138a–b, Esau is directly named as the scapegoat and becomes understood as an agent of the Adversary:

Observe that Jacob knew that Esau was destined to ally himself to that tortuous serpent, and hence in all his dealings with him he conducted himself like another tortuous serpent, using all cunning devices; and so it was meet. The same idea was expressed by R. Simeon when, in expounding the verse, “And God created the great fishes, and every living creature that creepeth” (Gen 1, 21), he said: “The “great fishes” are symbolic of Jacob and Esau, and “every living creature that creepeth” symbolizes all the intermediate grades.’ Verily Jacob was endowed with cunning to enable him to hold his own with that other serpent; and so it was meet. For the same reason every New Moon a goat is to be offered up so as to draw the serpent to his own place and thus keep him away from the moon. The same applies to the Day of Atonement, when a goat is to be offered. All this is cunningly devised in order to gain dominion over him, and make him impotent to do mischief. So Scripture says: “And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities into a land which is cut off” (Lev XVI, 22), where the goat (*sa’ir* = *Seir*), as already explained, symbolizes Esau.⁷⁹

In this passage, as in the narrative found in *Zohar* I.65a, the scapegoat ritual is also understood to play a role in the deception of the Other Side; it is devised in order to distract the negative forces’ attention during the yearly atoning rite.⁸⁰

79 Sperling and Simon, *The Zohar*, 2.44.

80 See also *Zohar* 1.145b: “For each time the Israelites offered up a he-goat the serpent was subdued and led captive, as already said. Hence Jacob brought his father two he-goats (*se’irim*), one to subdue Esau, who was hairy (*sa’ir*), and the other to subdue the grade to which Esau was beholden and to which he adhered, as has been said already.” Sperling and Simon, *The Zohar*, 2.70.

The popular biblical tricks of Jacob against Esau therefore receive a new sacerdotal meaning here: they are understood as the deceptive tools Israel uses against the powers of the Other Side, which are represented by Esau.⁸¹

81 Another passage from *Zohar* 1.142b appears to allude to the weakening of Esau, who is understood as the sacerdotal agent of the Other Side: "Rebekah therefore prepared two dishes. R. Judah said: Herein were foreshadowed the two he-goats which the children of Jacob were in the future to offer, one for the Lord and the other for Azazel on the Day of Atonement. We see thus Rebekah offering 'two kids of the goats,' one for the supernal grade and the other with the object of subduing the grade of Esau, so as to deprive him of any power over Jacob." Sperling and Simon, *The Zohar*, 2.56. On Esau as the scapegoat see also Hepner, *Legal Friction: Law, Narrative, and Identity Politics in Biblical Israel*, 539.