Shana tova. When I was growing up, my mother was always the one to chant the Yom Kippur torah reading at our shul. I have a visceral memory of listening to her practice it as we walked through our leafy suburban streets to services, feeling haunted by those opening words “Acharei Mot/After the Death” in the plaintive high holiday trope, and by the image of Aaron. Soon after two of his four sons had inexplicably died worshipping God, he is told to carry out the mysterious ritual of the Yom Kippur goats, casting lots to determine which of the two would be sacrificed to God, and which would be sent into the wilderness for Azazel. I still feel a sense of mystery and fear today as we twice recount the Service of the High Priest, once in the torah reading and once in the Avodah Service. We don’t do this on Rosh Hashanah, when our torah readings focus on the tragic personal stories of our ancestors, Avraham, Sarah, Hagar, Yitzchak, and Yishmael. But on Yom Kippur, we read about the two goats, one for God, and one, the proverbial scapegoat, for Azazel. Azazel was often identified with an ancient goat demon, the embodiment of our yetzer hara or evil inclination. The Talmud in Yoma classifies the scapegoat with the chukkim, or statutes, that can’t be understood based on reason but must just be accepted. But we’re Jews- we can’t just accept something. We have to ask why. Why the scapegoat? Recognizing that this ritual is distinct from the terrible practice of scapegoating that is so rife in our world today, what wisdom can we learn from it?

The ritual of the scapegoat involved bringing two goats to the High Priest on Yom Kippur. According to the mishna, the two goats were identical: ‘alike in appearance, height, and value, and…acquired at the same time.’ The High Priest would cast lots over them, designating one for God and one for Azazel. He would sacrifice the one for God, along with a bull, and use their blood to purify the mikdash. He would then confess all the sins of the People Israel over the head of the goat for Azazel and send it off to the wilderness in the hands of the Ish Iti, the designated man, or alternatively, the Person of the Moment.

In the mishnah, the goat for Azazel is thrown off a cliff to its death. But in the Torah, the goat is sent off alive into the wilderness. My brother David

likes to imagine a convention of scapegoats out there with all of our sins, comparing notes. The goat from 2021 is talking to the goat from 2025. “I thought the sins I carried out here were bad,” he says. “But, Oy, my little chad gadyaleh, compared to you I’m hardly worth bleating your chest over!”

I have so many questions: why two identical goats? Why the lots? Why did we send away the goat for Azazel, rather than sacrificing it like a normal guilt offering?

The trope of a scape animal was not unique to Yom Kippur. The torah describes a similar ritual of a scapedove in the healing of the metzora, the one suffering from a spiritual sort of skin disease. It was also not unique to Judaism. The practice of sending away a live animal to the wilderness to ward off threatening malevolence is also documented in Hittite, Ugaritic and Assyrian texts, among others. These practices include scapebulls, scaperams, scapefrogs, and my favorite, the scapemouse, who, like the scapegoat, was bound with a thread and carried off evil to the demons Zarniza and Tarpattassi. Many of you participated in the practice of scapebread on Rosh Hashana, also known as tashlich.

These rituals speak to a deep human desire to have the burden of our guilt lifted off of us. One of the first sinners in the Torah, Cain, tells G-d “Gadol Avoni Min’so” “My sin is too great to bear.” Cain is describing a physical feeling of being weighted down by what we’ve done wrong. We describe God in the liturgy as “Nosay Avon va’fesha v’chata’a”, which is typically translated as “forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin” but literally means “the one who carries iniquity, transgression, and sin.” The scapegoat is described as physically carrying our sins into the wilderness- “V’nasa hasair alav et kol avonotam el eretz g’zeira/And the goat shall carry on him all their iniquities to a land that is cut off.” It’s a burden to know we are guilty, and we long to put that burden on someone or something else and send it far away from us so we will never have to think about it again.

Outside of the realm of ritual, scapegoating in the sense of blaming an innocent person or group for your misfortune and killing or expelling them,

is not a new invention. The Ancient Greeks would choose a slave, a disabled person, or a criminal, called a pharmakos, and expel them from the community at times of disaster in the belief that this would bring about purification. Imagine what it must have felt like to be the pharmakos, sent away from your home, your community and everything that kept you safe, for no reason. And the tradition of scapegoating is sadly alive and well in our country today. Immigrants are being blamed for unemployment, for drugs, and for crime, and literally being expelled. Trans people are being blamed for political violence and, in a particularly absurd example, for Easter falling on the same day as the International Transgender Day of Visibility. As Jews, we have been the targets of scapegoating throughout history.

Of course Jews are not immune from the temptation to scapegoat others. Over the millenia, the rabbis blamed our troubles on Edom, the nation descended from our patriarch Yaakov's twin brother Esav, which came to stand for Rome, Christianity, or whatever group in power was victimizing us at a given time. Not to say that we weren't oppressed through much of our history, but blaming all Christians or all Romans for that oppression is deeply flawed.

A tenth century midrash, the Tana d'Bei Eliahu Zuta, teaches us that God is not ok with our scapegoating Esav in this way. In this midrash, God is going to take vengeance on Edom and the angels are looking everywhere for God so they can sing praises for this great act of retribution. When they finally find God after much searching, God is wearing red clothing, which apparently is not their usual wardrobe. So the angels are like 'Hey God, what's up with the red clothes?' And God's like, "Well, I was just talking to Esav and his descendants, and they told me they can't bear all the sins of Israel anymore, they can't serve as Israel's scapegoat any longer, it's too much for them. So I took all their sins away from them, and put them on my garments, and that turned My garments red. But I'm going to wash them now with my special Sin Away brand laundry detergent." So God washes their garments and they become white again. What does this midrash teach us, other than the fact that it sounds like Eliahu Zuta was

reading a little too much Christian theology? That the desire to scapegoat is so powerful that it can take one of our formative myths, the story of Yaakov and Esav, who are both nuanced characters in the Torah, and make them into caricatures, one who is all good and one who is all evil. And that scapegoating groups of people in that way imposes impossible burdens on them and is not okay.

I can't give this drash without thinking about the hatred between Israelis and Palestinians that has led to the tragic deaths of tens of thousands of innocent people, the vast majority of them Palestinian. I went to a Jewish Day School growing up, raised to believe that Israel was full of heroes living lives of meaning and purpose. I spent a year and a half there in high school and college, including a few months on Kibbutz Alumin next to the Gaza Strip during the First Intifada. I came to have a more nuanced view, learning about the occupation and human rights violations even as I appreciated the vitality, creativity, and beauty I saw in Israel. But the last two years have still been years of terrible disillusionment for me. How could the leader of a country I felt so connected to treat human beings like their lives are worthless, using them to divert attention from his own problems and hold onto power? How can the Jewish State, with the US implicated as well through our support, punish all the Palestinians for the actions of Hamas, bombing and starving so many innocent people? I don't have answers to these questions.

Although they stem from the same human need, there is a world of difference between the ritual of the scapegoat and the practice of scapegoating. Several elements of the ritual serve to temper and redirect the urge to scapegoat other people. First, the goats are identical and their designation for God or Azazel is by lot, teaching us that the group that we want to blame is fundamentally the same as us. Their status is a result of blind chance- we could just as easily be in their position. More importantly, the ritual includes the verbal confession of our sins on the goat's head. We acknowledge that we are at fault, that we did wrong, rather than pretending that the scapegoat is the source of our problems. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Those who blame others, defining themselves as

victims, are destined to remain victims. Those who accept responsibility transform the world, because they have learned to transform themselves."

There is a deeper lesson of the scapegoat that turns on an acceptance of our yetzer harah. The scapegoat was the only means of atoning for intentional sins in the Temple system, those sins we commit knowing we are doing something wrong, consciously making the wrong choice. According to the Sifra, a third century collection of Midrash halacha, the scapegoat changed the status of our intentional sins and made them equivalent to mistakes that could be dealt with through the sin and guilt offerings. What does this magic transformation mean?

Remember that Azazel was understood by some, including Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides, to be a goat demon, the embodiment of the yetzer hara. On Yom Kippur, we sent a goat to Azazel. Some say the goat is to distract or propitiate the demon, so our prayers can rise to God without interference. Ramban suggests another interpretation, that giving a gift to Azazel is like honoring a member of the king's retinue for the King's sake. But this means we need to recognize Azazel the goat demon as a servant of God! The forces of destruction, our urges and fears that can lead us to do terrible things to one another- they are part of us, part of the fabric of creation, alongside the forces of life and growth. We need to see both of the goats standing before the High Priest as being us- one is for God and one is for a demon, but they are both essential aspects of ourselves.

Recognizing Azazel in ourselves and in the structures of our society can feel shameful. I have watched our society fail to house and feed the most vulnerable among us, and walked past those unhoused people myself. I am watching my country falling apart and mostly standing by, feeling impotent and at a loss. Today we come together to confess what we have done wrong and acknowledge it is part of us but it doesn't define us. It's that acceptance that allows us to move beyond shame and aspire to do better.

The scapegoat ritual, and our recitation of it on Yom Kippur, allows us to return from a state of spiritual tum'ah, a feeling that our hope and love for ourselves has died a little. By gathering together and confessing our sins each year, and ritualistically sending those sins away, we tell ourselves that we can hope again, we can love ourselves, and together we can work for a better world, one where we can see each other's humanity, including the parts that are for Azazel, accept it and build with love. When you think about your sins today, don't just focus on feeling bad and sending them away. Think about what urges led you to do them. Were you afraid of being unloved? Did you fear losing connection? Then think about you can channel that urge into something positive. That's a classic Jewish move, channeling our yetzer towards holiness. As we say the vidui today, let's feel both those goats skipping in our hearts. Let's be the Ish Iti, the Person Who Is Here Now, and accompany the Azazel goat carrying our sins into the proverbial wilderness, into the place where we encounter God. Gmar chatima tova!