

Yom Kippur 2026 Torah Reading Commentary

I have spoken about this Torah reading in the past, but it comes around every year and every year I see something different. On a superficial level parts of the reading are very theatrical. There is a lot of cinematic detail, including stage and costume directions, special effects, as well as plenty of gory detail concerning slaughtering a bull, a ram and a goat, down to where to sprinkle their blood. But this year, in light of current events, I am going to discuss the change in meaning of the term “scapegoat” over time.

We will read that Aaron is given two he-goats by the Israelite community which are brought before the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. They are identical, and Aaron casts lots over them, selecting one for “the Lord,” which is sacrificed as a sin offering, and designating the other “for Azazel.” After the sacrifices and purification rituals, including the “normal” sin offering, the Torah tells us that:

Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated agent.

Thus, Aaron figuratively transfers the transgressions of the people to the goat for atonement and it is sent into the desert, to Azazel, essentially bearing away the sins of the people.

This was the original scapegoat. Note that the scapegoat had done nothing wrong, and it was not involved with or in any way responsible for anyone’s sins. No one ever suggested that it was – it was simply a he-goat selected from the herd for its special role - to figuratively bear away the sins of the community.

Now let’s look at how the term scapegoat has changed and is used today. In distinct contrast to the biblical scapegoat, the modern scapegoat **is** blamed for something, even though, like the biblical scapegoat, it had not actually done anything wrong or been responsible for whatever it is being blamed for. Typically the modern scapegoat is an individual or a group, whether Jews, Israelis, Haitians, Mexicans or other immigrants, who are actually blamed for some set of problems or grievances of members of the larger society. Like the innocent goat upon whom the society’s sins were figuratively heaped, the modern scapegoat has nothing to do with the grievances of the larger society that they are being unfairly blamed for,

but the outcome for them may be as bad as – or worse than – that of the goat.

We Jews have a long history of being scapegoats for the larger host society. The blood libel in Christian Europe began nearly a millenium ago. Jews in numerous communities were falsely accused of using the blood of Christian children to make matzo, or of throwing Christian children into wells, and the greater community sought vengeance on the Jews. They were blamed for something that was entirely fictitious. It began in the mid-twelfth century in Norwich England, and spread to the continent. By 1171, the Jewish population of Blois, France, was murdered - the first of many such events on the continent.

Blois is a lovely town in the Loire Valley, and my family used it as a base when visiting the Loire Valley nearly 15 years ago. The massacre is commemorated today by the Rue des Juifs, or Street of the Jews, right in the center of town.

As if the blood libel was not enough, Jews were also blamed for the black death in the 14th century in many communities in France, Spain, Germany and Switzerland. In many cases, entire Jewish communities were wiped out. Lucky Jews were able to escape with their lives, some migrating east to establish Jewish communities in Poland. The perpetrators often profited by keeping the property of dead or expelled Jews.

Making Jews scapegoats for the problems of these medieval communities did not solve any of the communities' underlying problems. Perpetrators of pogroms or massacres may have felt better for a short time, having taken vengeance, and some may have profited, but no-one avoided the black death or recovered from an illness by getting rid of their Jews.

Of course we all know what happened in Germany the last century when Jews were blamed for Germany's loss in World War I. I am not going to catalogue any further atrocities resulting from Jews being made scapegoats through history. But to bring this to the present, we need look no further than the news.

There are numerous statements - from both left and right - scapegoating American Jews for problems in our country, and for the wars in Gaza and Iran. For example, while discussing housing and childhood poverty, the New York congressional candidate Darializa Ávila Chevalier said: "We have the money...[but] I saw my tax dollars...being spent on bombs abroad" referring to

Israel and the Iran war. In her telling, supporters of Israel are somehow responsible, among other things, for the lack of money to pay for housing and children's health. This ignores the reality of significant cuts to health and education budgets to finance the big beautiful bill's tax cuts, not the relatively piddling aid to Israel. On the right, we have Candace Owens telling Black Americans that "Jewish people were in control of the slave trade" and that Jews had "buried" that history. This is demonstrably untrue, but she is able to mobilize support by blaming Jews for ills of the Black community.

When politicians talk like this, they do it to ingratiate themselves to segments of the population who are predisposed to agree with them by focusing their anger on the other - the scapegoat. If enough people agree with them, it helps solidify support. So their payoff is power and money.

Statements like these - and unfortunately there are far too many examples, can, and have, influenced actions that result in violence against Jews and their institutions in this country. All of the attackers of Jews, immigrants and other scapegoats in this country see themselves as taking vengeance. And as always, blaming the scapegoat doesn't actually solve any of their problems.

So, getting back to where I began, it is unfortunate that the word "scapegoat" has been inverted from an innocent goat upon whom the community's sins were placed figuratively or spiritually, to innocent people upon whom society's ills are actually blamed and who may become easy targets for violence. In today's reading, the innocent goat bears away the community's sins only figuratively. In our modern usage, the scapegoat is unjustly blamed, despite not actually being responsible, for whatever ills are being heaped on it. And the scapegoat suffers whatever members of the society do to it.

We would all be better off if scapegoat only had retained its original meaning. I will end with a quote from Chabad.

"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."

So let us all reflect and let go of our sins. Gmar Tov!