# Scapegoating: Taking responsibility for our actions

October 14, 2003: With the Chicago Cubs leading the Florida Marlins three games to none in a best of seven series, Cubs fans were getting ready to celebrate their first trip to the World Series since 1945 and hopefully their first title since 1908. They could taste victory. With only five outs to go, Marlins second baseman, Luis Castillo, hit a ball fading into left field foul territory. As Cubs outfielder, Moises Alou, raced over to catch the ball, Steve Bartman, along with other fans, reached out to try and catch what seemed like a foul ball headed into their seats. Bartman's hand happened to be the only one which touched the ball, ultimately interfering with Alou's attempt. Alou, in a fit of rage, yelled in frustration, throwing his glove onto the ground. His emotions, getting the better of him, fueled the Cubs crowd. The Marlins went on to make an improbable comeback and defeated the Cubs in seven games, winning four in a row.

Steve Bartman, a life-long Cubs fan and little league coach was escorted out of the stadium while fellow fans threw garbage in his direction. In a matter of seconds Bartman went from one of the 41,000 cheering fans to the most hated man in Chicago. For over a decade Bartman stayed out of the public eye for a legitimate fear of his own safety. He was vilified. Fellow fans and reporters all blamed Bartman for the Cubs' collapse. They accused him of sabotaging the Cubs' chances of going back to the World Series. They just couldn't admit it had anything to do with the team's meltdown and poor play on the field.

Not long after this notorious incident, Steve Bartman penned a public letter to his fellow Chicagoans.

*To Moises Alou, the Chicago Cubs organization, Ron Santo, Ernie Banks, and Cub fans everywhere I am so truly sorry from the bottom of this Cubs fan's broken heart.*

*I ask that Cub fans everywhere redirect the negative energy that has been vented towards my family, my friends, and myself into the usual positive*

*support for our beloved team on their way to being National League champs.*

A heartfelt letter, indeed. Yet, for thirteen years it made little impact on how he was treated by the city he loved and called home.

Rationally, we understand that Bartman was not the source of the Cubs downfall that year. And as Jews we painfully recognize the forces at play. For thousands of years *we* have been the scapegoats for the ills of society no matter where we lived.

A few examples come to mind quite easily:

France and Germany 1349: 2000 Jews were burned to death during the peak of the Bubonic Plague. Whole Jewish communities were obliterated. Villagers convinced themselves that it must have been the Jews who caused the pestilence by poisoning wells.

France 1870: France suffered an overwhelming defeat to the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War. It was humiliating. In the decades following the war, the French public began asking how they could have lost. After desperately trying to find an answer, they finally found a 36-year old nondescript artillery officer in the French Army who they argued must have been a spy working for the enemy. This innocent man also just happened to be a Jew. His name was Alfred Dreyfus.The trial against Dreyfus in 1894 became a watershed moment in the rise of European anti-Semitism.

Nazi Germany: The German loss in WWI and it's economic depression was too much to bear. Hitler quickly blamed the Jews for all of the country's problems. Along with Joseph Goebbels and Julius Striecher's Der Stürmer newspaper, Hitler was able to get a whole nation to point their fingers at its Jewish citizens.

Blaming one another, as we can see throughout history, is a natural human tendency. It's so simple to do. How much easier it is to place responsibility on another's shoulders than to accept responsibility for ourselves? When

things go sour for us, we tend to shift our self-imposed misdeeds and flaws onto groups or individuals so that we can have a clear conscience.

Dr. Neel Burton, author of *Hide and Seek: The Psychology of Self-Deception*, writes, "The ego defense of displacement plays a role in scapegoating, in which uncomfortable feelings such as anger, frustration, envy, and guilt are displaced and projected onto another, often more vulnerable, person or group. The scapegoated target is then persecuted, providing the person doing the scapegoating not only with a conduit for his uncomfortable feelings, but also with pleasurable feelings of piety and self-righteous indignation."[1]

There are so many examples throughout human history of scapegoating innocent people. We even see this play out today as immigrants, Muslims, other minority groups, and even video games are blamed for creating economic and other societal problems that we don't care to own up to.

It's not always humans who are targeted as the scapegoats. The now extinct Great Auk, a large flightless bird resembling the penguin, also paid the ultimate price for living in the wrong place at the wrong time. In 1840 the Scottish island of St. Kilda suffered a massive storm that took the lives of local fisherman. The islanders captured this bird, brought it to a church, and held a trial where they accused the auk of causing the storm. The species was found guilty and several of the last remaining birds were stoned to death.

As strange as this story sounds, the Jewish tradition also has an unusual way of placing blame on animals, literally. All we need to do is look at the origins of Yom Kippur and the Torah reading that many communities are chanting tomorrow morning. Yom Kippur, as described in *parashat Aharei Mot*, is a far cry from how we currently observe this Day of Atonement.

In Leviticus 16, Aaron, as head priest, requires a ram, a bull, and two goats to absolve the community of their sins. The ram was sacrificed as a general

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[1] Burton, Neel. "The Psychology of Scapegoating." *Psychology Today*, 21 Dec. 2013, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hide-and-seek/201312/the-psychology-scapegoating.

offering aimed at pleasing God. The bull was sacrificed as a sin offering for Aaron and his family. What about the two goats?

Our text reads:
*Aaron shall take the two he-goats and let them stand before Adonai at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and he shall place lots upon the two goats, one marked for Adonai and the other marked for Azazel. Aaron shall bring forward the goat designated by lot for Adonai, which he is to offer as a sin offering; while the goat designated by lot for Azazel shall be left standing alive before Adonai, to make expiation with it and to send it off to the wilderness for Azazel.*[2]

Confused? That's ok. Stay with me.

*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 man. Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness…This shall be to you a law for all time: to make atonement for the Israelites for all their sins once a year.*[3]

I don't know about you, but I am thankful that my role as your rabbi is not to sacrifice large animals on your behalf.

What is this ritual all about and what or who is Azazel?

The rabbis cleverly divided this name into two words "*ez 'azel*", which literally means, "the goat that goes away." Now we know the etymology of the term "scapegoat."

But some commentators teach us that Azazel is the name of a demon or deity believed to inhabit the wilderness. Thus, the sins of the people are

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[2] Lev 16:5-10

[3] Lev 16:21-22; 34

symbolically cast into this realm to become the property of a being who is the antithesis of our God.

The precise meaning of Azazel, unfortunately, is found nowhere else in the Bible and has been disputed since antiquity. So, while we don't really know what to make of this ancient ritual, we are able to glean valuable and relevant lessons.

Whenever we discuss this portion in Torah study, there are those who take issue with this method of absolving a community of its sins. *They didn't have to do anything.* Aaron simply directed the goat to walk into the wilderness. The Israelites were cleared of all responsibility to make things right with those they wronged.

And what happened if the goat turned around and appeared back at camp? The Mishnah[4] states that the goat was actually led to a cliff and pushed over, ensuring it would not return.

I would like to believe that our ancient ancestors understood that the goat of Azazel wasn't really carrying their transgressions off into uninhabited desert. Rather, I view the writers of this section and those who may have participated in this ritual as human beings, no different than those today who blame others for their sins. There are times when we turn a person into an object, a symbol for what afflicts us and our community. The story of Azazel is a story about how humans deal with their guilt and problems. There are times when we just unload all of it on others. This is dehumanizing. We know we ought to take responsibility for our actions, but as history shows us time and again, it isn't that simple.

The difference with the ancient Israelites, however, and the beauty of this tradition, is that they had the wisdom to know how unhealthy and damaging it is to place all of our shame and sinful behavior on fellow humans. They had the sense to use an animal—a scapegoat—to bear our burdens. Watching the goat walk away from the camp must have been a powerful

[4] BT Yoma 6:6

sight, not all too different from watching our breadcrumbs float away during *tashlich*.

The Yom Kippur ritual did not end with the goat leaving our sight. You see, years later, the rabbis knew we were better than that. They knew that we would have the capacity to own up to our failings. And they knew that we could confront one another and apologize, as hard as this may be. They understood that each person must confront his or her own transgressions. And we know the only way to truly move forward, to start anew, is if we come to grips with our past behavior.

The weight of our own failures is not on the scapegoat or any other person, but on our own shoulders. On the holiest day of the year, we need the self-awareness to face our own baggage. While the rituals have changed considerably since biblical times, the essence of what our ancestors experienced is still present. This yearly reminder to recognize our faults and seek forgiveness is an obligation we must take seriously. It is a mitzvah for all time.

Last year, the Chicago Cubs finally won the World Series after a 108 year drought. And just this past summer, Cubs management presented Steve Bartman with his own World Series ring.

In response, Bartman wrote a statement thanking the Cubs organization for the honor. He also said, “I humbly receive the ring not only as a symbol of one of the most historic achievements in sports, but as an important reminder for how we should treat each other in today's society. My hope is that we all can learn from my experience to view sports as entertainment and prevent harsh scapegoating…”

On this Sabbath of Sabbaths, this 24-hour period of self-repair and reflection, let us not fall in the trap of believing someone else caused our shortcomings. May we take responsibility for the hurt we have caused others and the many times each of us have missed the mark.

I pray that we enter 5778 with humility, compassion, honesty, a forgiving heart, and a renewed sense of ourselves.