

Yom Kippur 5787 Sermon
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Calling In the Scapegoat

The air in the wilderness of Azazel stings.

Far from the warmth of the camp and the familiar murmurs of the herd, a lone goat stands on a jagged ledge of stone. The sky is heavy with storm clouds. A bitter wind pulls at his dirt-streaked coat, offering no protection against the creeping frost. Tied tightly around his horns is a single strand of crimson wool—a blood-red contrast against the muted grays of the rock.

It is the physical symbol of a community's cast-off shame.

He lowers his head, his eyes wide with quiet confusion. For miles in every direction, there is only a vast, indifferent silence. No scent of water. No patch of green. No answering call to his low, hesitant bleat. Shivering, he takes an unsteady step toward the ledge, utterly alone, bearing the burden of a people who chose to cast out rather than call in.

This harrowing scene comes straight from the sixteenth chapter of Leviticus—the raw material of the first Yom Kippur. Two identical goats, chosen from a single herd, stand before the High Priest. By random lot, one is labeled *for Azazel*—sent into a barren wilderness, laden with the collective transgressions of the entire community.¹

The Torah treats this expulsion as a necessity for spiritual survival. A tool designed to let a scared, fragile people watch their sins physically walk out of sight.

But thousands of years later, we have to ask ourselves: what happens when we stop treating Leviticus as an ancient symbolic ritual, and start treating it as a modern permission slip for interpersonal exile?

¹ Leviticus 16:20

What happens when our families, our communities, and our institutions look at the people who hold up a mirror to our fractures—and instead of doing the hard, messy work of repair—we load them up with our anxiety and march them to the margins?

We cannot build a resilient future on a foundation of banishment.

The ancient world required a goat to carry our brokenness away. But our survival today demands a radical, courageous re-orientation. We must pivot from casting out to calling in. We must return to the holy, inescapable weight of mutual responsibility-leaving no one out in the cold.

True wholeness refuses to make the Other "unreal" out of fear. It calls them back inside—not as a vessel of shame, but as a spark of the divine.

To stop casting out, and start calling in, we have to trace how an ancient Scapegoat ritual evolved into a sharp, destructive reality throughout human history. Only then can we disrupt this old paradigm, reclaim our **messy, holy entanglement**, and call back the wisdom we've banished.

First, let us bring some empathy to our ancestors. The ritual in Leviticus can feel jarring, even unconscionable to modern ears. But as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes, it was originally designed to unify—For a single day, people came together to watch their heavy burdens walk away. And if we are honest, we still crave that kind of visual, physical cleansing.²

Maimonides taught that it is simply easier for the human psyche to process renewal when we can witness our mistakes departing from our sight. It is why we still cast breadcrumbs (or dissolving paper) into moving water during Tashlich. It is why I crave a good cold plunge after a grueling week, or why you might rigorously deep-clean your entire house between seasons. It is why we rewrite our daily routines

² <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/acharei-mot/the-scapegoat/>

after a painful breakup or a devastating loss. We **need** to feel the unwanted *shmutz* of hardship and grief leave our beings.

This is embodied release. ‘

This is ritual at its tangible, beautiful best.

Yet, there is profound psychological danger of this practice gone awry. Unchecked, collective anxiety can mutate into heaping our shame onto others. <<pause>>

Scapegoat. Scapegoat Scapegoat

This loaded, shame-laden term was actually coined by a Protestant scholar named William Tyndale in 1530. As he worked on the first English translation of the Hebrew Bible, he hit a linguistic wall in the pages of Leviticus. Facing the mysterious ritual of Yom Kippur, Tyndale struggled to understand the fate of the animal sent away to the harrowing wilderness of Azazel. So, he invented a word. He called it the "escape-goat," as if the goat was choosing to run away.³

Over the centuries, that translation took a monstrously ironic turn. What began as a misunderstood ritual became an interpersonal weapon. To scapegoat has come to mean blaming a specific person or group for everything wrong with society. It has been weaponized against the Jewish people, and against countless marginalized groups throughout history. It has become the ultimate tool of dehumanization—a tempting lure when the truth of our shared vulnerability is simply too much to bear.

We know the extremes of this contagion all too well. Whispered malice mutates into a roar. Longtime neighbors turn on one another overnight. Entire families are driven into the dark, the air thick with panic, as their lives are upended.

³ <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/understanding-antisemitism-scapegoating-jewish-people>

The scene could be 1938 Vienna, where my own grandpa watched his city morph with a high-octane hatred that forced him to flee.

The scene could be right here, in 2026 Seattle, where our immigrant neighbors are suddenly swept up in a Home Depot parking lot.

The scene could be a local high school basketball gym, where a teenager is disqualified from playing because her birth anatomy doesn't match her gender.

In moments of deep anxiety, systemic polarization, or collective pain, scapegoating is deceptively easy.

We look at another and we stop seeing a living, breathing soul, vulnerable and worthy. Instead, they become a two-dimensional character in our mind—an idea, a political category, or at worst, an enemy.

When we do this, we don't just exile the person standing in front of us. We exile a piece of our own humanity. We retreat into the false safety of our own camp, leaving a scapegoat out on a rocky ledge, shivering in the cold.

Fortunately, our tradition offers a profound, ancient antidote to directly shatter the paradigm of the banished wilderness. I believe it must become one of our driving principle this year: the principle of *Arevut*.

The word *Arevut* comes from a complex Hebrew root that means to mix, to blend, or to pledge security for another. We find its most radical expression in the Talmudic declaration: ***Kol Yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh***—all of us, , are deeply, inextricably responsible for one another, bound to one another.⁴

In Jewish law, to be an *arev* means to co-sign a loan. It means you guarantee someone else's material future well-being. You step forward and declare, "If they falter, look to me. I will hold the debt."

⁴ <https://voices.sefaria.org/sheets/417605?lang=bi>

When we lift this into the spiritual realm, we sense that our entire well-being is bound up with one another. If one of us stumbles, it is not reason to cast dispersions or shame, it is a call to collective care and repair.

Arevut is the ultimate refusal of the scapegoat because it means your dignity is inextricable from my dignity. Your safety is the guarantor of my safety. To divide and cast out becomes an entirely futile premise.

Just ten days ago on Erev Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about bees, and their remarkable capacity to build a vessel for sweetness and sustenance. Arev contains yet another dimension beyond mixture and responsibility—it means sweetness.

Perhaps counterintuitively, I've found there is nothing sweeter than experiencing the weight of the bonds that hold us together. It is sweet to call each other in. It is sweet to feel a mutual trust so durable that we can be flawed together.

Think of Arevut—our deep mutual belonging—as the spiritual honeycomb of our people. Each of us forms a single, fragile cell, but we are bound together by shared walls. When one cell is compromised—when one member of our hive is cast out—the structural integrity of the entire comb is threatened.

We don't preserve the hive by sealing off its chambers, or abandoning a struggling bee to the cold. The moment we do so, the honeycomb fractures, and the honey runs dry.

Instead, Arevut calls us to the gritty, sweet work of building a hive resilient enough to hold our collective complexity.

Arevut is not a soft theory we read about in our texts. It is a fierce, life principle that demands everything from us—including a difficult reconciliation with the experiences we would rather forget, and the relationships that complicate our comfort.

I became a firsthand witness to the most radical dimension of *Arevut* when I traveled to Cape Town, South Africa, on a rabbinic delegation just one month ago. More than three decades have passed since Nelson Mandela wove Archbishop Desmond Tutu's famous vision of a "Rainbow Nation" into his 1994 inaugural address, declaring to the world that South Africa would become a society at peace with itself. I wish I could stand before you today and say that the promise has been fully realized. It hasn't.

The devastating repercussions of apartheid—a system explicitly engineered to dehumanize, scapegoat, and cast out a Black majority within their own homeland—are still painfully visible in extreme economic disparity and systemic corruption.

Yet, amidst this harsh reality, I was blindsided by an encounter with a South African man who brought the concept of *Arevut* to life in a way I will never forget.

We met him directly after stepping off the ferry from **Robben Island**, the infamous political prison where hundreds of Black activists and leaders were hidden away from the world. This man was only twenty-five years old when he was arrested and sent to the island. His imprisonment overlapped with Nelson Mandela's, though they spoke only once during that time. Bafflingly to this young man, Mandela did not preach revenge; he spoke only of the radical forgiveness that would be necessary for their ultimate freedom. Mandela was already looking past the prison bars, refusing the trap of dehumanizing his captors.

He was already working to call in and repair the shattered framework of a community that apartheid had tried to permanently divide. He operated out of a deep conviction—as he famously wrote in his memoir—that “to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”⁵

The man carried Mandela's words with him, but his actual release from prison was not a triumphant return. At first, it was a torturous, unmoored existence. He described stumbling through a post-apartheid world, not unlike that poor, lost goat

⁵ Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom*. Abacus, 1995.

of Leviticus, wandering in a wilderness of poverty, trauma, and devastating loneliness.

Then, just last year, he received a phone call. It was a job offer that required him to do the unthinkable: return to Robben Island.

The historical site was intentionally recruiting both former political prisoners and their former prison guards to work alongside one another. They were being asked to share their firsthand accounts as tour guides so that visitors could truly grasp the human stakes of casting people out. The man told us he shuddered at the thought of stepping back onto the island that had shackled and discarded him. Yet, deep down, a voice told him that returning to the site of his fracture might also be the precise location of his healing.

Sure enough, he told us that over this past year, that landmark of cruel, forced labor has become the classroom of his liberation. He held his head up proudly as he moved through the prison's holding cells, giving us a tour of the same structures that had once dismissed his humanity. This time, he chose what would be learned from the story. The scapegoat became the guarantor of a future more South Africans could believe in.

To stand before this man—who is willing to entangle his life's purpose with the very same guards who once locked him in a cell—is to witness the absolute outer limit of *Arevut-deep, mutual responsibility*. He modeled for us the truth that we cannot simply banish our history, our enemies, or our pain and expect to be whole.

He sharpened for me the true power of calling in—calling in our broken places, our exiled longings, and the truth-tellers we have pushed to the margins, so they can teach us how we actually belong to each other.

This is the unbreakable spiritual contract that declares *Kol Israel Arevim zeh b'zeh*: we are all bound up, co-signed, and responsible for one another.

It was in South Africa that I began to consider my own relationship to Jewish peoplehood anew. I'll admit, it's easier as a rabbi to preach belonging and inclusion in the comfort of our liberal Reform synagogue. Here, our differences,

though real, are less stark, less hardlined than in parts of the world where to belong means fitting into a monolithic oneness—a oneness that is brittle at best, and brutal in its propensity to cast out.

I traveled to Cape Town with colleagues from communities where the struggle to be accepted as a woman leader is still an uphill battle, where categories of equity I take for granted are still deeply marginalized. I have never been more grateful to return to the wonderful, well blended peoplehood of this place. We are so incredibly lucky to be connected to such a vibrant, humming, sense of "we."

Yet we too have our work today to truly proclaim *Kol Israel Arevim zeh b'zeh*—we are beholden and beloved to each other.

We know It feels sweet to be called in. How profound it feels to sense a mutual trust so durable that we can be fully, authentically ourselves together.

Yet that Sweetness does not happen passively- It is fiercely active and intentional. True *Arevut* demands that we practice mutual responsibility in two profound ways as we step into this new year.

First, we must have the courage to practice *Arevut* within our own immediate circles. We must look at the margins of our personal lives—at the family members or friends we have frozen out, the interpersonal "Others" we have banished to the wilderness because staying in the room felt too hard. This Yom Kippur, we are called to open the closed cells of our hearts. We lean into the discomfort of repair and call those exiled relationships back into belonging.

And second, we must realize that our *Arevut* does not end at the synagogue doors. Our mezuzahs mark our entrances not only to keep us safe and securely Jewish within. They also mark the portal between our homes and a public square that desperately needs us. As Jews, our history has made us expert witnesses to the devastating mechanics of the scapegoat. We know exactly what it looks like when a society builds walls by casting people out. Because we know that pain, we are uniquely positioned—and spiritually commanded—to call out modern-day scapegoating, and call in the exiled.

When we see our immigrant neighbors targeted, when we see transgender youth isolated and pushed to the fringes, when we see any group loaded down with collective anxiety and marched to the margins, our *Arevut*—our Holy co-signature—demands that we speak up. We cannot protect our own cell in the hive while watching another be destroyed. We must use our unique Jewish voice to call out scapegoating wherever it rears its head, acting as guarantors for the dignity of all human beings.

When we choose to fortify rather than fracture—our strength grows, our capacity expands, and we find that the sanctuary we build is larger, safer, and sweeter than we ever dreamed possible. (We are not alone.)

If a survivor of Robben Island can step back onto the shores of his own exile, meet his former captor, and say, "We belong to each other," then we have no excuse to stay comfortable in a fragile sameness.

Instead, we can summon a radical willingness to see the fault lines in our community—witness the people, stories, and the ideas we have cast out this year—and say: ***Come back inside. Let us learn together. Kol Israel Arevim ZeBaZeh.***

To truly embrace *Arevut* demands a new kind of Yom Kippur ritual. Imagine, if you will, a different ending to our ancient story.

Picture us as the herd standing at the edge of that valley, looking out toward the jagged rocks. This time, we refuse the fleeting relief of banishment. We do not turn around and walk back to the warmth of the camp, pretending we are clean. Instead, we turn toward the wilderness, and begin the slow trek into the depths of Azazel.

We walk until we find the exiled goat, shivering in the twilight, the frayed strand of crimson wool still tangled in his horns. But this time, we do not leave him there. We walk right up to the ledge. We lean in close, offering the warmth of our collective breath against the creeping frost. And instead of heaping our silent shame upon him, we open our ears. We look into his amber eyes and ask the questions that true atonement demands:

What did you see out there in the dark? What did the wilderness teach you about our community that we were too afraid to see ourselves?

And what must we do now—what structural shifts, what grit, what repair must we undertake—to mend what was broken when we cast you out?

Then, gently, we untie the blood-red wool from his horns. We do not throw it away, because you cannot erase history.

Instead, we weave that crimson thread together with our own frayed ends, transforming the symbol of our shared fracture into the very twine that binds us together. And then, as a complete herd, we walk back into the valley.

Let us leave this sanctuary different than we entered it. Let us not only be a community that halts the cruelty of casting out; may we actively practice calling in those society has abandoned in the cold. Let us have the holy audacity to walk into the wildernesses of our own making, untie the crimson strands of our brokenness, and rebuild a more real, more loving “Us.”

May we be sealed for a year of calling in, a year of deep repair, and a year of building a more profound wholeness than we’ve ever yet dared.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah.

God always seeks that which has been pursued [or cast away].”

— *Leviticus Rabbah 27:4*

<https://www.hartman.org.il/a-god-just-like-us/>

