

APRIL 4, 2011

## Parashat Metzora

### Equitable Exchange

Two living clean birds (Leviticus 14:4)

שתי צפרים (ויקרא יד:ד)

As part of the offerings which atoned for the person afflicted with *tzara'at*, the Torah mandates that he make an offering of “two living clean birds” (14:4). What type of birds did the priests use in this offering? While the Torah does not specify, Ramban (on 14:4) suggests that the reference is to “free birds”—meaning birds that lived in the wild. But what is the reason for using free birds specifically? Quoting the Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 16:7), Ramban explains that the birds owe a debt of gratitude. Since these birds eat and drink freely from the fields of man, it is only appropriate that they too give something to the relationship—by bringing atonement when necessary.

Through this incredible example the Torah demonstrates the value of equitable exchange. In our modern world, nowhere is this more evident than in the strategic partnership between the United States and Israel.

While America supplies Israel with critical military equipment, munitions and technology that help provide for Israel's defense, the relationship is not one-sided. Every day, Israeli military advancements help save the lives of American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. For example, the Israeli Defense Forces developed Reactive Armor Tiles to help protect soldiers in armored personnel carriers from explosive devices. These tiles, which are placed over the vehicle's armor, are embedded with explosives that blast outward to suppress incoming fire and have successfully protected thousands of U.S. troops. Additionally, Israeli-made armor secures the majority of the U.S. military's Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles in Afghanistan and Iraq. Daily, thousands of U.S. soldiers travel into dangerous areas, where the threat of improvised explosive devices is immense, and these MRAP vehicles help to save their lives.

The lesson of the “free birds” teaches us a valuable lesson about partnerships, one that Israel has put into practice. Just as the Jewish state greatly benefits from America's investment in her security, so too does she stand ever-ready to share expertise, knowledge and technology with her greatest friend and ally, the United States. ■

### Escalating Warnings

The plague of leprosy in a house... (Leviticus 14:34)

נגע צרעת בבית... (ויקרא יד:לד)

The Midrash notes that the Torah describes *tzara'at* of the body (Chapter 13) before it describes *tzara'at* of the house (14:33-53). In reality, though, once the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel, God would first afflict the homes of the sinful with *tzara'at* before afflicting their inhabitants. In fact, according to the Midrash, the *tzara'at* of the house served as a powerful warning intended to encourage the people to abandon their sinful ways. “First God afflicts [the sinner's] home. If he relents all is well, and if not God afflicts his clothing...If he relents, all is well, and if not, [afflictions] reach his body” (Tanchuma Tazria).

The choice to create escalating stages of *tzara'at*—starting first in the homes, progressing to the clothes and finally ending with the affliction of the person—afforded the sinner multiple opportunities to heed God's warning and change his/her behavior. Just as the *tzara'at* intensified to encourage change, so too have international sanctions been

escalating in the hopes of prompting Iran to halt its illicit nuclear program. Unfortunately, Iran has disregarded these warnings, demonstrating once again the need for increased and unrelenting sanctions.

This need is one that Congress has clearly recognized. Ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA), recently criticized the Obama administration for announcing what he called “symbolic” sanctions against a company investing in Iran’s energy sector. Berman did so in response to the State Department’s recent announcement that it [imposed sanctions](#) against the state-owned Belarusian company Belarusneft for investing in the Iranian energy sector. “We have once again imposed sanctions on a company that doesn’t do any business in the U.S., so the sanction has no more than symbolic impact,” said Berman. The chairwoman of the committee, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), called on the State Department to use its authority to punish more companies doing business in Iran. “In addition to going after the low-hanging fruit like Belarusneft, the State Department must impose sanctions against energy giants that continue to do business with Iran,” said Ros-Lehtinen. “That’s the only way that our sanctions will have the force to compel the Iranian regime to stop policies and programs that threaten the United States.”

Recent steps by the Obama Administration to enforce sanctions against foreign companies doing business with Iran represent an important first effort. Still, the United States can and must do more by heeding the powerful example of God’s choice to gradually intensify subsequent warnings through the *tzara’at*. By imposing even greater sanctions the U.S. will show Iran that ignoring prior warnings from the international community will not be tolerated and that America will continue to stand strong in its demands. ■

## A Pockmarked Land

And I put the plague of leprosy (Leviticus 14:34)

ונתתי נגע צרעת (ויקרא יד:לד)

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Because of the grave threat that idolatry posed to the future of the Jewish nation, God commanded the people to uproot and remove all houses of idolatry in the Land. Yet, when the Jews entered into the Promised Land, how would they be able to identify the homes that represented such a scary spiritual threat? According to Chizkuni (on 14:34), *tzara’at* of the home played this critical role. Describing why the Torah uses the word *v’natati* regarding *tzara’at* of the home, Chizkuni explains that God contaminated those structures that had previously housed the practice of idolatry. “The plague came to [those] homes to show them [the Jews] which places the Canaanites worshipped idols that needed to be removed.”

The torah teaches us that idolatry had the potential to destroy the Jewish people, and *tzara’at* was the physical manifestation of that potential threat. That terrifying threat still exists today, as Hamas presents a similar propensity to destroy the Jewish people by continuing to invoke violence onto the land of Israel and its inhabitants.

Hamas—the Iranian-backed group that controls Gaza—recently increased its attacks on Israeli civilians, firing more than 100 rockets into populated areas in just one week. Faced with this substantial increase in rocket attacks from Gaza, Israel recently deployed the Iron Dome missile defense system, [The Washington Post](#) reported. At the same time, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas welcomed senior Hamas officials to his office to discuss a reconciliation of the two factions, a move that would effectively bring the terrorist group back into the PA, [The New York Times](#) reported. Hamas has not been part of the PA since 2007, when it violently seized control of the Gaza Strip from Abbas’ Fatah faction. Hamas also refuses to recognize Israel’s right to exist as well as refusing to renounce terrorism and abide by past agreements between the Jewish state and the PA. In light of the recent attacks on Israeli civilians coupled with Abbas’ refusal to negotiate with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the PA’s apparent interest in reconciling with Hamas marks a clear and frightening preference for violence over peaceful negotiations.

These recent and terrifying developments offer us additional evidence of the increasing threats Israel continues to face on her borders. While the tangible threat posed by Hamas may not be seen through the pockmarked walls afflicted with *tzara’at*, the threat becomes a tragic reality seen in the pockmarks dotting an ancient landscape, caused by the rockets and mortars raining down on Israeli soil threatening all those who call the Jewish state their home. ■

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