

MARCH 21, 2011

Parashat Shemini - Parah

Foreign Fire

And they offered strange fire before the Lord (Leviticus 10:1) (ויקרא י:א)

Parashat Shemini chronicles the tragic consequences that befell Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu after they, on their own initiative, offered incense on a "strange fire before the Lord." Using poetic license, Rabbi Simcha Raz (Shivim Panim L'Torah, Vayikra p. 55) notes that "a strange fire is particularly dangerous when it is brought 'before God'—when one combines fire with the sake of heaven." Interestingly, the term *aish zarah* literally means a "foreign fire," a fire that comes from an outside, unauthorized source.

As we read of the calamity that befell Nadab and Abihu with the introduction of a "foreign fire before God," we cannot help but think of the theocracy that recently attempted to insert a "foreign fire" into the Gaza Strip.

On March 15, the Israeli Navy stopped the German-owned ship "Victoria" as it sailed 200 miles off of Israel's coast. Following an inspection of the ship, three containers were found to be loaded not with lentils, as the manifest indicated, but with mortar shells, ammunition and surface-to-sea missiles—ordnance that officials said originated in Iran and was bound for Gaza, [CNN](#) reported. "Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the weapons 'went through Syria, and they were en route to terror organizations in Gaza, but their ultimate target was the Israeli civilian population. Every day, new attempts are made by Iran and by Syria to smuggle weapons into Lebanon to Hizballah, to Gaza to Hamas and to other terror organizations.'" [The Telegraph](#) noted that "'Made in Britain' labels were attached to all of the crates in an attempt to deceive whoever opened them."

As Iran continues to spread its strange, foreign fire throughout the Middle East, we must support Israeli efforts to prevent terrorist organizations like Hamas from acquiring ever more potent weapons. Otherwise, like the fate of Nadab and Abihu, there could be tragic consequences for Israeli civilians. ■

Lending a Hand

And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan (Leviticus 10:4) (ויקרא י:ד)

Following the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, Moses requested that his cousins Mishael and Elzaphan remove the bodies from the sanctuary. Why did Moses specifically call for these two? Netziv, in *Ha'amek Davar* (on 10:4), explains that Moses knew that he could rely upon them because their father—Moses' and Aaron's uncle—Uziel, "was Aaron's beloved friend and shared in [Aaron's] pain." Moreover, the Midrash *Torat Cohanim* explains that by connecting Aaron to Uziel in the text, "The Torah compares the actions of Aaron to the actions of Uziel. Just as Aaron chased after peace in Israel, so too did Uziel chase after peace in Israel." Therefore, because Uziel and his sons followed the path of peace, they shared in Aaron's anguish when tragedy struck. As such, their special care and sensitivity made them the obvious choice to serve in the most delicate of tasks—collecting the bodies of Nadab and Abihu.

Like Mishael and Elzaphan, the people of Israel have once again demonstrated their empathy and compassion. Though thousands of miles away, Israel was quick to join international efforts to send assistance to the devastated victims of the natural disasters in northern Japan.

A civilian Israeli search and rescue team left for Japan to help victims of the 8.9 magnitude earthquake and massive tsunami that struck the island nation. Shachar Zehavi, head of IsraAID, the Israeli humanitarian umbrella group that is organizing the search and rescue team, said: “We’re sending six medical professionals and people specializing in search and rescue. Many of these people were members of the Israel Defense Forces search and rescue team in the past.” In addition to these volunteers, the Israeli government has been quick to offer official help. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offered Japan “any assistance” it needs in a letter he wrote to his Japanese counterpart, Naoto Kan, [The Jerusalem Post](#) reported. The prime minister added that Israel was prepared to “help to the best of its ability” and immediately send rescue teams, medical teams, experts in identifying bodies, water purification facilities and any assistance asked for to the disaster area. “The citizens of Israel stand beside you at this difficult time. I have no doubt that the strength and heroism displayed by the Japanese people will help overcome this terrible tragedy.” According to [Ynetnews](#), the Japanese consul in Israel stated that “Israel officially offered its help an hour after the earthquake struck. It is very heart-warming, but at this point we do not know exactly what the extent of the damage is, so it is difficult for us to say what can be done.”

When tragedy struck, Mishael and Elzaphan followed in the footsteps of their father by providing the necessary assistance to Aaron and Moses. Following the devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan, Israelis followed in their own forefathers’ footsteps, providing valuable aid to people in need. ■

A “Tense” Peace

But he does not part his hoof (Leviticus 11:4)

וּפְרָסָה אֵינָנוּ מִפְּרִיס (ויקרא יא:ד)

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter notes that the Torah changes tenses when depicting the non-kosher attributes of different animals. The Torah describes the camel as not kosher: *u’parsah eineno mafris*, “he does not part his hoof” (11:4)—in present tense. The rock badger is also not kosher due to an un-split hoof, but this animal’s hoof is described as *u’parsah lo yafris* (11:5)—in future tense. Finally, the hoof of the rabbit, which is also not kosher for the same reason, is described: *u’parsah lo hifrisah* (11:6)—in past tense. From this unusual linguistic device Rabbi Salanter derives a critical lesson: “The Torah hints to us in this manner that before a person expresses his opinion that a certain individual is impure, he must consider the matter greatly, and take into account not only his present, but his past and his future” (see *Mei’otzreinu Hayashan* vol. 2 p. 277).

It appears that an overwhelming majority of Congress understands the point that Rabbi Salanter was making, and is working to make sure that as Egypt forges a new future, it remains committed to its past obligations.

Recently, 326 members of the House of Representatives signed a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that urges all branches of the U.S. government to emphasize to prospective Egyptian leaders and opposition figures the importance of Egypt’s international obligations, specifically its peace treaty with Israel. The [letter](#), spearheaded by Reps. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA) and Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), recognizes the role Egypt has played over the last few decades in fostering regional stability, maintaining its peace with Israel, opposing an Iran with a nuclear weapons capability, ensuring freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal, combating terrorism, and containing Islamic extremism. Yet, following the recent removal of the Mubarak government, Egypt’s future relationship with Israel remains unclear. As Egyptians work towards democratic change and political freedom, the resulting uncertainty raises many security concerns both in the United States and in Israel.

The Torah reminds us that even as we recognize the fact that Egypt has been America’s foremost strategic Arab ally, we must also insist that Egypt’s future government continue to adhere to its past obligations. If it does, its transition towards democracy could usher in a bright future for the entire region. ■