**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PaRashat tazria-metzora**

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“Dedicated in loving memory of

Dr. Saul G. Agus, z”l

Whose 5th Yarzheit is Iyar 3

Marcelle A. Agus and

the Agus /Fox Families”

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**“Every One That Is Written To Life”**

**The Meaning of the Purification Ceremony Involving Birds[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Rav Gad Eldad**

The purification process that a leper (*metzora*)must undergo consists of two stages, at the end of which he is permitted to enter the sanctuary. His purification is completed by way of a series of offerings brought to the Tabernacle (*Mishkan)*, but this occurs only after a preliminary purification process, which takes place immediately upon the confirmation of his purity by the priest:

This shall be the law of the leper in the day of his purification: he shall be brought to the priest. And the priest shall go forth out of the camp; and the priest shall look, and, behold, if the plague of leprosy be healed in the leper; then shall the priest command to take for him that is to be purified two living pure birds, and cedar-wood, and scarlet, and hyssop. And the priest shall command to kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over living water. As for the living bird, he shall take it, and the cedar-wood, and the scarlet, and the hyssop, and shall dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the living water. And he shall sprinkle upon him that is to be purified from the leprosy seven times, and shall pronounce him pure, and shall let go the living bird into the open field. And he that is to be purified shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and bathe himself in water, and he shall be pure; and after that he may come into the camp, but shall dwell outside his tent seven days. (14:2-8)

Abravanel (Chapter 14, Answer to Question #1) explains the need for the two stages as follows:

The leper had to distance himself in two ways: first, from his people, namely, he had to dwell alone, outside the camp; second, from God's sanctuary and resting place. Therefore he needed two purifications: the first, to make known that he was healthy and fit to reenter the camp and to join with every member of the people; and the second purification, when he offered an offering before God that would atone for him, and then he could touch all holy things and enter the sanctuary.

Whereas the second stage, i.e., the bringing of offerings in the *Mishkan*,is mentioned in the next chapter as a purification rite for several types of impurity, the preliminary stage requires our special attention. This ceremony is exceptional in character and unique to this event. The puzzling nature of the ceremony finds expression in the words of Abravanel at the beginning of his commentary to our chapter (Question 1):

Why does the Torah command that on the day of his purification the leper must offer two living pure birds (*tziporim*)? Bird offerings are brought only from pigeons and doves, but the term *tziporim* includes all birds, large and small… And all the more so that neither one of these birds is offered on the altar as a burnt-offering, or as a sin-offering, or as a guilt-offering, nor is its neck pinched. What then is the idea of these two birds, if they were not brought as an offering? And what is the purpose of the slaughter, if they were not brought as an offering? And what is the purpose of the living bird that is let go into the open field?

Abravanel offers an answer, and other commentators propose additional explanations.[[2]](#footnote-2) We will try to understand the matter in light of clues that are left for us in the Torah itself.

**Parallels in the Torah**

One direction is found in the words of ibn Ezra (v. 4), who points to the similarity between the sprinkling of blood on the leper and the sprinkling of blood on one who became ritually impure through contact with a corpse:

The leper, a leprous house, and a person who became ritually impure through contact with a corpse are similar, they too being like the paschal offering brought in Egypt.

Ibn Ezra includes in this list the paschal offering brought in Egypt:

Then Moshe called for all the elders of Israel, and said to them: Draw out, and take you lambs according to your families, and kill the paschal lamb. And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two sideposts with the blood that is in the basin; and none of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. (*Shemot* 12:21-22)

In all three cases noted here, a living creature (heifer, sheep, bird) is slaughtered, and use is made of its blood by way of a bunch of hyssop.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, despite the similarity between the components used in the purification of a person with corpse impurity and those used in the purification of a leper, their role in the procedure is different. In the case of the leper, the hyssop is used in its natural form to sprinkle the blood of the bird on the leper. In the case of the paschal offering, the hyssop is used in a similar manner, for the sprinkling of the blood. However, in the case of the person with corpse impurity, the hyssop is thrown into the fire together with the heifer, and thus becomes part of the ashes that are then used in the sprinkling:[[4]](#footnote-4)

And the heifer shall be burnt in his sight; its skin, and its flesh, and its blood, with its dung, shall be burnt. And the priest shall take cedar-wood, and hyssop, and scarlet, and cast it into the midst of the burning of the heifer. (*Bamidbar* 19:5-6)

However, the distinctive feature of the leper's purification rite lies in the use that is made of a pair of birds. This is the aspect upon which we wish to focus, in the wake of Abravanel's question regarding its meaning.

**“Then Shall the Priest Command to Take for Him that is to be Purified Two Living Pure Birds”**

When we examine the Torah, we find another situation in which use is made of a pair of living creatures:[[5]](#footnote-5)

And the Lord said to Moshe: Speak to Aharon your brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the veil, before the cover which is upon the ark; that he may not die…

With this shall Aharon come into the holy place: with a young bullock for a sin-offering, and a ram for a burnt-offering…

And he shall take of the congregation of the Israelites two he-goats for a sin-offering, and one ram for a burnt-offering…

**And he shall take the two goats,** and set them before the Lord at the door of the tent of meeting. And Aharon shall cast lots upon the two goats: one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for Azazel. And Aharon shall present the goat upon which the lot fell for the Lord, and offer it for a sin-offering. But the goat, on which the lot fell for Azazel, shall be set alive before the Lord, to make atonement over it, to send it away for Azazel into the wilderness…

**Then shall he kill** the goat of the sin-offering, that is for the people, and bring its blood within the veil… **and sprinkle it** upon the cover, and before the cover. And he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of **the impurities of the Israelites,** and because of their transgressions, even all their sins; and so shall he do for the tent of meeting, that dwells with them **in the midst of their impurities…**

And when he has made an end of atoning for the holy place, and the tent of meeting, and the altar, he shall present the live goat. And Aharon shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the Israelites, and all the transgressions, even all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, **and shall send** it **away** by the hand of an appointed man into the wilderness. And the goat shall bear upon it all their iniquities to a land which is cut off; and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness…

And he that lets go the goat for Azazel shall wash his clothes, and bathe his flesh in water, and afterward he may come into the camp. (16:2-26)

The two goats participate in the effort to achieve atonement for the holy place "because of the impurities of the Israelites," similar to the two birds that serve to remove the impurity from the leper. Beyond the similar use of a pair of animals in each of the purification ceremonies, the internal division between the components of each pair is also identical. One of the animals is slaughtered, and its blood is sprinkled seven times, while the other is sent away from the place of slaughter. This similarity finds expression in the identical verbs that are used in both cases: "take," "kill," "sprinkle," and "send away."

The connection between the two passages is already noted by the Rashbam (16:10):

"To send it away for Azazel into the wilderness" — according to the plain sense of the verse, to send it away alive to the goats that are in the wilderness, as we find with the birds of the leper: "And he shall let go the living bird into the open field," to purify him of his impurity. So too here, in order to purify Israel of their sins, he sends [the goat] into the wilderness, it being a place for the grazing of animals, as it is written: "And he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness" (*Shemot* 3:1).

Rabbeinu Bachya as well (14:7) draws a connection between the two events, explaining the meaning as follows:

"Into the open field" alludes to the birds of the field, that he would send off the living bird that had been dipped into the blood of the slaughtered bird to the birds of the field, which are a class of destructive forces lower in standing than the angel of the wilderness that would take a bribe on Yom Kippur.[[6]](#footnote-6) **[That bird] would carry away the sins of the leper in the same manner as the goat that was sent to Azazel to the wilderness.**

It is interesting to discover that the Mishna as well connects these two pairs, through the identical wording that is used in relation to both:

The two he-goats of Yom Kippur are required to be alike in appearance, in size, in value, to have been brought at the same time; but even if they are not alike they are valid. If one was bought one day and the other on the following day, they are valid…

Furthermore, said Rabbi Yehuda: If the blood was poured away, the goat-to-be-sent-away was left to die. If the goat-to-be-sent-away died, the blood is poured away. (*Yoma* 6:1)

The two birds are required to be alike in appearance, in size, in value, to have been brought at the same time; but even if they are not alike they are valid. If one was bought one day and the other on the following day, they are valid…

Furthermore, said Rabbi Yehuda: If the blood was poured away, the bird-to-be-sent-away was left to die. If the bird-to-be-sent-away died, the blood is poured away. (*Nega'im* 14:5)

**“And the Goat Shall bear upon it all their Iniquities to a Land which is Cut off”**

The initial conclusion that may be drawn from the comparison relates to the meaning of the "sending away." The Torah goes into detail about the meaning of the sending away of the goat to Azazel:

And Aharon shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the Israelites, and all their transgressions, even all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and shall send it away by the hand of an appointed man into the wilderness. And the goat shall bear upon it all their iniquities to a land which is cut off; **and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.** (16:21-22)

It should be emphasized that the Torah does not explicitly state that the goat is killed, but only that it is let go in the wilderness, just as the bird in the case of the leper is sent away into the open field. A comparison of the actions leads us to a conclusion that exposes a hidden aspect of the nature of leprosy. Even though we are all familiar with *Chazal's* assertion that leprosy results from sin, nowhere is this explicitly stated in the Torah.[[7]](#footnote-7) *Chazal* presumably derive this from the manner by way of which a leper is purified, and from the fact that the sending away of the living bird comes to distance the leper's sins from himself.

**“And I Will Put the Plague of Leprosy in a House of the Land of Your Possession”**

At the end of Chapter 14, the Torah returns to the purification rite involving birds in connection with leprosy of the house. There we find additional allusions that support our argument:

And he shall take **to cleanse** (*le-chatei*)**the house** two birds, and cedar-wood, and scarlet, and hyssop. And he shall kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over living water. And he shall take the cedar-wood, and the hyssop, and the scarlet, and the living bird, and dip them in the blood of the slain bird, and in the living water, and sprinkle on the house seven times. **And he shall cleanse the house** (*ve-chitei*) with the blood of the bird, and with the living water, and with the living bird, and with the cedar-wood, and with the hyssop, and with the scarlet. But he shall let go the living bird out of the city into the open field; so shall he make atonement for the house; and it shall be pure. (14:49-53)

We are familiar with the act of *chitui* as an act performed in connection with a sin-offering (8:14-15):

And the bullock of the sin-offering was brought; and Aharon and his sons laid their hands upon the head of the bullock of **the sin-offering** (*par ha-chatat*). And when it was slain, Moshe took the blood, and put it upon the horns of the altar round about with his finger, **and purified** (*vaychatei*)**the altar**, and poured out the remaining blood at the base of the altar, and sanctified it, to make atonement for it. (8:14-15)

This detail as well sends us to the two "he-goats for a sin-offering" that serve Aharon as he enters the holy place:

And he shall take of the congregation of the Israelites **two he-goats for a sin-offering,** and one ram for a burnt-offering. (16:5)

The purification process for a leprous house adds another layer for drawing a comparison between the passages. When he enters the Holy, Aharon is required to bring sin-offerings, the declared purpose of which is to achieve atonement for the Holy and for the Tent of Meeting:

**And he shall make atonement for the holy place,** because of the impurities of the Israelites, **and because of their transgressions, even all their sins;** and so shall he do for **the tent of meeting,** that dwells with them in the midst of their impurities. And there shall be no man in the tent of meeting when he goes in to make atonement in the holy place, until he come out, and have made atonement for himself, and for his household, and for all the assembly of Israel…

And when he has made an end of atoning for the holy place, and the tent of meeting, and the altar, he shall present the live goat. And Aharon shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the Israelites, **and all their transgressions, even all their sins;** and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and shall send it away by the hand of an appointed man into the wilderness. And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities to a land which is cut off; and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness. (16:16-22)

If so, the goat that is slaughtered serves to atone for and to purify the holy place and the Tent of Meeting "because of their transgressions, even all their sins," and in this way the *Mishkan* is purified from the sins that defiled it. Still, it stands to reason now that the sins that are removed from the *Mishkan* do not vanish into thin air, but are merely removed from the *Mishkan.* As such, they still threaten to return to the *Mishkan*, and therefore the need arises to distance them. This is what the living goat does. The Torah relates that after the priest finishes atoning for the holy place, by way of the confession for "all their transgressions, even all their sins," the priest then loads those sins on to the head of the living goat, and in this way they are sent far away into the wilderness.[[8]](#footnote-8)

When we come to apply this to leprosy of the house, we should note another common element. As with respect to the *Mishkan*, so too with regard to leprosy of the house: we are dealing with the purification of a particular geographical space contaminated by those who used it. While it is impossible to replace the *Mishkan*, or to suspend the service carried out inside it, when a house becomes impure, its inhabitants naturally empty out of it, if they wish to be in a pure state.

Now it becomes necessary to cleanse the house, and in this way the exile of its inhabitants can come to an end. The pair of birds function in a manner similar to the model of the two goats. One of them parallels the sin-offering goat that is slaughtered, and cleanses the house of its impurity. The other one is dipped into the first one's blood, and then carries the impurity away, distancing it from the house into the open field. Thus we reach the desired end**: "So shall he make atonement for the house; and it shall be pure"** (14:53).

It is precisely the close comparison between the goats of the *Mishkan* and the birds involved in the purification of a leprous house that highlights the difference between them and the birds used in the leper's purification. In the former cases, we are dealing with absolute and final atonement. In the case of the leper, on the other hand, the purification rite involving the birds is only a preliminary procedure, which is then followed by another stage of offerings brought in the *Mishkan* to complete his purification.

**“As for the Living Bird, He Shall Take It”**

When we closely examine the two instances of purification by way of birds, we discern a difference between them. In the case of the purification of a leprous house, the living bird is joined to the cedar-wood and the hyssop, and together they are dipped into the blood of the slaughtered bird. Afterwards, the house is purified with a mixture that includes the blood of the slaughtered bird, the living bird, the cedar-wood and the hyssop:

And he shall take **the cedar-wood, and the hyssop, and the scarlet, and the living bird,** and dip **them** in the blood of the slain bird, and in the living water, and sprinkle on the house seven times. And he shall cleanse the house **with the blood of the bird, and with the living water, and with the living bird, and with the cedar-wood, and with the hyssop, and with the scarlet.** (14:51-52)

In the case of the purification of the leper, on the other hand, the Torah is careful to note separately the living bird, both when it is taken and when it is dipped in the blood:

And the priest shall command to kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over living water. **As for the living bird, he shall take it,** and the cedar-wood, and the scarlet, and the hyssop, **and shall dip them and the living bird** in the blood of the bird that was killed over the living water. And he shall sprinkle upon him that is to be purified from the leprosy seven times, and shall pronounce him pure, and shall let go the living bird into the open field. (14:5-7)

According to the plain meaning of the verses, it is clear that the living bird is indeed dipped into the blood of the slaughtered bird, just as the other articles are dipped into that blood, but it is not at all clear that the living bird participates in the sprinkling on the leper.[[9]](#footnote-9)

It seems then that whereas with regard to the purification of the house, the two birds serve as a pair of sin-offerings for the purpose of cleansing the house, the pair of birds used in the purification of the leper are not a pair of sin-offerings, and the living bird stands as an independent entity.

**“See, I Have Set Before You This Day Life and Good, and Death and Evil”**

Our interpretation of the meaning of the purification rite involving the birds relies on some of the data that we have seen in the course of the discussion. This interpretation is, of course, subjective, and we must acknowledge that the data can be analyzed in different ways.[[10]](#footnote-10)

While the purification of the *Mishkan* and the leprous house amounts to the removal and distancing of sins, this cannot be the totality of the purification of a person. A person is not an inanimate structure that absorbs the sins of its environment, but rather he is the force that drives this system, and it is from him that impurity spreads to the spaces and objects in his proximity. Of the many impurities, the impurity of a leper stands out in its severity, and includes a detailed order of impurity, spread out over weeks, and involving distancing the person from his natural environment. The process of confirming the impurity is limited to several weeks, but the duration of the period from when the leper is declared impure until he achieves purity is unknown. The leper is liable to find himself spending weeks and even months anticipating his purification, with repeated mental letdowns, after each disappointing visit by the priest, without anyone explaining to him why he has been so afflicted, and without an end in sight. The plethora of technical details and laws regarding the complex process skips over an entire world of feelings of frustration and yearning, which is the lot of the leper.

From this perspective, his distancing is not aimed at benefiting society, but at benefiting himself. The flow of life had blurred his way, but now there is no one who can explain to him the cause of his leprosy other than he himself. He must look inward and contemplate his life, and plan out a new path, until he is informed of his salvation, and then he will know that he has succeeded in mending his ways.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Before returning to the camp, the leper must complete this process with himself. Only then will he be fit to cope with his commitment to his family, his people and God. Therefore, the first ceremony is performed while he is still outside the camp, in an intimate setting, where only he who is being purified and the priest who is purifying him are present.

In light of what we have learned, there is a significant difference between the purification rite of the leper and the ceremonies performed to purify a leprous house and the *Mishkan.* Both of the latter take place in close proximity to the place that is being purified, and the goat and the bird are sent away to carry the sin off to an open space. Here, however, the situation is just the opposite. The rite takes place in the open air, the natural environment of the bird which is set free to remain there. The leper must experience the beginning of his purification precisely from the place of his banishment, and from there it falls upon him to continue taking steps that will bring him back to his own place.

A pair of birds are brought to the ceremony, which begins with the priest slaughtering one of them. The other bird is dipped into the first bird's blood, but in the end survives the event. From the outside it appears to be wounded, but in truth it is unharmed. At the end of the ceremony it is released from the priest's grip, proving its ability to fly off freely on its way.

This bird confronts death, which leaves its imprint on it, but it survives, the bird being a reflection of the leper himself. In light of the experience that he has gained from the oppressive experience that he has undergone, he is fit to move forward to a renewed confrontation with those around him, and from here to the completion of his purification:

**Our soul is escaped as a bird** out of the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we are escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. (*Tehillim* 124:7-8)

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. Unlesss otherwise specified, all references in this article are to the book of *Vayikra*. For the sake of convenience and clarity, we will use the terms “leper” and “leprosy” for the biblical terms “*metzora*” and “*tzara’at*” respectively, as this is not the forum to address the precise identifcation of the maladies that fall under this category in *Tanakh*. Moreover, we will use the masculine construction which is the default in the Torah, although the laws of *tzara’at* are applicable to women as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For additional explanations, see R. Yosef Bekhor Shor (verse 4), Chizkuni and Ba’al Ha-turim (verse 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. What is striking in its absence from Ibn Ezra's list is the the sprinkling of blood on the priests at their consecration ceremony (Ch. 8), which is very reminiscent of the sprinkling connected to the leper, as in both cases, the blood is placed on the tip of the right ear, the right thumb and the right big toe.

   Perhaps ibn Ezra omits this because it lacks the bunch of hyssop. Another reason may be offered for its omission, namely, that the sprinkling on the priests does not take place as part of a purification process. This approach offers a new perspective on the blood of the paschal offering: the placement of the blood on the doorposts and the lintel is part of the process of purifying Israel from the impurity of Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rav Bazak noted the similarity and difference between them in his *shiur* available at the Virtual Beit Midrash, "*Bein Metzora Li-tmei Met*." This approach fits in well with *Chazal's* position that "a leper is accounted as dead" (*Nedarim* 64b). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. After writing this, I have found that this similarity has already been noted by Rav Bick in a VBM *shiur* on this *parasha*, "*Taharat Ha-metzora*," and in several other *shiurim* on the Hatanakh.com site (14). There, however, the comparison is drawn in very general terms, and in a way totally different from what I am proposing. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Based on the Ramban's well-known explanation of the goat sent away to Azazel (16:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The fact that the leper must bring a sin-offering, and that the Torah uses the phrase, "And the priest shall make atonement for him before the Lord" (14:18), does not necessarily imply that we are dealing here with a sin. We find sin-offerings and similar wording (15:15, 30) with regard to the impurity of a *zav* and a *zava*, but we do not find that *Chazal* relate to the sin of a *zav* or a *zava*, apart from relating to the impurity of a woman after childbirth. Of course, the guilt-offering that is unique to the leper suggests that we are dealing here with a sin. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This also explains the need for two identical goats. The truth is that we are dealing with a single act, with two stages, and therefore it should have been performed with only one goat; but since the first stage dictates that the goat sin-offering be killed, in order to allow the act to contnue, a double is required. The Oral Law, however, assigns two different roles to the two goats, as if they were unconnected. The goat sin-offering serves to purify the sanctuary from the impurity of the sanctuary and its holy things, as part of the system of the goats of the festivals (*Shevu'ot*, Chapter 1). In contrast the goat that is sent away atones for the entirety of the sins of the people (*Yoma* 6:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rashi (v. 6) notes the distinct and prominent mention of the living bird, and cites in the name of *Torat Kohanim* that the living bird is not bound together with the cedar-wood and the hyssop. In light of the difference that we pointed out, it would seem that in the purification rite of the leprous house, the living bird should be bound together with the other articles, but *Torat Kohanim*'s silence on the matter implies otherwise. In addition, it would appear from *Torat Kohanim* that despite the fact that the living bird is not bound with the other articles, it is in fact used in the sprinkling of the blood of the slaughtered bird on the leper, even though, as we have noted, this is not stated explicitly in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See also the *shiur* of Prof. Y. Grossman on the VBM site, "*Parashat Tazria-Metzora: Adam Ha-mitabel al Atzmo.*" His interpretation dovetails with ours, though they come from different directions. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The plain sense of The Torah suggests that there is no medical cure for leprosy. Abravanel, however, maintains that alongside the process described in the Torah, a person may seek a medical solution that will help him free himself of his situation (Chapter 13, Verse 1):

    I have seen someone who explains that the leper is isolated for seven days in a prison, in order to prevent his relatives or friends from giving him a drink or a medicine to remove those signs, because the intention is that nature should be left to act on its own. Therefore it says: “Then the priest shall shut up (*ve-hisgir*) the plague” (13:4), as the word *hisgir* is a transitive verb and directed at him who must be shut up [i.e. “Then the priest shall shut up the person with the plague”]. However this is incorrect in my opinion, for why should the priest deprive the leper of a cure, when the Torah has stated: (*Shemot* 21:19) “He shall surely heal”?

    What he says here, however, relates to the period during which the leper is put in isolation, before his leprosy has been confirmed. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)