

Second Chances – Parashat Emor (Pesach Sheni)

In 1849, the as yet unknown writer Nathaniel Hawthorne was dismissed from his government job as a custom-house surveyor when President Zachary Taylor and the Whigs replaced President James K. Polk and the Democrats. Hawthorne came home utterly defeated. His wife, Sophia, listened as her husband poured out his heart, threw a few logs on the fire, and set pen, ink, and paper on the table. Lovingly she put her arms around Hawthorne and said: “Now, you will be able to write your novel.” Hawthorne did just that and, but a few months later, produced his literary masterpiece The Scarlett Letter. How fortuitous for readers everywhere that his political career flamed out so spectacularly!

Where would we be today were it not for second chances? From the silly mistakes of our youth to the missteps and miscalculations of adult life, the errors in judgment that got us in trouble, the times when what we thought we really wanted turned out not to be right, the circumstances beyond our control that landed us in a terrible position, and the times we just plain acted badly - how grateful we are to have had the opportunity to bounce back from difficult times. There have been starter jobs that ended up paving the way for something far different; bad financial decisions or just simple bad luck from which we were lucky enough to recover; relationships ended, whatever the circumstances, eventually giving way to new love. There have been terrible choices on our part for which we thankfully, miraculously, received forgiveness.

Jewish tradition, too, is replete with examples of individuals being given a fresh start. My colleague, Rabbi Justus Baird, includes amongst his top ten list of Jewish second chances Adam and Eve after being expelled from the Garden, Noah rebuilding humanity in the aftermath of the Flood, and the Israelites making it to the Promised Land after 40 years of ungrateful whining in the desert. There is Moses

receiving a second set of tablets after breaking the first in anger. There is Rabbi Akiva, who had not studied a word of Torah until age 40, going on to become one of the greatest sages ever in human history. Every adult bar mitzvah or conversion ceremony or second marriage is a chance to start again anew. Every High Holiday season provides us with the opportunity for *teshuvah*, the ability to return back to our best selves and do better in the year ahead. It is hard to get it right all the time, to avoid mistakes and missteps and circumstances beyond our control that send things down an undesirable path. Luckily, we are often given a second chance to make things better.

This evening we are reminded of yet another example of Judaism's commitment to do-overs in the institution of *Pesach Sheni* – the Second, or Alternative, Passover. Passover in Biblical times was not the seder-based ritual of today but rather centered around the Passover sacrifice which was to be offered on the 14th day of the month of Nisan at twilight. Like other sacrifices, the Passover offering had to be made in a state of ritual purity which presented a problem for those who might be contaminated on the day of the holiday. The Passover sacrifice also raised difficulties for those who found themselves traveling during the festival and thus unable to participate along with the rest of the community.

In *Parashat B'haalotcha*, which we will read in a few weeks, a few such men – prevented from offering the Passover sacrifice in Nisan because of having recently come in contact with a dead body - approach Moses to see if there might still be a way to take part in the holiday celebration. They ask, "Unclean though we be by reason of a corpse, why must we be barred from presenting the Lord's offering at its set time with the rest of the Israelites" (Numbers 9:7)? Upon hearing their reasonable request, Moses brings the men's question directly to God who agrees to provide them with an alternative – a second Passover on the 14th day of the subsequent month at twilight – for anyone who was unable to

participate in the first iteration of the holiday. It is a second chance for those who missed the original Pesach!

In our day and age, *Pesach Sheni* is no longer celebrated as an official festival as since the destruction of the Second Temple and the end of the sacrificial system, Passover observance no longer requires a state of ritual purity. Some individuals will symbolically eat a little bit of *matza* on this day; the morning and afternoon prayer services are modified ever so slightly in acknowledgement of the occasion. But the lesson of *Pesach Sheni*, I believe, still endures and indeed, especially in the Chasidic community, the day has come to be called the holiday of second chances reminding us that it's never too bad or too late or too hard to try again and make things right. In the words of the great Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, "The Second Passover means that it's never a 'lost cause.'"

I will admit that I always thought *Pesach Sheni* a little bit on the silly side until this year. As some of you will know, I experienced a modern-day version of *Parashat B'haalotcha* earlier this April when I tested positive for Covid just a few days before Passover, a set of circumstances which essentially meant that I was prevented from enjoying Pesach seder not by dint of impurity but rather by dint by quarantine. (Ironically, the Perler family – whose daughter's bat mitzvah we celebrate this morning – were all sick at the very same time and, in a characteristic show of kindness, invited me to a Covid-seder although, unfortunately, I didn't feel quite well enough to attend.) I'm not sure that I'll be dusting off my haggadah tonight as the 14th of Iyar rolls in but there does feel to me something healing in our tradition's acknowledgment that I was deprived of something important this year through no fault of my own and provided instead with a "make-up" day. *Pesach Sheni* comes to fill a pastoral, if not a ritual, need – naming the disappointment that comes when things don't quite go right the first time and affirming that we still have another shot at making things better.

If *Pesach Sheni* comes to encourage us to realize our own second chances, I suggest that it also comes to urge us to grant second chances to others. It is all too easy to get caught in cycles of anger or resentment, jealousy or hurt; to wish to close off oneself to another person because she has closed herself off to us; to continue to punish someone for events and grievances that happened many long years in the past without moving forward. Perhaps it is a former spouse more concerned with “winning” than with keeping the peace, a sibling who always claims more than his fair share, an estranged friend, a difficult set of in-laws, a co-worker good at making nice with the boss while doing little else. Perhaps it is someone that we see quite often, falling into awkward patterns of avoidance and hostility, or perhaps it is someone that we’ve managed mostly to escape. Perhaps we know exactly why it is that this relationship has soured or perhaps it’s been so long that we’ve simply gotten into the habit of disliking the other person. Whatever the circumstances, whatever the reason, *Pesach Sheni* encourages us to give them a second chance. It is truly the holiday of do-overs.

Interestingly enough, in **this** morning’s Torah portion, *Parashat Emor*, we read of the yearly holiday cycle including the original Pesach celebrated in the month of Nisan. Immediately before the details of the festival are described, the Torah gives a general introduction to these sacred days referring to them as *moad’im* – literally “fixed times.” Indeed, in contrast to the Muslim holiday cycle where festivals shift by approximately 11 days each year so that they eventually end up in different months and seasons on the Gregorian calendar, the Jewish calendar works to ensure that holidays stay set in place – partially because so many of them connect to agricultural events which would only make sense to celebrate at a particular time of year. Pesach, for example, not only commemorates the Exodus from Egypt but is also *chag haaviv* – the holiday of springtime – and must be celebrated then. It also, as we know, is supposed

to come exactly 7 weeks before Shavuot so that the counting of the Omer brings us right up to the giving of the Ten Commandments.

And yet, despite *Parashat Emor's* reminder that the times of our holidays should be fixed, still we have *Pesach Sheni*. It's squarely mid-spring rather than ushering in the season; it's about halfway through the Omer period and certainly not 50 days before Shavuot. Second chances don't always come at exactly the right time or work out in the most ideal way or make up perfectly for what they seek to heal and replace. Still, they often bring a sweetness and redemption all their own!

As we welcome Pesach Sheni this evening, may we feel newly committed to grasp for the second chances that it offers. Second chances allow us to right wrongs, to repair hurts, to realize new goals, to forge new relationships. They allow us to grow from the past rather than being burdened by it; to imagine a different future rather than being stuck in old disappointments. In this day and age as people are living longer and feeling less boxed in by convention, as the world is changing ever more rapidly and requiring us to be ever more nimble, there are second careers and second acts and second marriages and second tries. It is up to us to be wise enough to grab these opportunities whenever they present themselves!

"Lama nigara l'vilti hikriv et karban Adonai b'moado - Why should we be prevented from offering God's sacrifice at its proper time," our impure ancestors asked so many hundreds of years ago (Numbers 9:7).

When it doesn't go quite right at first, thanks goodness for second chances!

Shabbat Shalom,

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