

Be'ha'alotkha 5769
Second Chances

Shabbat Shalom.

While some mornings are great, some can be awful. I'll never forget the morning of the argument I had with one of my rabbinical school friends and roommates 15 years ago. While what exactly precipitated it eludes me, the depths into which we sank are still fresh and vivid in my mind years later. Since we had been friends since high school, we knew each other well and knew how to hurt each other through our words. It was not a pretty sight. Our friendship broke and we drifted apart. While we continued to see each in school, our relationship was not the same.

A couple of years later, we found ourselves at a conference and he was sitting reading the paper in the hotel lobby. I had to make a decision – should I go over to him? What should I say? What would he say? Should I give him a second chance? Would he do the same for me?

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Second chances are rooted in the notion of change. If we do not have the capacity for change, then why would we give others a second chance? But if we do believe in the power of change, that one can truly transform one's self, then second chances must be a central feature of our lives.

The idea of change did not exist in the ancient world as it does today. The ancients believed that our lives are mostly scripted and controlled by other forces and thus, there is less free will and no opportunities for change.

As Thomas Cahill (who, by the way, is not Jewish), explains in his best-seller, *The Gifts of the Jews*, before Judaism came on the scene, "life moved only in cycles: the moon and the tides, the seasons and farming, and life itself. The never-changing pattern of birth, life, and death continued generation after generation. In some sense, the idea of time as we understand it did not exist." (Review by David Grayson.)

"Development and evolution, Cahill writes, 'words of such importance to us -- would have meant little in the timeless culture of Sumer, where everything that was -- their city, their fields, their herds, their plows -- had always been.'

"In this world of the 'ever-turning Wheel,' the countless gods and goddesses of the old mythologies played out their dramas in the world above. These gods were lustful, jealous, and greedy, and humans were of little import. People had no freedom to choose a destiny, and no divinely inspired laws and ethics to guide them.

“According to Cahill, it was the Hebrews through the Torah who ‘developed a whole new way of experiencing reality.’ As he writes, ‘it may be said with some justice that theirs is the only new idea that human beings have ever had.’

“No longer did time meander in an eternal circle; it now had a beginning and end. And human beings are not fated to play an inconsequential role in the universe, but are characters in an unfolding story.”

That move from an endless circle of loop to a different kind of circle like a helix where yes, the seasons come around and around, but we can move forward, develop and change was a wondrous advance. We can see this in our Torah in many ways from the concept of Shabbat and the week, which did not exist before, to the notion of justice, change and forgiveness.

We have an interesting example in our Torah reading. Amidst this busy and wonderful *Parashat Be'ha'alotkha*, which contains a diverse menu including the lighting of the menorah, the purification of the Levites' work force and their age limits, the trumpets, marching and guidance through the wilderness, complaints about the lack of food, and even a family feud between with Moshe and his siblings, we find the laws of the second Passover.

Now at first glance, this may seem somewhat unsettling – what?! A second Passover!? Pesah seems like too much work just one time around!?! Well, let's slow down and I'll try to explain. Apparently when the Israelites approached the first Passover, just a year after the Exodus itself, there were some folks who were spiritually impure because they had come into contact with a dead body and thus, were, ineligible to offer the special Pesah, Passover sacrifice. They turned to Moses and Aaron to ask what to do.

Unsure himself, Moses has them wait, while he inquires of the Holy One. God then answers not only for this situation but for the future, explaining that “when any of you or your posterity who are defiled by a corpse or are on a long journey would offer a Passover sacrifice to Adonai, they shall offer it in the second month.” And then follows the same description of exactly when and how to eat it with matzah and *marror* – bitter herbs.

This is a fascinating law – if you miss Pesah for a good reason, you get a second chance exactly one month later. This is known as Pesah Sheni, the second Passover. Today, after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, we no longer offer these sacrifices so we do not get to have a second Pesah in the same manner the Torah describes (if you are on a journey, you observe it where you are), but we still gain insights from this law.

So, what about these special circumstances? First, we can learn something from spiritual impurity which led to this second chance. The Torah here is dealing with the case where one came into contact with a corpse. They may have been worried about the very real danger of transmitting illness or another physical affliction from this

experience, but there is something else, something deeper, here as well. Someone who came into contact with a dead body was often traumatized on some level. To see someone die, something I have been present for a few times in my life, is traumatic and even to see the corpse shortly after death is an intense experience. I would say that it can leave you with some degree of post-traumatic stress which would not leave you in the right state to offer the Pesah sacrifice and participate in this joyous celebration.

Second, we see that people who are on a long journey or simply live too far from Jerusalem, have another opportunity as well. The phrase in the Torah “*v’derekh rehokah*,” “on a long journey” is noteworthy. There is an unusual dot above the last letter (*heh*) which leads to a debate: is this a long journey from Jerusalem or from your home. Either way, this notion that being on long journey was a legitimate excuse was revolutionary. Other ancient Near Eastern civilizations and cults do not regard long journeys as legitimate excuses, while the Torah’s divine decree paves the way for a second chance.

While we can learn from the second Passover about second chances in general, it is different from forgiving others and given them second chances with us. Almost every day, we have fights, disagreements, mis-communications and arguments with the people around us. Sometimes they are strangers, sometime acquaintances, classmates, co-workers, friends, and even family. Often they leave bad feelings; sometimes they lead to traumatic breaks and cut-offs. We all have these in our lives and they are incredibly painful and difficult.

Thankfully, our tradition is particularly helpful in this regard. Generations of Jews have applied the ideas and ideals of our Torah to more elaborate situations. The Hasidic tradition – the popularizing movement in Judaism beginning in the 18th century – drew upon rabbinic notion of *teshuvah* – repentance and made new insights.

One of these teachers: Rabbi Menahum Nahum Ben Tzvi of Chernobyl who lived from 1730 – 1787 was known as the Me’or Enayim, literally, the one who illuminates the eyes, a feeling I sometimes get when reading his commentaries.

He wrote: “While the world is time, before the world was created, there was no time. Therefore, there is no time *b’tikkun ha’teshuvah* – in the repair of repentance – rather an instant. Since the world was created without time, similarly, in the same blink of an eye, it can be repaired in no time. Someone who tells you that *teshuvah* takes time, that’s not the essence of repentance and transformation.”

The Me’or Enayim offers us a profound teaching and an amazing approach to life. Yes, the work of healing takes time, but usually the most powerful moment is an internal one that happens almost instantly. It is the subtle shift within ourselves that allows us to forgive others or to ask for forgiveness. That awareness of realizing what we have done or being open to giving someone else a second chance happens instantly.

I have felt it myself – after someone has hurt me, I may hold onto that hurt, but then something happens, a new awareness, a new perspective, some shift seems to occur and just like that, I am changed. That is the deep power of *teshuvah*, self-transformation and second chances.

Rabbi Kook, the first chief rabbi of the land of Israel in the early twentieth century, said: “*Hirhurei teshuvah k’teshuvah atzmah*,” the stirrings of *teshuvah* are like the actual process of asking for forgiveness.” While we still need the process of asking and reengaging others, it is the internal process, the subtle shift that occurs within that is most significant. This subtle shift I like to call “a spark of awareness” and it can open us to all kinds of changes.

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Back to my friend and me – I took a chance and went up to him in that hotel lobby. We schmoozed, we apologized to each other, and talked things out. While we did not become best friends, we moved our relationship to a better place. And I realized that from my perspective, I was not merely trying to make things whole between us for him, but that this was for me. I was trying to make myself more whole.

We all have people and moments and relationships like that – they can often be healed and transformed but that can’t happen without that first spark of awareness of change. Once we feel that first glimmer of forgiveness, that first openness to a new reality, our perception and our attitude can shift and the world is once again full of possibility.

May we all be able to give second chances to each other – and even to ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom.