

## **Ki Tissa-Parah 5767 - Second Chances**

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As many of you know, I spent several summers as Rosh Agam, the head of the waterfront, at Camp Ramah in Palmer. My first summer as Rosh, we had an emergency. A camper, learning how to dive, slid, seemingly successfully head first into the water, but came up feeling tingling in his neck and fingers. His instructor blew her whistle, giving the signal for an emergency situation. Calling for the backboard, she entered the water, as the rest of us made sure to guide the other campers to safety on the docks. But the rescue, in real time, was more difficult than it was when we practiced it in our training. After a few minutes, which seemed like much longer, it became clear to this lifeguard that she wasn't going to be able to complete the rescue. The stabilizing hold was tiring; the backboard was too buoyant to control. So she called me into the water, where I took over for her, stabilizing the camper's spine as we secured him to the backboard for transport to the hospital. While the camper was ultimately fine—it's amazing how flexible nine year old necks are!—the incident's impact on the morale of our staff was palpable. When it really mattered, one

of our lifeguards wasn't able to respond. The following winter, as I was interviewing candidates for next summer's waterfront staff, I was informed that this lifeguard wanted to come back to camp, and to the Agam. This was a real dilemma for me. We *did* focus on spinal injury response skills quite seriously for the rest of that summer—this lifeguard had improved since that one terrifying moment. Would her failure to respond that one time ultimately keep her from the opportunity to grow and develop as a lifeguard and swimming instructor? Should I give her a second chance?

Although I didn't look to the Torah for guidance in making that decision, this week's parasha, Ki Tissa, has an awful lot to say about second chances. Following the devastating betrayal of the golden calf, God is ready to wipe out the people of Israel, a people who are, God realizes, עם קשה עורף, a stiff-necked nation. Before he even descends from the mountain to witness the sin of the people, Moses pleads before God on their behalf, calling upon the merit of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, reminding God of the miraculous exodus from Egypt, and ultimately gaining a second chance for the people of Israel. While God

did not consent to let the incident go unpunished, God does seem to get past it, continuing to dwell among the people and entering into a second covenant with them. As we reach the end of the parasha, we see that this second chance seems to work. Under this new system, Moses stays a little closer by when he goes to commune with God. And the people faithfully await his return, listening to the words he brings them from his divine encounter.

As powerful and comforting as the message of forgiveness and renewed relationship that pervades our parasha is, it is not the only way our tradition looks at the idea of second chances. This Shabbat is also Shabbat Parah, the Shabbat on which we read the special *maftir* about the ritual of the פרֵה אֲדוּמָה, the red heifer. This ritual, during which a red cow without blemish or defect is slaughtered and burned, provides the main ingredient, the cow's ashes, for a potion that removes the impurity imparted by contact with a dead body. Ironically, the acts that prepare the cow and its ashes to become this instrument of purification render the participants in those acts impure. The method through which the Torah teaches us to remove impurity necessarily makes one impure. The second chance that the פרֵה אֲדוּמָה gives to a person living

in a state of impurity brings that person back to the community—but forces someone else outside its boundaries. Not a very charitable view of second chances. Moreover, the fact that we read this parasha this Shabbat, three weeks before *Pesah*, sends a strong message about the Torah's preference for getting it right the first time. In the mind of the Torah, and of the early Rabbis, one of the central obligations of *Pesah* was the Passover sacrifice. However, one living in a state of impurity was not permitted to bring the sacrifice. Although we no longer observe this sacrificial rite, the concept of purifying ourselves for *Pesah* has stayed with us. We read this parasha now as a reminder that this holiday will soon be here, and it is incumbent upon us to greet it in a state of purity. Again, we have a strong endorsement of getting things right the first time—the Passover sacrifice has a very specific time frame, and our cycle of readings teaches us to meet that requirement.

Interestingly enough, our tradition also takes the ritual of the פרה *פרה* in entirely the opposite direction, seeing it as the ultimate symbol of second chances. In this view, it's not at all accidental that our Torah readings this morning provide us with two cows to consider. A

midrash explains: Just as the definitive sin that defiled the Israelites was committed with a cow, this mode of expiation, this tool for effecting purity will also be a cow. However, the word the Torah uses to describe this ritual law is חֻקָּה, a statute. Rashi, following the Talmud, explains that because it is a statute, it is God's decree, and it is not appropriate for us to consider why we do this thing. In reality, the ritual of the פֶּרֶה אֲדוּמָה is meant to make up for the sin of the Golden Calf. But we're not allowed to think about that. According to this understanding of the פֶּרֶה אֲדוּמָה, this purification ritual is meant to wipe out our entire memory of the sin of the Golden Calf. The ritual essentially constitutes a "do-over": we erase the memory of that first cow by using this one as a means to purification.

As troubling as I found the attitude that second chances are not so wonderful, I find this view of them perhaps even more troubling. The idea that a second chance can obliterate the fact of a first, unsuccessful attempt bothers me for two reasons. First, it's not a realistic view of second chances. They're not really "do-overs." They can't undo our actions, or our missed opportunities. Both of the *parashiyot* from which we read this morning teach us that. In Ki Tissa, we already

noted how the relationships between God and the people, between God and Moses, and between Moses and the people were affected by the sin of the Golden Calf. Forgiveness and moving on didn't erase the sin.

And we read Parashat Parah to remind us to purify ourselves in time for *Pesah*. However, a few chapters earlier in the book of במדבר, we read of פסח שני, second Passover, an opportunity for those who didn't make the purity deadline to offer their Passover sacrifice, in gratitude for being freed from Egypt. But *Pesah Sheni* isn't the same as the first one. While all of the details of the sacrifice are the same, the holiday is missing. One who missed out on *Pesah* gets a chance a month later to bring the sacrifice, but the atmosphere is necessarily different. This is not a punitive measure—it's just that the second chance can't entirely replace the first opportunity.

The second reason this “do-over” view of second chances troubles me is that it cuts off our own process of learning and growing from our mistakes. There's a well known story about a boy who had trouble controlling his anger. In an effort to teach his son a powerful lesson, the boy's father had him hammer a nail in their fence each time he lost his temper. After a while, the boy learned to control his anger.

Seeing that he had achieved this important goal, the father then instructed his son to remove a nail each time he was able to hold his temper. Eventually, the boy removed all the nails, but noticed that the fence was full of holes. I imagine that the boy learned at least as much from seeing the fence riddled with holes as he did from learning to control his anger. Second chances don't erase what's been done, but they do give us an opportunity to try again, enriched by what we learned from our first experience.

We see this most powerfully in our parasha. Both God and Israel have learned from their prior experience. As God sets out the terms of this new covenant, the laws God gives are much more specific than the ones we received before the Golden Calf. We read of a comprehensively explained prohibition on idolatry and of a focus on ways to create closeness between God and the people through the celebration of our three pilgrimage festivals. One interpretation of our parasha even shifts the chronology of our story, moving the instructions for building the mishkan to after the incident of the Golden Calf, recasting them as a response to Israel's need for concrete encounters with God.

Despite the fact that this second chance didn't erase the sin of the Golden Calf, we are comforted knowing that God and Israel found their way back to each other, that a new covenant was forged, bringing us even closer to God than we had been previously. However, as Parashat Parah reminds us, this security shouldn't keep us from striving to get it right the first time.

In the end, I did choose to give my lifeguard a second chance. She came back to camp the following summer, eventually becoming my *s'ganit*, the assistant head of the waterfront. And she now is the Rosh Agam, one who is particularly vigilant about keeping the backboarding skills of her lifeguards sharp and at the ready. And she remains a dear friend.

As we celebrate this Shabbat that focuses our attention on mistakes, missed opportunities, and forgiveness, may the example of the פרֵה אֲדוּמָה, the red heifer, inspire us to be whole as we prepare for *Pesah*, and may the renewed covenant of Ki Tissa give us security in know that we all get second chances.

Shabbat Shalom.