

B'ha'a'lotcha: The Possibility of Second Chances

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Shabbat shalom.

Preparing for today's *d'var*, I was struck by three very different themes or details in *B'ha'a'lotcha*.

- First, the importance of clouds, which directed our people when and where to travel and rest as they made their way to *Eretz Yisrael*. I was developing this whole Joni Mitchell tie-in, but it never came together.
- Second, the concept of *Pesach Sheni*, the opportunity to observe Passover for those unable to do so at the appointed time;
- And third, one of the earliest known references to baseball. You can look it up. Chapter 11, verse 32: *The people set to gathering quail all that day and night and all the next day – even he who gathered least had ten homers.*

I'd like to focus my remarks on *Pesach Sheni*.

“I don't see any smoking gun,” the doctor said, snapping off his surgical gloves. “I'll send the samples to Pathology, and your doctor will review the results with you. But I don't see anything to worry about.”

Ten days later, the specialist informed us I had Stage 2 cancer, that I needed to act quickly, and outlined my options.

So began a journey that involved multiple hospitals, oncologists, more specialists, and tests.

In this week's Torah portion, we find our ancestors on their own journey. As *b'nei Yisrael* prepare to leave the Sinai wilderness, they're given the commandment to offer the Passover sacrifice as a way to commemorate the exodus and mark their first full year of freedom. In future generations, this holiday is, of course, known as *Passover*, and one of its central rituals was the offering of the Paschal lamb.

Much of today's *seder* reflects this: the *zeroa*, or shank bone (or in our house, a roasted beet), *matzah*, *maror*, eating, singing, and praising G-d while in the company of family, friends, and strangers.

We're told that some men were ritually impure because of their contact with a corpse, and they were not allowed to offer a sacrifice, or participate. But that didn't stop them from expressing their strong feelings about being excluded. They plead their case to Moses and Aaron in chapter 9, verse 7, saying:

"We're impure because we've been with a corpse, but why should we have a privilege taken away by not being allowed to bring an offering to G-d at the same time as everyone else?"

To put this in perspective, we're told explicitly at the *seder*: *In every generation, we're obligated to see ourselves as though we left Egypt*. The thing is, these men **really did** leave Egypt, yet they're set apart from the community at this special time. You can sense their angst. Even worse, they're disqualified because they performed a *mitzvah* by being in contact with the dead. Think about it. They could be mourning the loss of a loved one. One *midrash* suggests that they're accompanying Joseph's remains. In any case, it doesn't seem fair.

Adonai then speaks to Moses, saying,

"When any of you are tamei, or impure, because of a dead person, or on a long journey, now and in future generations, and would offer a Passover sacrifice to the Lord, you shall offer it in the second month, on the 14th day, together with matza and bitter herbs.

In effect, G-d grants them a second chance, a make-up date one month later, so they can fulfill the *mitzvah* they wanted to do so badly.

This is an amazing story.

Mendel Kalmenson, a London-based Orthodox rabbi, writes that the men answer their own rhetorical question as to why they can't offer the sacrifice when they state they are contaminated.

They knew the law, and they made no effort to challenge its logic or make excuses for their actions.

By virtue of their action, this incident breaks the pattern of lawgiving. Up until now, G-d's laws are delivered with no input from the people. But here, a new commandment is enacted in response to individuals' needs.

As Kalmenson writes, *Pesach Sheni* came about because of deep human longing. Six hundred and twelve of the commandments were initiated by G-d, he says, but the 613th was initiated by man.

And indeed, this solution is novel. What other commandment tied to a specific time gets this kind of reprieve? For example, let's say you didn't sit in a *sukkah* during *Sukkot*. You wanted to, but for some reason couldn't. You don't get a second chance. But with *Pesach Sheni*, the *halacha* gives the impure and those on a long journey a second chance to fulfill the commandment.

As many commentators point out, there's a similarity between this case and the daughters of *Tzelophehad*, which we'll read a few weeks from now in chapter 27. Spoiler alert: They question the merits of a law that excludes daughters from inheritance rights, and request their claim to land in order to perpetuate their father's name. G-d tells Moses that their position is just, and amends the law.

When we examine both cases, the men who were impure and the daughters, there is an implicit sense that Jewish law must be flexible to respond to the needs of individuals and the community. And we know those needs change along with our evolving understanding of justice, compassion, and ethics.

Less than 50 years ago, for example, in the Conservative movement, *bat mitzvahs* were only held on Friday nights, and women were not counted for a *minyan* or able to take an *aliyah*, let alone put on a *tallis* or *tefilin*. The first female Conservative rabbi was ordained in 1985.

Pesach Sheni has come to symbolically represent the potential for second chances, but this is hardly the only example in the Torah. The first time Moses came down from *Har Sinai* carrying the tablets, and saw the Israelites worshipping the golden calf, he shattered them. G-d gave our people a second chance to prove they would not worship idols, and —through Moses—a second set of tablets. We are encouraged to learn from mistakes, and do better the next time.

There is also an important lesson to be learned from the phrase *v'derech r'chokah*, “on a long journey.” On the surface, this refers to someone who is physically too far away from the tabernacle (or in later eras, the Temple in Jerusalem) to get there in time for the Passover offering.

It's interesting to note that the scribes place a dot on top of the letter *hey* in the word *r'chokah*. Rashi interprets this to mean that a “long journey” doesn't have to be taken literally in terms of physical distance. It can also apply to someone standing right outside the threshold of the Temple courtyard.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his commentary to this verse in *Etz Hayim*, cites the Jerusalem Talmud to teach us that the phrase “long journey” can include a person “who is spiritually distant from God and the Jewish people” and that “[s]uch a person need not feel permanently exiled.”

So *Pesach Sheni* also reminds us that, no matter what far off journey we may be on – spiritually or geographically – there is always the opportunity to reconnect with our people and tradition.

Journeys come in many forms, as do second chances. As for me, this month marks the one-year anniversary of my surgery. And just last week, my surgeon said my cancer was *undetectable*, one of the sweetest words in the English language.

What does it take these days to elicit a sense of urgency – with the same intensity and authenticity that altered the way *mitzvot* are given, that led to the creation of *Pesach Sheni*? Is it the drive to correct an injustice that affects you, or a select group, as in today's *parsha*? Is it the wake-up call that comes with the death of a loved one, or a public figure who personified a cause or idea? Will yet another mass shooting do it – on another continent, in another state, or closer to home?

We know that second chances often come about after careful planning and orchestration. Consider the thought, research, time, testing, and logistics involved in a live organ donation. Think about the rescue and adoption of a pet from a shelter, or the challenge of learning to use prosthetics to achieve greater function and independence. Imagine what it takes to flee a domestic abuse situation and begin the long journey to safety and a brighter future. Ponder what it takes to reconnect with, and even forgive, a loved one or former friend to rekindle a relationship cut off by the passage of time, or conflict.

But second chances also come out of the blue. Can that same spark ignite and inspire action? When you suddenly recognize the opportunity to help a stranger in need, what kind of second chance can spring to life as a result? I'd like to close with one powerful example.

A few years ago in California, while waiting in a Trader Joe's checkout line, Jenni Ware suddenly realized she had no wallet. A hectic, bad day had just gotten worse. Carolee Hazard, a complete stranger, approached and offered to pay her \$207 bill. Jenni gratefully accepted and promised to repay her. Once home, Carolee posted what happened on Facebook, she wrote that she was "vacillating between feeling really good and very, very stupid." Friends reassured her that she had done the right thing and good karma was sure to follow.

The next day a check for \$300 arrived from Jenni, with a note thanking Carolee for her generosity and trust, recommending that she get a massage with the extra money. And that could have been the end of the story.

But Carolee was uncomfortable with keeping the \$93, and asked her Facebook friends what they would do with the money. Several suggested giving it to charity, and Carolee matched the \$93

and again asked for ideas on where the \$186 should go. One proposed a food bank, since the event occurred at a grocery store. Another, inspired by the story, matched the \$93. So did another. And another. And another.

Then something extraordinary happened.

When Carolee and Jenni reconnected the next week Jenni learned that the massage money had become \$2,000 through the spontaneous generosity of Facebook friends. Jenni then posted the story to *her* Facebook page, and her friends began making donations. The total soon grew to \$10,000. Children donated 93 cents of their allowance. One single mother, a graduate student working 20 hours a week, offered \$9.30 because she couldn't afford \$93. The media picked up the story and more donations poured in. Many chose to give \$93 to local food banks as far away as Massachusetts.

Since that encounter, funding has reached six figures to benefit food banks from coast to coast, resulting in more than a quarter of a million meals. Through social and traditional media, the story has traveled around the globe and continues to move people to give the hungry a second chance far beyond Silicon Valley.

On this *Shabbat*, may we have the sensitivity to recognize the second chances we've been given, the strength to create second chances for others, and the courage and persistence to make the most of them.

Shabbat shalom.