

Parshat Behaalotcha, *Ma Nishma*, Leffell School Newsletter

Sometimes, even second chances need second chances. About a month ago, on the 14th of Iyyar, I considered writing a blog post about Pesach Sheini and second chances. I never actually wrote the post. This week I was asked to write a column for Parshat Behaalotcha—where Pesach Sheini is described in the Torah. A second chance at “second chances!” I’m reaching for the text again, asking it to teach me something worth sharing.

The Book of Numbers tells the story of a group of men who could not observe Passover “in its appointed season,” as Moses commands. They approached Moses and Aaron, worried that they would have to miss the Pesach sacrifice.

And those men said unto [Moses]: 'We are unclean by the dead body of a man; why are we to be kept back, so as not to bring the offering of the LORD in its appointed season among the children of Israel?' (Numbers 9:7)

Moses returned to the men with God’s permission to bring the Pesach sacrifice a month after the proper time.

‘If any man of you or of your generations shall be unclean by reason of a dead body, or be in a journey on a distant road, he shall keep the passover unto the LORD; in the second month on the fourteenth day at dusk they shall keep it.’ (Numbers 9:10-11)

If you were unable to make it the first time, God seems to be saying, try again. One month after Pesach, the 14th day of Iyyar, we are given a second chance.

I love what Jonathan Mark wrote in [the Jewish Week](#) about the text:

‘Death’ and ‘distant roads,’ rebbes explained, also refers to sadness and disconnection. Anyone who missed doing what he or she had to do, be it on a Passover or in other circumstances, essentially could go back in time if his or her yearning was true enough. Nothing broken was beyond repair. After all, time itself is an earthly concept. Heaven is not confined by the laws of time.

According to Mark, Pesach Sheini allows us out of the confines of time. It frees us from the idea that we are stuck in a cycle of aging and moving through time, with no rest point, no do-overs. Pesach Sheini allows us to go back and do over, once in a while.

And the do-over does more than allow us to go backwards in time. The second chance also lets us move forward with a new perspective, with a kinder, gentler view of ourselves and the things we may have done imperfectly.

What were these men doing when they missed Passover? The ancient midrashic text Sifrei offers three possibilities: they were carrying Joseph’s bones, burying Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu, or caring for a met mitzvah (a corpse with no family to claim it). In any of scenarios, one thing is

clear; these men were involved in a sacred task. Their excuse is entirely acceptable, their second chance merited.

Powerfully, the Sifrei offers these men the benefit of the doubt. They must have had a good reason to miss the Pesach sacrifice, we can hear the rabbis explaining to themselves. They must have been doing something important.

What if we were to judge ourselves with that same approach? To say to ourselves, “okay, you didn’t make it the first time, but there must have been a good reason. You must have been involved in something important. Can you let yourself off the hook and try again?”

Pesach Sheini offers us the opportunity to forgive ourselves for things we wish we had done differently, to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt, let ourselves off the hook, and try again. It’s a gift to those of us who may not get everything right on the first try. And isn’t that, really, just about everyone? Shabbat Shalom.