

Beha'a lot'cha
Rabbi Arinna Moon
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Twelve years ago, I was working as a social service administrator in a large non-profit agency. I had recently taken a new position in which I had far more responsibility than in my previous job. Despite juggling grant-writing, budget development and managing a staff, I was aware of the positive impact our programs had on the low-income population we served. While I was satisfied at the time, I set my sights on moving up and becoming an executive director. In the midst of this focus on my career ladder, I took some vacation and attended a training program for Jewish lay leaders. That decision ended up becoming a major turning point in my life. While I was there, I realized that what I really wanted to do with the rest of my working years was to become a rabbi. I felt like God was calling to me and offering me a second chance to live out my heart's desire. It took me a few years, but eventually I heeded that call and started on a new and exciting path. Since then I've never looked back.

This week's parasha teaches us about second chances. The Israelites have now been out of Egypt for a year, and are instructed by Moses to observe their first Passover in the wilderness. Some, however, inform Moses that they have been rendered impure by contact with a corpse and therefore are prohibited from sacrificing and consuming the paschal offering on the assigned day. Yet, given the momentous nature of this first anniversary, they do not want to be excluded. Moses seeks God's counsel and returns with a unique concession: that individuals who are precluded from participating by virtue of defilement or being on a long journey may offer the paschal sacrifice exactly one month later – that is on the eve of the 14th of Iyar rather than the 14th of Nisan (Num. 9:1-14). This accommodation gave rise to what became known as Pesach Sheni or a second Passover which remained operative as long as the Temple stood. Today the date on the calendar is noted by a slight change in the morning prayer service.

One very interesting aspect of this exception to the law is that no similar concession is granted for missing any other festival – not Sukkot, Shavuot or even Yom Kippur. There is no second chance for those who may have missed any of these festivals, even for a good reason. Why this difference? Passover commemorates the founding of ancient Israel as God's emissary to humanity. Each time that the nation was reconstituted – by Joshua when the people entered the land, by King Hezekiah when he saved Judah from the Assyrians, by King Josiah when he commanded the people to follow the teachings of Deuteronomy, and by Ezra when he read the Torah to the people – the occasion was marked by a public celebration of the Passover festival. The importance of Pesach Sheni was to integrate the individual into the religious fold. To sacrifice the paschal lamb was to reaffirm one's sense of belonging to the people, hence, the possibility of a second chance. Annually, everyone was able to avow and renew the bonds of national affiliation.

Pesach Sheni is also important from a psychological standpoint. It is in keeping with the optimistic spirit of Judaism in which God constantly gives us second chances and is ready to forgive us when we repent. Wouldn't it be sad if we never had an opportunity to do something over? Think about all the mistakes we have made in our lives. Some of them we can never undo and we may live with regret or guilt or sadness

as a result. But other actions that may have seemed like mistakes at the time could really have been opportunities for us to open our eyes to a deeper truth.

One area where this applies is in our work. How many of us have switched jobs or even careers in order to be more satisfied with how we spend this major portion of our lives? A story from the Talmud illustrates this point. Rabbi Akiva was an illiterate shepherd. He fell in love with Rachel, his wealthy master's daughter who recognized his innate talent and agreed to marry him if he would go and study. He agreed to this plan and they were wed in secret. When her father found out what they had done, he disowned her and the couple was forced to live in poverty. Nevertheless, they kept to their plan and Rabbi Akiva went away for twelve years to study at the academy. As he was about to return, he learned that his devoted wife would endure twelve more years of being alone if he would continue his studies. This he did, and he became one of the greatest scholars among the rabbis. Rabbi Akiva was what we would call a second career student – he didn't begin his studies until age forty. Had it not been for the second chance he received from his far-sighted and long-suffering wife, he would not have achieved his greatness. An important lesson we learn from this story is that age is not a barrier to achievement. It is never too late to begin studying or to change our direction or to start something new. Similarly, there is no point at which we are entitled to stop. The words "I'm too old" are not part of the Jewish lexicon!

Another area in which mistakes become opportunities is that of relationships. I read an article in the newspaper recently about an Afghani woman who was betrothed by her father at age seven. Now that she graduated from college in the United States, her father expects her to come home to Afghanistan and honor her family by marrying the man he chose for her. The woman, who has now acquired an independent spirit, wants no part of this arrangement. It remains to be seen whether or not she gets a second chance at a marriage partner of her choice. For us who live in the West, dating is a normal part of finding the person with whom we want to spend our lives. We get to "try out" in a way what it is like to spend a significant portion of time with someone before we commit ourselves. Imagine marrying the first person you ever dated. For most of us, it would not have worked out. Having a second chance in this case means taking the time to get to know ourselves, to grow as individuals and to make a meaningful choice in a life partner. If later we change so significantly that that relationship is no longer viable, we may choose to find someone else to marry who is more suited to the person we have become.

Within our relationships, whether the individuals are co-workers, friends or family, we are prone to making mistakes simply because we are human and not perfect. Forgotten appointments, harsh words said in haste, or an uncaring attitude, can all contribute to the erosion of trust and the ease with which we once related to each other. Making apologies and asking for forgiveness are the means by which we repair our relationships. Having open discussions where feelings and thoughts are aired can create a much greater understanding and deepen the bond between people. Being willing to let go of our hurt and embrace the belief that the other person has changed takes courage but is necessary if the relationship is to flourish once again. These are the second chances that we provide for other people when we want to keep our friendships. We all know how painful it can be when someone doesn't afford us this opportunity. To be cut off from

even trying to mend fences is very discouraging and isolating. Giving someone the benefit of the doubt, giving them another chance, is to open our hearts to God's grace.

To me, one of the most fascinating aspects of Pesach Sheni is that it wasn't the law that came first. Rather, the law was a result of the stories that came before it. People had an issue to resolve and so God made an accommodation for their benefit, instead of the people having to squeeze themselves into an existing law with no leeway. Just as God has given us the opportunity to do something over if we miss the mark the first time around, so too, should we give the same latitude to the people around us. After all, we are made in God's image and acting in a godly way means allowing others to make mistakes. It is not too late to repair broken relationships or to set ourselves on a path of following our hearts. Let us give ourselves and each other the gift of a second chance.