

Second Chances – Parashat B'haalotcha

Besides being the man for whom the Nobel Prize is named, Alfred Nobel was also the inventor of dynamite. What would inspire a manufacturer of explosives to dedicate his fortune to creating the premiere award bestowed upon those who have benefited humanity? Strangely enough, it was a printing error. When Nobel's brother passed away, a newspaper ran a lengthy article about Alfred Nobel, mistakenly thinking that it was he who had died. Nobel had the rare opportunity to do what very few people can – to read his obituary while still alive – and it absolutely terrified him. The paper described Nobel as a person who had made it possible for more people to be killed more quickly than anyone else who had ever lived. In that moment, Nobel realized that this was not the way he wished to be remembered and it inspired him to change his life. Today, few people associate the name Nobel with dynamite but rather with a dedication to advancing society. Alfred Nobel had the privilege of being given a second chance, and he was wise enough to take advantage of it.

Where would we be today were it but not for second chances? From the silly mistakes of our youth to the missteps and miscalculations of adult life, the errors in judgment that got us into trouble, the times when what we thought we really wanted turned out not to be quite right, the circumstances beyond our control that landed us in a tough spot, and the times we just plain acted badly - how grateful we are to have had the opportunity to bounce back from difficult times. There have been starter jobs or starter careers that ended up paving the way for something far different; bad financial decisions or just simple bad luck from which we were lucky enough to recover; relationships ended, whatever the circumstances, eventually giving way to new love; terrible choices on our part for which we thankfully, miraculously, received forgiveness.

Jewish tradition, too, is replete with examples of individuals being given a fresh start. My colleague, Rabbi Justus Baird, includes amongst his top ten list of Jewish second chances Adam and Eve after being expelled from the Garden, Noah rebuilding humanity in the aftermath of the Flood, and the Israelites making it to the Promised Land after 40 years of ungrateful whining in the desert. There is Moses receiving a second set of tablets after breaking the first in anger. There is Rabbi Akiva, who had not studied a word of Torah until age 40, going on to become one of the greatest sages ever in human history. Every adult bar mitzvah or conversion ceremony or second marriage is a chance to start again anew. Every High Holiday season provides us with the opportunity for *teshuvah*, the ability to return back to our best selves and to do better in the year ahead. It is hard to get it right all the time, to avoid mistakes and missteps and circumstances beyond our control that send things down an undesirable path. Luckily, we are often given a second chance to make things better.

In this morning's Torah portion, *Parashat B'haalotcha*, we read of yet another example of Judaism's commitment to second chances in the institution of *Pesach Sheni* – the Second, or Alternative, Passover. Passover in Biblical times was not the seder-based ritual of today but rather centered around the Passover sacrifice which was to be offered on the 14th day of the month of Nissan at twilight. Like other sacrifices, the Passover offering had to be made in a state of ritual purity which presented a problem for those who might be contaminated on the day of the holiday; the Passover sacrifice also raised difficulties for those who found themselves traveling during the festival and unable to participate along with the community.

In our Torah portion this morning, a few such men – prevented from offering the Passover sacrifice in Nissan because of having recently come in contact with a dead body - approach Moses to see if there might still be a way to take part in the holiday celebration. They ask, "Unclean though we be by reason

of a corpse, why must we be debarred from presenting the Lord's offering at its set time with the rest of the Israelites" (Numbers 9:7)? Upon hearing their reasonable request, Moses brings the men's question directly to God who agrees to provide them with an alternative – a second Passover on the 14th day of the subsequent month at twilight – for anyone who was unable to participate in the first iteration of the holiday. It is a second chance for those who missed the original Pesach!

In our day and age, *Pesach Sheni* is no longer celebrated as an official festival as since the destruction of the Second Temple and the end of the sacrificial system, Passover observance no longer requires a state of ritual purity. Some individuals will symbolically eat a little bit of *matza* on this day; the morning and afternoon prayer services are modified ever so slightly in acknowledgement of the occasion. But the lesson of *Pesach Sheni*, I believe, still endures and indeed, especially in the Chasidic community, the day has come to be called the holiday of second chances reminding us that it's never too bad or too late or too hard to try again and make things right. In the words of the great Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, "The Second Passover means that it's never a 'lost cause.'" Like Alfred Nobel, we must be wise enough to take advantage of the second chances in life that we are offered.

If *Pesach Sheni* comes to encourage us to realize our own second chances, I suggest that it also comes to urge us to grant second chances to others. It is all too easy to get caught in cycles of anger or resentment, jealousy or hurt; to wish to close off oneself to another person because she has closed herself off to us; to continue to punish someone for events and grievances that happened many long years in the past without moving forward. Perhaps it is a former spouse more concerned with "winning" than with keeping the peace, a sibling who always claims more than his fair share, an estranged friend, a difficult set of in-laws, a co-worker good at making nice with the boss while doing little else. Perhaps it is someone that we see quite often, falling into awkward patterns of avoidance or hostility, or perhaps it

is someone that we've managed mostly to escape. Perhaps we know exactly why it is that this relationship has soured or perhaps it's been so long that we've simply gotten into the habit of disliking the other person. Whatever the circumstances, whatever the reason, *Pesach Sheni* encourages us to give them a second chance. It is truly the holiday of do-overs.

Pesach Sheni this year occurred last month on Wednesday, May 10th, about a month after Passover, yet as we read of it again this morning we may feel newly committed to grasp for the second chances that it offers. Second chances allow us to right wrongs, to repair hurts, to realize new goals, to forge new relationships. Second chances allow us to grow from the past rather than being burdened by it; to imagine a different future rather than being stuck in old disappointments. In this day and age as people are living longer and feeling less boxed in by convention, as the world is changing ever more rapidly and requiring us to be ever more nimble, there are second careers and second acts, second loves and – of course - second chances. It is up to us to be wise enough to grab them whenever they present themselves!

In closing this morning, we return to our friend Alfred Nobel. Who knows what would have happened to the man if his brother hadn't predeceased him, causing the terrible newspaper mix-up that led to his dramatic personal reinvention. Presumably Nobel would have continued on as a successful businessman and dynamite manufacturer, never knowing about the less than glowing obituary that would ultimately accompany his death. Presumably many of the laureates whom his award eventually honored would still have gone on to do great things, inspired not by hopes of recognition but rather by passion and purpose. But if Alfred Nobel hadn't prematurely read his own obituary, not only would the narrative of his own life have been far different but perhaps our own lives would be different too. His example reminds us of the extraordinary power of second chances.

On this morning of *Parashat B'haalotcha* may we be inspired to look for second chances in our own lives and to grant second chances to others as well.

Shabbat Shalom.