



# The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Beha'alotcha

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## Is there a Jewish Version?

By Steve Smith

Fourteen months into the new decade Congregation Shearith Israel, the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue of New York, ran a contest to name the decade. It was a tongue-in-cheek affair, but it was infused with the seriousness and urgency that the pandemic brought to every discussion. After tabulating many entries and noting that The Great Depression and The Roaring Twenties were “used and therefore ineligible,” an objective judging process declared the winner: henceforth, the decade would be called The Mulligan Years. (For those unfamiliar with the term, some golfers declare a Mulligan when they want to retake a shot; this is, of course, frowned upon by those who play by the accepted rules of golf, but for many, it is common practice. The term is thought to have been introduced at the Winged Foot Club by a Canadian named Frank Mulligan — really!)

The Mulligan Years, or TMY, as they refer to it, is one Shul’s way of saying that based on what we have seen so far of this decade, the best we can do is crank up a time machine and start again — it’s a request for a complete ‘do-over.’

Fun and amusement amidst the shut down. But then, a few weeks later, Spanish & Portuguese was back with a second question: what is a Jewish Mulligan?

I thought I had this one. The answer was obvious: *Pesach Sheni*.

I was sure I was right until I realized that I was wrong. Our *parsha* explains why.

The origin and purpose of *Pesach Sheni* are clear, and they are made explicit for a reason: a group of people ask *Moshe* why they should be excluded from bringing a *Korban Pesach*. They said, אֲנַחְנוּ טְמֵאִים — *we have become unclean* — לָמָּה נִגְרַע לְבִלְתִּי הַקֹּרֵב אֶת־קֹרְבָנוּ יְהוָה בְּמַעֲדוֹ בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל — *why must we be barred from presenting the LORD’s offering at its set time with the rest of the Israelites?* (Bamidbar 9:7) *Moshe* consulted with Hashem and was told,

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי־יִהְיֶה־טָמֵא וְלִנְפֹשׁ אוֹ בְּדֶרֶךְ רַחֲקָה לָכֶם אוֹ לְדַרְתֵּיכֶם וְעָשָׂה פֶסַח לַיהוָה. בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי בְּאַרְבַּעָּה עָשָׂר יוֹם בֵּין הָעֶרְבַּיִם יַעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ עַל־מִצּוֹת וּמִרְהָרִים יֹאכְלֶהוּ

*Speak to the Israelite people, saying: When any of you or of your posterity who are defiled by a corpse or are on a long journey would offer a passover sacrifice to the LORD, they shall offer it in the second month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. (Bamidbar 9:10-11)*

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Clearly, *Pesach Sheni* is a ‘make up,’ not a ‘do-over.’ What’s more, unlike the whimsical competitive golfer who declares a Mulligan, the people who petitioned *Moshe* demonstrably accepted the rules that prevented them from offering the sacrifice and, as the *meforshim* are quick to point out, showed an exemplary enthusiasm to perform *mitzvot*. Indeed, the *Soforno* seems to think they were incensed at being denied the opportunity to perform a *mitzvah* (the *Pesach* sacrifice) simply because they had recently performed another *mitzvah* (מַתְּמָצְוֵה — caring for the dead). How could doing a *mitzvah* disqualify them from doing a *mitzvah*?

Hashem responded through *Moshe* by creating a new holiday and extending the opportunity to bring a *Pesach* sacrifice to anyone ineligible through no fault of their own. Like other holidays — the *Gemara* calls it a *mo’ed* — *Pesach Sheni* is to be observed at a particular time (14<sup>th</sup> of Iyar) and is governed by specific rules (the most striking of which to me is that all the laws of *Chametz* don’t apply except at the meal at which the *Pesach* is eaten).

The Lubavitch Rebbe expressed it beautifully when he said that *Pesach Sheni* demonstrates Hashem’s compassion and that it is an indication of His willingness to give us a second chance.

Our rabbis like to describe *Pesach Sheni* as a second chance. It plays prominently in discussions of the need to increase observance of *mitzvot* and of *kiruv* (literally: bringing close). They built on this positioning by creating second chances for several *mitzvot* — *Havdalah*, for example, can be said until Tuesday if we’re unable to do so on Saturday night. The Lubavitch Rebbe expressed it beautifully when he said that *Pesach Sheni* demonstrates Hashem’s compassion, and it is an indication of His willingness to give us a second chance.

Still, I can’t help but think that my first shot at answering Spanish & Portuguese’s question was wrong — I’m stuck with the understanding that *Pesach Sheni* is a ‘make up’ not a ‘do-over’ or a Jewish Mulligan.

I finally figured it out: there is such a thing as a Jewish Mulligan, and it is indeed a complete do-over! Unlike the Mulligan of golf, the Jewish version is legal and encouraged, and can be invoked at any time.

But, alas, I have run out of space and will have to continue this *dvar Torah* and reveal the Jewish Mulligan at another time (*Parshat Nitzavim* in September). In the meantime, a challenge: what do **you** think is a Jewish Mulligan? Please share your thoughts 😊

**Steve** and Arlene migrated to Scarsdale from Brooklyn after a brief stop-over in Manhattan. Their sons, Eric and Michael, grew up at YIS, WDS, WHHS, and MDS (they are men of letters). Steve and Arlene are proud YIS old-timers — 40+ years, not counting a 4-year hiatus in Madrid — with strong roots in this warm and growing community.

Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?  
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*Learning and Growing Together as a Community • Learning as Legacy*

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