

A RITUAL MADE FOR ALL:

PESAH SHEINI

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REDEMPTION CANNOT HAPPEN without everyone. We learn this lesson from the Seder ritual, when we open our homes by inviting guests and asserting that all who are hungry should come and eat. But the idea of radical inclusion is perhaps most clearly found in the laws of the *pesah* sacrifice itself. Every person should join a group that will offer the *pesah* sacrifice and eat the entire offering together.¹ Nobody can be left out. This mandate to include everyone in this sacrifice extends so far as to necessitate the creation of an additional make-up holiday for those who were unable to participate in the primary *pesah* offering. This second-chance holiday is called *Pesah Sheini* (“Second Passover”), and falls each year exactly one month after *Pesah*.²

The Mishnah in *Pesahim* summarizes who is obligated to participate in the *Pesah Sheini* ritual:

משנה פסחים ט:א

מי שהיה טמא או בדרך רחוקה ולא עשה את
הראשון — יעשה את השני.

שגג או נאנס ולא עשה את הראשון — יעשה את
השני.

Mishnah *Pesahim* 9:1

One who was ritually impure or on a distant journey and did not observe the first [*Pesah*] should observe the second.

One who unwittingly forgot or was prevented beyond their control and did not observe the first should observe the second.

Pesah Sheini offers a chance for those who missed the

first holiday to still be part of the *mitzvah*. The people showing up to partake of this second *pesah* offering are extremely diverse. They share the same need for a second chance, but the reasons that have brought them there are many and very different. Some were on a journey, while others were home but impure and therefore not able to participate. Some missed the first holiday completely by their own mistake, while others were held up or prevented by some outside force that they couldn't control. The talmudic discussion that follows (on *Pesahim* 93a) quotes a tradition that expands the participant list, detailing even more different and specific cases including lepers, menstruating women, women who have recently given birth, and even one who missed the day intentionally. Most strikingly, the Talmud extends the categories found in the Mishnah to include a child who comes of age and an adult who converts to Judaism between *Pesah* and *Pesah Sheini*.

The Jews joining together in groups to offer a *pesah sheini* offering are not brought together because they all share one singular experience. Their lives over the previous month have looked very different. Yet, *Pesah Sheini* manages to bring them together as one people, to include them all in a ritual that is meant for all.

So much of *Pesah* has traveled through the years and is still a part of our lives today, but the *pesah* sacrifice itself has not. With the disappearance of the animal offering, we have also lost *Pesah Sheini* as an active holiday. Yet, there is so much we can learn from the structure and the values expressed in this radically inclusive ritual. *Pesah Sheini* is an opportunity to include those who find themselves on the margins, to invite them in to form community with each other, without blurring their own distinct experiences.

From *Pesah Sheini* we learn that who is “in” and who is “out” is not static. Our communities are dynamic and always changing. Over the course of a life, we will likely each move between categories, and so will the people

1 See Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Korban Pesah* 2:1.

2 See Numbers 9.

around us. Sometimes these moves are good, healthy, and intentional. Pesah Sheini reminds us that people go on journeys and they return home. We should give ourselves permission to take big journeys—real and metaphorical—and trust that we will find our way back into community. Likewise, we must let others travel and welcome them back upon return.

Other times, we may find ourselves outside of the community for reasons that are harder. Just because we participated in Pesah this year doesn't mean we won't need Pesah Sheini next year. Life is full of the unexpected. Some years we fall outside the community because we are in mourning, struggling with illness, or even because we are home with a newborn. But our tradition asserts that everyone who is impure can become pure again. This is radical and not a given. The Torah gives all of us rituals for returning to community, and Pesah Sheini acknowledges and celebrates that possibility.

The Pesah Sheini ritual teaches us not to assume that just because someone is usually included, they will stay included. We should always be asking, "Who is left out now/here/this year?" The expanding categories of people who may need a second Pesah remind us to watch out for who else may need to be invited in.

In the absence of the Temple, halakhic impurity is no longer a reason for exclusion from today's Pesah meals and communal singing of Hallel, yet we continue to mark this second Pesah, this day of second chances, on our calendars. May this day offer us the opportunity to see all those who have been left out of our communities, for whatever reason, and invite them to eat and sing with us now. ♦