



The Afterglow of Nisan

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Pesahh Sheini 5785

When you stop to think about it, Pesahh Sheini is a very strange holiday, with a motivation that would be incomprehensible for almost any other festival. As we read in Bemidbar 9, some people were ritually impure on the 14th of Nisan—the eve of Pesahh—and therefore unable to perform the foundational *mitzvah* of slaughtering and eating a paschal offering. They ask for a second chance, and God grants it: On the 14th of the following month, Iyyar, they may slaughter their lamb.

But why should they get a second chance? The *korban pesahh* is a historical commemoration, recalling the anniversary of our leaving Egypt. The date matters. We don't say that if it's inconvenient, or even impossible, to hear the *shofar* on the 1st of Tishrei, when the world was created,¹ that you can simply do it on the first day of the following month! We might have sympathy for these unfortunate souls who missed out on the chance to perform the *pesahh* offering, but that doesn't mean it makes any sense for them to get a mulligan on such an important ritual. Sometimes you just miss your chance.

¹ According to R. Eliezer; R. Yehoshua disagrees (Bavli Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a).



One possible answer comes from a midrashic strand that associates Pesah_h Sheini with Yosef. Shemot Rabbah suggests that those people who were unfit to offer the original paschal sacrifice in Bemidbar 9 were impure because they were bearing Yosef's bones, brought back from Egypt and carried on the 40-year journey through the wilderness:

שמות רבה כ"ט	Shemot Rabbah 20:19
א"ל הקב"ה, אתה אמרת לאחריך (בראשית נ"א) אנכי אכלכל אתכם חיין אתה נפטר ויהיו עצמותיך מחזרין עמהם במדבר מ' שנה שנאמר (במדבר ט"ו) ויהי אנשים אשר היו טמאים לנפש אדם - ואין אדם אלא יוסף... בזכות עצמותיך הם עושים פסח קטן.	The Blessed Holiness said to [Yosef]: "You told your brothers, 'I will sustain you' (Bereishit 50:21); by your life, when you die, your bones will travel with them in the wilderness for 40 years," as it is stated, "There were people who were ritually impure because of the soul of a person (<i>nefesh adam</i>) (Bemidbar 9:6)—and <i>adam</i> means Yosef... In the merit of your bones, they will perform the Small Pesah _h .

The Shem mi-Shmuel² notices another connection point between this *midrash* and Yosef:

שם משמאל, קדושים ד	Shem mi-Shmuel, Kedoshim 4
יש להתבונן מדוע פסח שני נקרא פסח קטן במשנה (ר"ה פ"א מ"ג). ונראה דהנה במדרש (ריש פ' בשלח) שפסח שני הוא בזכות יוסף. והנה במדרש (פ' ויגש) יוסף קטן של שבטים הי'.	We should consider why Pesah _h Sheini is called "the Small Pesah _h " in the Mishnah (Rosh HaShanah 1:3). It makes sense, for in <i>midrash</i> (Shemot Rabbah 20:19), Pesah _h Sheini is in the merit of Yosef. And [also] in <i>midrash</i> (Bereishit Rabbah 93), "Yosef was the smallest of the brothers."

Mostly, the holiday of the 14th Iyyar is known as Pesah_h Sheini, but sometimes, as in this *midrash*, it is called "The Small Pesah_h" (*pesah_h katan*). Yosef is also associated midrashically

² The Second Sokhachover Rebbe, R. Shmuel Bornszstain (1855-1926).



with being small, called “the smallest of the brothers” (*ketanan shel shevatim*). Referring to the holiday this way, then, emphasizes the connection to Yosef.

But the Shem mi-Shmuel is bothered by this:

ויש להבין למה נקרא קטנן של שבטים אדרבה מצינו שנקרא ראש לשבטים, ובמדרש (סוף פ' ויחי) שאמר יוסף לשבטים אתם הגוף ואני הראש...	But we must understand: Why is Yosef called the smallest of the brothers? To the contrary, we find that he is called the head of the brothers, and in <i>midrash</i> (Bereishit Rabbah 100, 101) Yosef says to the brothers, “You all are the body, and I am the head...”
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Even though he is the second-youngest son of Ya’akov, he is also the most powerful; his dreams present him as the head of the family, and those dreams are made manifest when he becomes the second-most powerful person in Egypt. In what way is this righteous ancestor, in whose merit we observe Pesah Sheini, “small?”

We can only understand the notion that Yosef is small, says the Shem mi-Shmuel, by recognizing that the righteous generally are called small³ as an homage to the moon, the “smaller light” (*ha-ma’or ha-katon*).⁴ And that, says the Shem mi-Shmuel, teaches us something important about the nature of righteousness. Just as the moon is the “smaller” light, reflecting what it receives from the sun, so too the righteous are mirrors reflecting the light of God. Yosef, who selflessly accepted the twists and turns through which God led him, despite being the most powerful of the brothers, was also “small.” To be small in this understanding is not about one’s size or social status, but rather about one’s ability to reflect God’s light—which is why smallness is equated with righteousness.

³ See, for example: Amos 7:2 and 1 Shmuel 17:14.

⁴ See Bavli *Hullin* 60b.



And this is why in the month of Iyyar, we get the “Small Pesah”:

והנה חודש אייר נקרא זיו, היינו שמקבל ההארה מניסן כמו הלבנה שמקבלת אור השמש.	Behold, the month of Iyyar is called “Ziv” ⁵ (“glowing”), because it receives the light from Nisan, like the moon receives the light of the sun.
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Why is it possible to make up the observance of the *korban pesah*? Why can you commemorate the deliverance of the 14th and 15th of Nisan on the 14th of Iyyar? Precisely because Iyyar is a month of reception and reflection—the calendar may have turned, but we’re still living in the light of Nisan. There’s a very real way in which those who must perform Pesah Sheini are not doing it a month late, but rather, on a date that is actually re-lived; the 14th of Iyyar is a mirror image of the 14th of Nisan. The light of Pesah, and Nisan more generally, is so powerful that it transforms even the month that follows it.

It’s now been a month since our Seders, since we sang Hallel both at night and during the day, since we were able to tell a story of redemption so powerful that it has become a cross-cultural paradigm and inspiration. Are we still able to feel the effects of telling and living that story? Are we still feeling the excitement we were meant to feel on Seder night? Or have we moved on—too quickly—from that transformative moment of freedom? Pesah Sheini reminds us that even now, the light of Nisan is powerfully present, if we can just stop for a moment to notice it. Our job now is to integrate what we learned from the magic of Pesah and Seders, so we can bring it forward into our lives. So on Pesah Sheini this year, take a pause: perhaps eat some *matzah*, and remember that the moment of redemption is not over—we are still in it, and therefore, we can get another chance.

⁵ See 1 Melakhim 6:1, and Bavli Rosh Hashanah 11a, where the Gemara seems to read this verse—which is explicitly about Iyyar—as referring to Nisan. See also Rashi there.

