

Help Yourself to Seconds

Here we are, on the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah. And it is an elite group of progressive Jews who show up.

Our calendar, which is already full of holidays, has even more holidays than some may realize. There are the major holidays, the all-stars: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Passover, Shavuot. There are minor holidays that have somehow made the team with the big guys: Hanukkah, Purim, Tu B'Shvat, Tisha B'Av. There are some lesser-known holidays: Lag BaOmer, Tu B'Av, Rosh Hodesh.

And then there are holidays that many of us may never have observed or even thought about: the Fast of the Firstborn, Mimouna, Ta'anit Esther, Shushan Purim, Asara B'Tevet, Tzom Tammuz...

And this other holiday...

Scott and I were in Crown Heights a couple of years ago, visiting his son in Chabad, and the Chabadniks were all abuzz with excitement.

"What a wonderful day for you to be visiting! You know what today is, don't you? It's Pesach Sheni!"

What is Pesach Sheni? Literally, it means "Second Passover." Which is entirely different than Second Night Seder.

And it comes from a passage in the Book of Numbers. This is just after God instructed the Israelite people to observe Passover at its set time, "on the fourteenth day of the month." But then a group of Israelites approach Moses and say: Hey! We weren't able to observe Passover at its set time. We were busy doing other holy things. But we don't want to be left out.

I love this group of vocal self-advocates. They refuse to believe that because they missed the appointed moment, they must forever remain outside. They want to participate. They could have shrugged and said, Oh well. See you next year. Instead they come forward and say: We want in. Even though it's work, and it involves sacrifice, we want to be a part of it.

Moses doesn't know what to do. So he asks God.

And God says: "Anyone... who is ritually impure by death, or is on a distant journey and would offer a Passover sacrifice to God: They shall offer it in the second month..."

In other words, God offers the class a makeup date. If you couldn't hand in your paschal lamb in the month of Nisan, you get an extension. One month later, in Iyar, you get another chance.

It's a revolutionary response! Gd listens to this minority group, and makes changes to ensure their inclusion.

Every other holiday laid out in Torah has its set time. If you miss it, you miss it. But not Passover.

I want to explore the reasons for Pesach Sheni, second Passover. And then we'll figure out why we are talking about Passover on Rosh Hashanah. It's not a time warp. There will be no matzah after services.

The first reason someone might miss Passover, according to Torah, is because they have been caring for the dead.

Caring for the dead, tending to and burying a body, vessel of life, is an essential Jewish value. They missed the communal ritual

because they were doing something profoundly sacred. Sometimes we are not where we are “supposed” to be because life suddenly summons us somewhere else. Death is not convenient. It interrupts. Honoring that holy life takes precedence over other rituals.

The second reason someone might miss Passover, according to the Torah, is they are on a distant journey.

Jewish commentators suggest that the distant journey is not just geographic but can describe someone who’s become spiritually or emotionally distant. Different than the wicked child who at least is still at the table. The one on a distant journey, who is cut off from their source, from their truth, must find their way back home.

Life is messy. Sickness happens. Flights are delayed. Trips take longer than expected. We get overwhelmed. We lose track. We lose faith. We lose ourselves. And sometimes, just when the deadline has passed, and we think the door is closed, there is an opening.

So why isn’t there a second Yom Kippur a month after Yom Kippur? Probably because no group of people who missed a day of fasting ever came together to argue to have it again. But why not Sukkot Sheni? Why is Passover the holiday that gets the second chance?

The truth is, there are second chances all over the Jewish calendar. Tashlich is about emptying the crumbs of the past and starting anew. Hanukkah, you might argue, is sometimes called Sukkot in Winter, a second Sukkot, because the Sukkot festival was missed when the temple was impure. Every Havdalah we sanctify the start of a new week. Rosh Hodesh sanctifies the start of a new month. There are four New Years. Still, there is something about Passover.

Rabbi Rachel Greengrass suggests that it's because Passover is the holiday that tells us who we are. Our foundational story. We were slaves. We went free. We were powerless. We became a people. We know what it is to be oppressed, and therefore we are commanded not to oppress. And no one should be permanently excluded own story. No one should be told: You missed the moment when everyone else became free.

It's like that classic sci-fi story, All Summer in a Day, if you remember it, about a human colony on Venus where it rains constantly and the sun only comes out for one hour every seven years, and one little girl is bullied and locked in a locker just at the moment the sun finally appears, only to be remembered after the rain starts again, her chance to see the sun completely gone.

Torah doesn't lock us out, with no way to return. With no light.

Talmud even expands the possibilities beyond ritual impurity and distance, suggesting that even if someone failed to bring the first Passover offering because of any duress, and some even say if you missed it willfully, you may still bring the second.

Which means the second chance is not reserved only for people with excellent excuses. Even if you blew it. Even if it was your fault. Even if you knew better.

I have spent a lot of our Second Day Rosh Hashanah talking about Second Passover. Using one Second Holiday to talk about another. Because perhaps this is exactly what the second day of Rosh Hashanah is for. A day for those of us who need to hear something twice.

In fact, the word MISHNE in Hebrew, which refers to the Talmud, essentially means repetition. That which is repeated. Because that's how we learn. There is a lot of wisdom in the second time around.

A lot of wisdom in seconds!

In Genesis, when Abraham lifts the knife over Isaac, an angel calls to him and says "Stop!" And then, the angel calls to Abraham *shenit*, a second time, and says, "I will bestow My blessing upon and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore." The first call stops the knife, and the second contains the blessing.

In Exodus, Pharaoh has a second dream. Because one wasn't enough to get the message through that there would be a famine in his land. It was the second dream that woke him to take action.

And later, after the first set of tablets are broken, Moses goes back up Sinai to get a second set.

In Jonah, God tells the prophet: Go to Nineveh. Jonah runs in the opposite direction. He is swallowed by a great fish. And after all of that, the text says: *Vayehi d'var Adonai el Yonah shenit*. "The word of God came to Jonah a second time." *Shenit*.

The entire book turns on one tiny word: *Shenit*. A second time. And this time, Jonah went to Ninevah and the people repented and were saved.

Second isn't the same as the first, but its not second best. In fact, the second time is enriched with experience, with wisdom. Jonah has matured the second time Gd speaks to him.

We've all been on distant roads. We've all missed moments. But here we are, *shenit*. A second day. A second time. The shofar sounds again. The gates open again.

The world is created again. And we are invited to begin again.

And maybe there is someone in your life to whom you need to give a Pesach Sheni. Or a second call, one that contains a blessing. Or a second dream. Perhaps Rosh Hashanah asks us not only to seek second chances, but to become people who know how to give them.

Passover this year begins sundown April 21. Pesach Sheni begins sundown May 20. But opportunities to begin again are all over our calendar. It may be autumn, but it's spring somewhere on this planet. And it's not just on Yom Kippur that we erase all the vows and wipe the slate clean, but every single night. As part of the bedtime Shema, the traditional reading is:

Master of the universe, I hereby forgive anyone who angered or antagonized me or who sinned against me—whether against my body, my property, my honor, or against anything of mine; whether it was done accidentally, willfully, carelessly, or purposely; whether through speech, deed, thought, or notion... may no one be punished on my account.

In Hebrew, like in English, the word for second, as in first-second-third, is the same as the word for the unit of time. A *sh'niya*.

Every *sh'niya* contains the possibility of *shenit*. Every second contains the possibility of a second chance.

So here we are, on the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah. The first day is gone. This day will soon be gone too. But there is no moment in which we are permanently locked out of our own becoming.

The next sh'niya, the next second, is already arriving.