

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Beha'alotcha)

*There is a special mitzvah (imperative) to love the stranger, the Ger, listed as the fourth mitzvah in Maimonides' **Hilchot Deot** (laws of ethical relationships). And as one is not meant to remind a person that he or she is a convert I will change the names and details of this story, but the story is true.*

A number of years ago a student joined our program, who always perked up when I was teaching the special mitzvah of loving the stranger, or convert (Ger). It transpired that his mother was a giyoret (convert) and he shared the following story with me:

Due to the fact that he was already a boy old enough to understand when his mother converted, our student himself also had to undergo a conversion of sorts, including immersion in the mikveh or ritual pool. Having grown up in a small farming community in the middle of no-where and now moved to a big city, he was more than a little intimidated at the thought of immersing in a mikveh and being questioned as to his intentions of joining the Jewish people by a Rabbinic court of three Rabbis.

He was ready to start a new life, to join the Jewish people; but wondered if they would accept him.

And that was when a tall bald Rabbi whose name he has since forgotten, but whose voice will be forever seared into his memory, changed his life. The Rabbi, tasked with ascertaining whether this boy was ready to join the Jewish people, asked from across the room if they (his parents were obviously present) were from the South.

"Yes", they replied hesitantly; "North Carolina".

The Rabbi's eyes lit up as he told his story which began in Pittsburgh. He had been a young Rabbi, travelling the country performing ceremonies and presiding over rituals in smaller remote Jewish communities. One of the remote areas he used to frequent, he recalled, was a small town called New Bern, North Carolina. Everyone's ears perked up; no one they met had ever heard of New Bern before....

With a smile the Rabbi recalled that every time he had stepped off the train in New Bern, he was always met by a kind-hearted Jewish man named Harold Orringer who greeted him with a kosher corned beef sandwich and a homemade pickle. He had never forgotten the kindness of that special man.

For a moment, time simply stopped. Finally, our young student's father broke the silence: "that kind man was my father"

And in that moment, a young boy suddenly realized he was on the right path, and was being given a chance to start life all over again, and to become part of something really special.

Sheni falls, has no other holidays in the Torah but contains all the modern special holy days of the State of Israel: Memorial Day (Yom Ha'Zikaron), Independence Day (Yom Ha'Atzmaut) and Jerusalem Day (Yom Yerushalayim).

The same month of Pesach Sheni, born of the Jews' desire to participate and offer up thanksgiving, would one day give rise to the birth of the State of Israel and the return home to Jerusalem after two thousand years of dreaming; Iyar is the month of how we, with Hashem's help, can make a difference....

There is a fascinating question regarding this mitzvah of Pesach Sheni, specifically regarding the convert or **Ger**. If a person converts and formally joins the Jewish people after the festival of Pesach but before Pesach Sheni, is he or she obligated to offer up the Paschal lamb on Pesach Sheni, the Second Passover?

Obviously, this depends on the reasoning behind this mitzvah: if this is simply an opportunity to fulfill what one missed through no fault of their own, then on Pesach itself the convert was not yet Jewish and obligated in the paschal lamb. Consequently, there would be no need for them to ‘make up’ what they missed on Pesach Sheni.

And yet, we rule in accordance with Rebi Yehuda Hanassi (Tractate *Pesachim* 93) and so indeed rules Maimonides (*Hilchot Korban Pesach* 5:7) that a person who converts in between Pesach and Pesach Sheni is indeed obligated to bring the Paschal lamb offering on Pesach Sheni; why?

The **Lubavitcher Rebbe** in his *Likkutei Sichos* suggests that even though the person had not yet converted on Pesach, the *desire* to join the Jewish people was already there, and this intense desire, the spark of Judaism burning in that soul already connected them to the mitzvah of Pesach even before they formally became halachically Jewish thus allowing them the special mitzvah of a ‘second chance’: the mitzvah of Pesach Sheni.

It is interesting to note that this ‘second chance’ mitzvah does not appear regarding any other festival; one cannot bring the offerings of Sukkot once the holiday concludes no matter how noble the reason a person might have for having missed the mitzvah. Only on Pesach are we given this opportunity. Perhaps because this is the first mitzvah, as we departed Egypt, which represented our willingness to make a difference.

On the fourteenth day of Nissan when we were still in Egypt, Jews who had been enslaved in Egypt for over two centuries, took the gods of their masters (the lamb was one of the seven gods of ancient Egypt...) and slaughtered them, even painting their doors with the lambs’ blood as if to say, ‘into this home Egyptian gods are no longer welcome’.

Even though we were technically still in Egypt, on that holy night of Passover the Jewish people stood up and grabbed their freedom.

Before G-d took us out of Egypt we had to first set ourselves free.

Pesach then, is the festival of freedom because it was built on an intense yearning, a desire to be free. And three thousand years later, after witnessing the greatest horror the world had ever known, an ancient people, fueled by an intense wellspring of pure will returned home to their ancient land and built a modern state they could call home.

Interestingly, the Midrashic opinion that those original Jews who yearned to fulfill the central mitzvah of Pesach were carrying the bones of Joseph makes sense as well. It was only Joseph’s powerful will, his desire to remain a Jew even in the dark pit of despair that must have been the lot of a Hebrew slave in Ancient Egypt that allowed him to remain a Jew even in such terrible darkness.... And this deep will, this *ratzon*, is what Pesach Sheni is all about.

Three thousand years ago, an ancient people willed themselves a second chance and G-d took them, us, out of Egypt. And more than seventy years ago that same ancient people willed themselves a second chance and G-d brought us home at last.

This is the secret of the special mitzvah to love the *Ger*; the convert or stranger. More than anything we love his or her will; the intense spark of *ratzon* that would not let Ruth abandon her mother-in-law Naomi which gave birth to the line of King David, and the same will that brings lost sparks back to the beauty of Judaism.

And all of us can learn, from this very special mitzvah, the power and beauty of Judaism’s message that there is always a second chance, every day, and in every moment. We simply have to reach out and grab it....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman