



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Beha'alotcha 5775

By Rachel Travis

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For years I kept a Jewish calendar on my wall. It was my weekly guide to Shabbat times and my monthly reference for Jewish holidays. Now I have a Jewish calendar app on my phone and refer to Chabad.org each Friday to check candle lighting times. The technology has changed, but the fact that much of Jewish observance is embedded in time remains the same.

Holidays, Shabbat, fast days and special Torah readings are all inscribed in the Jewish calendar. And if we miss an observance during its appointed time, there is generally no making it up. If we fall ill on Yom Kippur and must eat, none of us would try to compensate by fasting the next day. Anyone who has scrambled to finish Shabbat preparations on a Friday afternoon understands that the circumscribed nature of time-bound *mitzvot* imbues their practice with a sense of urgency. It's a do-it-or-lose-it system.

Pesach and, in the Biblical period, the Pesach sacrifice, fall into this category of time-bound *mitzvot*. In *Parashat Beha'alotcha*, the Israelites are instructed to bring the Pesach offering "on the 14th day of this month [Nissan] in the afternoon in its appointed time."¹ The time frame for offering this sacrifice is extremely constrained (down to the time of day!) and might have remained so had not a group of men approached Moshe and Aharon with a complaint: "We are impure, having had contact with a corpse; why should we be excluded and not be able to bring the offering of God in its proper time, among the Children of Israel?"²

According to the Talmud, these men were excluded from offering the sacrifice because they had become ritually impure after performing the particularly meritorious act of burying an unclaimed, unidentified body.³ Given their status, they could have legitimately sat out the Pesach offering and waited until the opportunity came around the following year, but instead, they demanded the right to participate.

God responds to their visceral passion for the *mitzvah* with an offer of a second chance, thus creating a new holiday, *Pesach Sheni*—"Second Pesach." Going forward, anyone who misses the Pesach offering because of ritual impurity or prohibitive circumstances (such as distant travel) will have the opportunity to bring the sacrifice on the 14th day of the following month.⁴ Incredibly, this is the only instance in the Torah in which the Jewish people are given a chance to make up a time-bound *mitzvah*. Consequently, *Pesach Sheni* has come to symbolically represent the potential for self-improvement and second chances.⁵ It is, in a sense, a holiday to rectify missed opportunities.

There is no such loophole for our practice of *tikkun olam*—our obligation to repair the social ills of the world. It is neither ritualized nor time-bound. Our instructions are broad and the details remain vague: tithe your earnings; care

¹ Bamidbar 9:3.

² Bamidbar 9:7.

³ Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 25b.

⁴ Bamidbar 9:11. See also Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 25b.

⁵ Rabbi Chaim Miller, ed. *The Gutnick Edition Chumash*. New York: Kol Menachem, 2008. p. 79.

for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger; pay your workers on time. The nature of such open-ended *mitzvot* can be empowering: we have the opportunity to develop our practice of social justice whenever we want and interpret it as broadly as we want. But it also means that we often feel less urgency than the group of men in the desert experienced. If we miss a rally, we feel few immediate, personal consequences because we assume there will be another. We might not send in a donation right when we get a request in the mail because we can always write a check another day. When we have opportunities to do the *mitzvah* of *tikkun olam* today, tomorrow or the next day, there's rarely an impetus for immediate action.

This is particularly true of our efforts to address poverty and inequality in developing countries, when the repercussions of delaying action are distant and even imperceptible to us. Sometimes a major global disaster spurs us to emboldened action, but those initiatives and the feelings they engender are often evanescent.

While, we, as a community, are engaged in admirable social justice programs across the globe, these efforts often lack urgency. Our perception that global issues don't require immediate action is both false and deeply damaging. Though social justice may not be a time-bound *mitzvah* per se, there are certainly repercussions to waiting to act. With each day that passes, a child needlessly goes hungry; a woman dies unnecessarily in childbirth; hospitals and schools in developing regions remain unrealized dreams.

We cannot assume that just because there will always be another chance to do *tikkun olam*, we don't have to act now. If we miss a chance, we should experience the sense of loss the men in the desert felt, and we, like them, should not resign ourselves to standing on the sidelines until another opportunity happens to come around. As we read this week's *parashah*, let's take a moment to reflect on our unactualized *tikkun olam* ambitions and create a symbolic *Pesach Sheni* for ourselves with a renewed commitment to acting now.



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