

For non-Jews, one of our most baffling traits is our predilection for arguing, not only amongst ourselves, but with HaShem. Even though we acknowledge our insignificance in the presence of HaShem in the daily morning service and in the High Holiday liturgy, we exercise our right as partners in our eternal covenant to question, criticize, and even challenge, HaShem. From Abraham, Moses, and a host of other biblical personages to the Talmud rabbis, medieval writers, and modern day people, we have dared to confront HaShem. As that mysterious Being named us after its nocturnal struggle with Jakob, we are indeed *Yisrael* – God-Wrestlers. And when we think HaShem is allowing an injustice to occur, we speak up. An episode in our parashah illustrates that contrary to popular belief, our Torah is not rigidly legalistic, but instead, finds creative ways to ensure justice for all. Chapter 9 opens with a reiteration of commandments regarding the Pesach sacrifice. However, some men who were unable to observe the Pesach sacrifice approached Moses. “We are ritually unclean [due to] contact with a corpse; why should we be excluded and not be able to bring the offering of the Lord in its appointed time, with all the children of Israel?” (9:7) HaShem amends the original commandments by instituting Pesach Sheni, a second Pesach for “any person who incurs corpse impurity, or is on a distant journey, whether among you or in future generations ... In the second month, on the 14<sup>th</sup> day, in the afternoon, they shall make it; they shall eat it with unleavened cakes and bitter herbs. ... But the man who was ritually clean and was not on a journey, yet refrained from making the Pesach sacrifice, his soul shall be cut off from his people, for he did not bring the offering of the Lord in its appointed time; that person shall bear his sin. If a proselyte dwells with you, and he makes a Pesach sacrifice to the Lord, according to the statutes of the Pesach sacrifices and its ordinances he shall make it. One statute shall apply to you, to the proselyte and to the native-born citizen.” (9:10-14) Indeed, observing the Pesach sacrifice is so important that this unique second opportunity was instituted. Talmud Tractate Pesachim discusses aspects of Pesach Sheni, including the length of a distant journey: “From the threshold of the Temple courtyard and beyond is a distant journey ... Therefore the word is dotted over the letter *heh* in the word ,distant’ [הַיָּחִיד] to say that the meaning should be qualified ... not because he is really distant; rather, it includes anyone located from the threshold of the courtyard and beyond.” (This is a typical creative attempt to deal with unnecessary dots over letters and the many other scribal anomalies in our Torah. Scribes are only human!) With an eye to sheer practicality, the sages also discuss differences in the two observances: “On the first Pesach leavened bread is prohibited, and on the second it is permissible to have both leavened bread and matzah in the house.” Of course claiming this second chance rests upon honest desire to perform the commandment. Even if one had deliberately avoided observing the first Pesach, true repentance made it possible to observe Pesach Sheni. Actually, Pesach Sheni is a *mitzvah* in its own right, referred to in the Talmud as *Pesach Katan*, Small Pesach. It even gave rise to a law requiring a new proselyte or a minor who becomes bar mitzvah between Pesach and Pesach Sheni to bring the Pesach sacrifice on Pesach Sheni. (Maimonides: Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Pesach Sacrifice 5:2) – a superb way to underscore the importance of observing the *mitzvot*. Although the sacrificial system is long gone, we still may observe Pesach Sheni today by eating a piece of matzah, and as on all holidays, by omitting *tachanun*, the prayer of supplication in the morning and afternoon services. Pesach Sheni falls on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Iyar, one month after Erev Pesach. It is the 29<sup>th</sup> day of the Omer Count, Day One of Week 5, the day of *chesed* in the week of *hod*. The sephira *hod* encompasses such diverse attributes as splendor, majesty, and glory, as well as humility and surrender. In other words, we recognize that although HaShem is the ultimate power, we are still responsible for the things that are within our earthly power. The attribute of *chesed* infuses this day with love, starting with ourselves. “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) is the prerequisite for extending that love outward so that we are able to value the multifaceted splendor of HaShem’s creation and do all we can to guard and preserve it. The root *יה* forms words that mean to thank/acknowledge as well as to throw/hurl (*yad* means hand). How fitting that Pesach Sheni falls on this day! Pesach Sheni was not instigated by Moses in one of his many altercations with HaShem, but rather, by ordinary citizens who felt slighted and likely also somewhat confused about their inability to observe this most important *mitzvah*. For people so new to freedom, these courageous men demonstrated remarkable understanding of the responsibilities freedom entails. This is indeed a bright spot in the midst of all the fear and confusion that has already led to so much discord and a short while later will dissolve into bitter complaining. Moreover, this episode illustrates that our Torah is far more than a body of laws. It is a collection of teachings about those laws that offers a strong, yet flexible framework for building an equitable society. We have questioned, challenged, and railed against HaShem for millennia, and many of us are “non-observant.” But every time we contribute to charitable causes, help protect our environment, work toward intercultural understanding, or challenge injustice, we are acting in accordance with Torah teaching. There are many ways to be Jewish, and most of them include a generous amount of healthy arguing.

Shabbat shalom!