



Parashat Beha'alotcha
Pesach Sheni and Gay Marriage?

Amy Soule

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Numbers 8:1 - 12:16

Hearing Minnesota state Representative Steve Simon's defense of gay marriage last month left me smiling. He asked, "How many gay people must God create before we ask ourselves if God wants them around?" He went as far as pushing his opponents to consider the ramifications of their statement that "sexuality is a gift from God" (Hmmm... they weren't entirely specific... did they mean to suggest all sexuality was, since they didn't explicitly state 'heterosexuality is a gift from God', or were they assuming their statement had to be interpreted through a heterosexist lens?).

Anyway, enough modern history. Let's return to the Torah, which can be read as including affirmations that marriage can and should be accessible to everyone. Chapter 9 of Numbers, included in this Shabbat's parashah, refers to the ancient holiday of Pesach Sheni. If extrapolated to our times, God's institution of this festival can be reinterpreted as God blessing same-sex marriage.

Some people came to Moses looking for a means to be involved in celebrating Pesach despite having a difference that, depending on your interpretation and perspective, exempted or prevented the group from participating in any religious rituals, including celebrating holidays. Since Moses had no idea if any solution was possible for their predicament he went to consult with God about it.

God's response is radical. God tells our ancestors that if they are ritually impure due to corpse contact or away on a long journey they can celebrate Pesach a month later than its traditional date. Date alone is different; they remain held to the same rigorous standards as their peers who are able to celebrate according to tradition. Something else God states is that people will be punished if they exploit this new rule: anyone who is able to mark Pesach on time but doesn't follow through will be subject to punishment and "cut off" from the community around them.

If this doesn't seem like enough activism, our ancient sages interpreted everything even more, making Pesach Sheni as inclusive as possible. The Mishnah indicates that ANY kind of ritual



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impurity, as opposed to corpse contact alone, is a valid rationale to observe Pesach Sheni. Our sages also have a very broad understanding of the Hebrew expression translated as “long journey” due to the extra marking above the term rechoka-the Hebrew word meaning journey. According to them, people anywhere outside the Temple were making a lengthy journey.

As for the harsh edict about people being cut off from the group? Perhaps it’s intended to serve as a reminder to the majority group that they aren’t impacted by the new rule and they remain responsible to follow through according to tradition. They have no reason to exploit a rule that wasn’t created to affect them on any level.

Why is any of this relevant to our fight to be able to marry?

Our Torah portion tells us God instituted a new holiday to enable all people to be involved even if they were different. Putting this notion into modern times makes it easy to believe God wants us to be able to marry if we choose to, since today, marriage can be perceived as analogous to Pesach observance for our ancestors many millennia ago: it demonstrates a kind of “fitting in” or adherence to “expectations” and we all deserve to be able to do this if we feel so inclined.

Second, all people, according to the Torah, are held to the same standards no matter when they celebrate Pesach. Similarly, no matter whether a marriage is same or opposite sex, God expects the same level of commitment, respect, etc. within the relationship; simply being different doesn’t mean we are held to a different-no matter whether it’s lower or higher-standard than other people are.

Something else that is extremely relevant is the threat God issues at the ending of the verdict delivered to our ancestors all those years ago. God warns them that if they are able to follow through without any extenuating circumstances and they fail to do it they will receive divine punishment.

To some, that may seem harsh but if read according to an activist perspective it’s completely fair. It communicates that rules implemented to help minorities have no effect on the majority of people and anyone within the majority group doesn’t have any rationale for feeling threatened or devalued simply due to the fact that others are receiving the same rights they are. Also, it can help toward reassuring the majority group: making something as accessible as possible doesn’t have to-and isn’t supposed to-be a slippery slope and create many other concerns.

In addition, the idea that our sages pushed so hard in their interpretation of defining the people who could celebrate Pesach Sheni indicates that as many people as possible deserve to be involved. It’s not enough to look at the surface level and claim that alone is sufficient; look again and determine if any others can be included also.



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Millennia ago, the courage of a small group of ritually impure people led God to create Pesach Sheni. As one commentator puts it, “God could have instituted Pesach Sheni from the beginning; instead God gave people a chance to fight for their position due to a refusal to accept their fate”.

Today, God is giving us the same chance our ancestors had. It’s not always pleasant or easy but we are fighting the status quo also and if our Torah portion sets any kind of precedent God will be able to help us through and give us the chance to affirm our love no matter where we live.

Though some, such as John Quinn, the bishop of the Winona Archdiocese, state that “marriage is the union of one man and one woman, and law must reflect what we know from reason, experience, tradition as well as revelation”, apparently believing that religion can serve as an excuse to judge anyone who loves differently, let us always remember, if we choose to see them, affirmations (and revelations) for all kinds of love and marriage are visible within sacred scripture.



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