



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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“A Second Chance”

I was in a total fog during my first year in high school. I am convinced that my experience then was not unique. I entered a strange school, much larger than the one I had attended previously, and was not given the benefit of any orientation to the new environment. I did not know what to expect, and I was not informed about what was expected of me.

I struggled academically and socially. But I knew one thing, and that was that I liked to write, and I sought to learn how to do so.

Toward the end of the year, I learned that there was a special track in the English department for those who were interested in writing. The track was called “Journalism for Sophomores” and was open to those who did well in their freshman English courses. But, as I said, I was in a fog that freshman year and was merely passing freshman English.

Nevertheless, I applied for entry into the journalism class. I was turned down. But I persisted and made it my business to arrange for an interview with Mr. Joe Brown, the instructor for the journalism class, and also the advisor for the student newspaper.

I will never forget Mr. Brown, because he was impressed by my perseverance and gave me a second chance explaining that many freshmen often become overwhelmed by the novelty of their new environment and

don't always excel to their full potential. He would allow me into the elite journalism class with the condition that I would prove myself by doing extra essays, and doing them well, during the first six weeks of the semester.

I fulfilled his conditions and spent not one, but three years in the special journalism section under his tutelage. I enjoyed it, learned a great deal, became one of the editors of the prize-winning student newspaper, and was elected editor-in-chief of the senior yearbook. To this day, every time I put a pencil to paper or fingers to a computer keyboard, I think of Joe Brown.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Beha'alotcha*, we read of a group of people who, like me, were unable to fulfill their responsibilities the first time around. In their case, it was the *mitzvah* of bringing the Passover offering on the 14th day of the month of Nisan, which they failed to do. For them, it was not the strangeness of a new school that prevented them from doing the *mitzvah* properly. Rather it was because “...they were unclean, having come into contact with a dead body, so that they could not keep the Passover on that day.” (*Numbers* 9:6)

They could easily have taken the approach of shrugging their shoulders and saying something like, “We tried our best, but circumstances were such that we were unable to perform the Passover sacrifice. We have a good excuse, so let's move on.”

But that was not their reaction. Instead, “...they came before Moses and before Aaron on that day.” They wanted, nay demanded, a second chance.

“Unclean though we are by reason of a corpse, why must we be debarred from presenting the Lord’s offering at its set time with the rest of the Israelites?” (*Numbers 9:7*) They persisted and insisted upon having the same benefits of the rest of the people, those who did not suffer the set of circumstances that denied this particular group of men this type of privilege.

Most fascinating is the fact that Moses did not know what to tell them. As far as I can tell, this is the first time in the Bible, and quite possibly the first time in the history of the human race, that a group of people asked for a second chance. Moses was unaware of a precedent for the privilege that this group was requesting.

So Moses, having the kind of access that none of us has today to the Divine, said to them, “Stand by, and let me hear what instructions the Lord gives about you.” (*Numbers 9:8*)

The Lord gave them a second chance. He told Moses that forevermore in the history of the Jewish people, when individuals are faced with circumstances that prevent them from bringing the Passover offering in its proper time, “they shall offer it in the second month...” God, in His infinite mercy, gave a second chance, a kind of a do-over session, to a group of people who could have easily given up, but who did not want to be left out and therefore persevered in their search for a spiritual privilege.

There is so much to be learned from this story. Although we cannot play God, we can certainly emulate Him and give others a second chance. We need not strictly enforce all of our rules but can recognize that there are circumstances in the lives of men that prevent them from doing the right thing the first time around and who, therefore, require a little “slack.”

But the great lesson for me in the story is the value of perseverance, of not taking no for an answer but continuing to knock upon the doors of opportunity. These men who were “unclean because of their contact with a corpse” are among the heroes (in their case, unnamed heroes) of the entire biblical narrative. Had they not persevered, we would never have learned of the Almighty’s provision of a *Pesach Sheni*, an opportunity to compensate for the excusable failure to do it right the first time.

So I learned much from Mr. Joseph Brown about how an empathic teacher can bring out the best in a confused youngster. But I also learned, very early in my own life, about the value of persistence.

‘Tis a lesson you should heed,

Try, try again.

If at first you don’t succeed,

Try, try again.

I am tempted at this point to hold a contest and offer a prize to the reader who can identify the source of that famous quote. But I will forego that temptation and tell you that it was first published in *A Teacher’s Manual*, by early 19th century educator Thomas H. Palmer.

Or in the words of another relative unknown, William Ward:

Four steps to achievement:

plan purposefully, prepare prayerfully,

proceed positively, pursue persistently.

Or, finally, in the words of the famous Goethe:

In the realm of ideas everything depends on enthusiasm;

in the real world, all rests on perseverance. ■



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