



“The Five Books of Moses:  
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

36 Beha'alotkha — Second Chances

Text

**במדבר ט**

א וידבר יהוה אל-מֹשֶׁה בַּמִּדְבָּר-סִינַי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִיָּה לְצֵאתֵם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן לֵאמֹר. ב וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הַפֶּסַח בְּמוֹעֲדוֹ. ג בְּאַרְבַּעַת עֶשְׂרֵי-יוֹם בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה בֵּין הָעֲרָבִים תַּעֲשׂוּ אֵת בְּמֹעֵדוֹ כְּכֹל-חֻקֹּתָיו וְכָל-מִשְׁפָּטָיו תַּעֲשׂוּ אֵת. ד וידבר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת הַפֶּסַח. ה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ אֶת-הַפֶּסַח בְּרִאשׁוֹן בְּאַרְבַּעַת עֶשְׂרֵי יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ בֵּין הָעֲרָבִים בַּמִּדְבָּר סִינַי כֹּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת-מֹשֶׁה כֵּן עָשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. ו וַיְהִי אֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ טְמֵאִים לְנֶפֶשׁ אָדָם וְלֹא-יָכְלוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת הַפֶּסַח בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיִּקְרְבוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וּלְפָנֵי אֱהָרֹן בְּיוֹם הַהוּא. ז וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הַהֵמָּה אֵלֵינוּ אֲנַחְנוּ טְמֵאִים לְנֶפֶשׁ אָדָם לָמָּה נִגְרַע לְבַלְתִּי הַקְרִיב אֶת-קִרְבָּן יְהוָה בְּמֹעֵדוֹ בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. ח וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מֹשֶׁה עֲמְדוּ וְאִשְׁמַעְהָ מִה-יִצְוָה יְהוָה לָכֵם.

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**במדבר יב**

א וַתְּדַבֵּר מֵרִים וְאֱהָרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל-אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי-אִשָּׁה כַּשִּׁית לָקַח. ב וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרֹק אַךְ-בְּמֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר יְהוָה הֲלֹא גַם-בְּנֹדֵב דַּבֵּר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה. ג וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲנוּ מֵאֵד מִכֹּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה. ד וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה פְּתָאֵם אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אֱהָרֹן וְאֶל-מֵרִים צְאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁתְּכֶם אֶל-הַלְּמוֹעֵד וַיִּצְאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁתֶּם. ה וַיִּרְדּוּ יְהוָה בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן וַיַּעֲמֵד פֶּתַח הַאֹהֶל וַיִּקְרָא אֲהָרֹן וּמֵרִים וַיִּצְאוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם. ו וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַעוּנָא דְבַרִּי אִם-יְהִי נְבִיאֲכֶם יְהוָה בְּמִרְאֵה אֵלֵינוּ אֶתְוֹדַע בְּחִלּוֹם אֲדַבֵּר-בוֹ. ז לֹא-כֵן עֲבַדִּי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל-בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמַן הוּא. ח פֹּה אֶל-פֶּה אֲדַבֵּר-בוֹ וּמִרְאֵה וְלֹא בְחִידוֹת וְתִמְנַת יְהוָה יְבִיט וּמִדּוֹעַ לֹא יִרְאֶתֶם לְדַבֵּר בְּעַבְדִּי בְּמֹשֶׁה. ט וַיִּחַר-אַף יְהוָה בָּם וַיִּלְךְ. י וְהָעֲנָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהָנֵה מֵרִים מִצַּרְעַת כַּשְׂלֵג וַיִּפֹּן אֱהָרֹן אֶל-מֵרִים וְהָנֵה מִצַּרְעַת. יא וַיֹּאמֶר אֱהָרֹן אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בִּי אֵד נִי אֶל-נֹא תִשֶׁת עֲלֵינוּ חֲטָאת אֲשֶׁר נֹוֹאֲלָנוּ וְאֲשֶׁר חֲטָאנוּ. יב אֶל-נֹא תְהִי כַמֵּת אֲשֶׁר בְּצֵאתוֹ מִרְחֹם אִמּוֹ וַיֹּאכַל חֲצִי בָשָׂרוֹ. יג וַיִּצַּעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל-יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֵל נֹא רַפָּא נֹא לָהּ.

יד וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֲבִיֶּה יִרְקֵי בְּפָנֶיהָ הֲלֹא תְכַלֵּם שְׁבַעַת יָמִים תִּסְגַּר שְׁבַעַת יָמִים מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וְאַחַר תֵּאֲסֹף. טו וְתִסְגַּר מֵרִים מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה שְׁבַעַת יָמִים וְהָעַם לֹא נִסַּע עַד-הָאֲסֹף מֵרִים. טז וְאַחַר נִסְעוּ הָעָם מִחֲצֹרוֹת וַיִּחַנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר פֶּאֶרֶן.



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#### **Bamidbar 9**

1 The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, on the first new moon of the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, saying: 2 Let the Israelite people offer the passover sacrifice at its set time: 3 you shall offer it on the fourteenth day of this month, at twilight, at its set time; you shall offer it in accordance with all its rules and rites.

4 Moses instructed the Israelites to offer the passover sacrifice; 5 and they offered the passover sacrifice in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, in the wilderness of Sinai. Just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so the Israelites did. 6 But there were some men who were unclean by reason of a corpse and could not offer the passover sacrifice on that day. Appearing that same day before Moses and Aaron, 7 those men said to them, "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?" 8 Moses said to them, "Stand by, and let me hear what instructions the Lord gives about you."

9 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 10 Speak to the Israelite people, saying: When any of you or of your posterity who are defiled by a corpse or are on a long journey would offer a passover sacrifice to the Lord, 11 they shall offer it in the second month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, 12 and they shall not leave any of it over until morning. They shall not break a bone of it. They shall offer it in strict accord with the law of the passover sacrifice. 13 But if a man who is clean and not on a journey refrains from offering the passover sacrifice, that person shall be cut off from his kin, for he did not present the Lord's offering at its set time; that man shall bear his guilt.

14 And when a stranger who resides with you would offer a passover sacrifice to the Lord, he must offer it in accordance with the rules and rites of the passover sacrifice. There shall be one law for you, whether stranger or citizen of the country.

#### **Bamidbar 12**

1 When they were in Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: "He married a Cushite woman!"

2 They said, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has S/He not spoken through us as well?" The Lord heard it. 3 Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth. 4 Suddenly the Lord called to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the Tent of Meeting." So the three of them went out. 5 The Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, stopped at the entrance of the Tent, and called out, "Aaron and Miriam!" The two of them came forward; 6 and S/He said, "Hear these My words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. 7 Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. 8 With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!" 9 Still incensed with them, the Lord departed. 10 As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales! When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with scales. 11 And Aaron said to Moses, "O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly. 12 Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away." 13 So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, "O God, pray heal her!"

14 But the Lord said to Moses, "If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted." 15 So Miriam was shut out of camp seven days; and the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted. 16 After that the people set out from Hazeroth and encamped in the wilderness of Paran.



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#### Context

After instructing about the gold menorah-lampstand, BeHa'alotkha discusses how the family of Levi are to be dedicated as offerings in the Mishkan – to perform the sacred service. The Torah enjoins everyone to offer the Pesach offering; those who are not ritually fit in the first month are to bring it in the second. The Israelites break camp and travel according to divine signs, following a pillar of fire by night and cloud by day. The blasts of two silver trumpets by the priests broadcast to the camp to assemble, to move, to prepare for defense when attacked, and to announce festivals. The order of the camp is set out according to tribes and their leaders. God cures peoples' gluttonous craving for meat and nostalgia for the delicacies of Egypt by providing vast quantities of quail. The eventful parasha ends with a challenging encounter between Miriam and Aaron, and Moshe.

#### Explorations

This complex parasha deals with many aspects of the Israelite community in the desert, from the appointments of the Mishkan and its functions, to appetites for food, and challenging family dynamics. Here we will relate mainly to the theme of the First and Second Pesach, and raise some issues about Moshe's role parenting a nation.

#### ***First and Second Pesach***

One of the extraordinary ideas in the text is contained in a passage about the observance of Pesach-Passover. In Shmot, the Torah makes clear that the special experience and rituals of leaving Egypt – termed in the Mishna *Pesach Mitzrayim* (the Passover of Egypt, Shmot 12:1-13), are not only for that night, but are to be observed annually – *Pesach Dorot* (the Passover of generations, Shmot 12:14-20). The Mishna distinguishes between the first Pesach and all future ones:

What is the difference between the Passover as celebrated in Egypt-*Pesach Mitzrayim*, and that observed by later generations-*Pesach Dorot*? The Egyptian Passover (animal for sacrifice) was specially ordered to be purchased on the 10th of Nissan, and it was required that its blood should be sprinkled with a bunch of hyssop on the lintel, and on the two side-posts of the door, and also that it should be eaten with unleavened-bread on the first night of the Passover in a hasty manner; whilst it is required to abstain during the Passover of later generations, from all leaven during the whole seven days of its duration. (Misha Pesachim, chapter 9.5)

With no blood to smear on the door, nor rush to escape from slave-masters, the Mishna requires different strictures to be observed - refraining from leaven for a full seven days. Both the Torah and the Mishna strive to keep the monumental Exodus night and its significance vital every year, for every member of the Jewish People, and for future generations.

The commandment to offer the Pesach sacrifice adjusts the focus of the original familial event in Shmot – where each family performs the offering and the special rituals together at home. Once



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the Mishkan stands, the commandment is to bring the offering to the central place of service. While the entire Israelite camp is traveling together through the desert, taking the Pesach offering to the Mishkan in their midst connects a meaningful family ritual to the central sacred service with relative ease. However, once the service transfers to the Jerusalem Temple, and the people disperse throughout the land and beyond, the requirement to travel to make the offering there is more difficult.

Tractate Pesachim of the Babylonian Talmud discusses women's obligations concerning the Pesach offering. Women are bound to bring the Pesach offering (91b). The fact that women are obligated follows from the use of the word “soul” in the Torah. Women's souls count for this ritual.

We can imagine during the Temple period, families streaming up to Jerusalem, camping around the hills, feasting and telling the Exodus through the night. A passage in the book of Chronicles casts doubt about the historicity of this image when it describes the observance of Pesach during the reign of King Yoshiahu.

So all the service of the Lord was prepared the same day, to keep the Pesach, and to offer burnt-offerings upon the altar of the Lord, according to the commandment of king Yoshiahu. And the Children of Israel that were present kept the Pesach at that time, and the feast of unleavened bread seven days. And there was no Pesach like that kept in Israel from the days of Shmuel the prophet; neither did any of the kings of Israel keep such a Pesach as Yoshiahu kept, and the priests, and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel that were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. (IIChronicles 35:16-18)

In this account, the Pesach chronicled is unique; apparently most years people did not celebrate Pesach as prescribed. The family pilgrimage to Jerusalem might not have been realistic for everyone for many reasons.

Our parasha explains that the requirement to experience Passover and fulfill at least some of its obligations is binding even if it is not possible for us at the appointed time – during the month of Nissan, the first month according to the biblical calendar. There is a second chance, *Pesach Sheni*. The need for a second Pesach is not theoretical. The parasha presents the case of specific people who come before Moshe and Aharon and make their plea,

["Why must we be debarred from presenting the Lord's offering at its set time with the rest of the Israelites?" \(Bamidbar 9:7\)](#)

The Torah mentions people who are on a journey, and cannot reach Jerusalem, and people who are not ritually fit to offer the Pesach offering because they have been in contact with a corpse. On the second month, Iyyar, these people are to observe some of the Pesach rituals, but not all. They are to bring the offering, and eat it with *matza*-unleavened bread, and bitter herbs.



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The Mishna clarifies the distinction between the first Pesach and the second, *Pesach sheni*,

What is the difference between the first and second Pesach? They differ, that in respect to the first mentioned, nothing leavened may be seen nor found in the house; while on the second, leavened and unleavened may be had together in the house [whilst the sacrifice is eaten]. By the eating of the first mentioned, it is necessary to say the "Hallel," but not by the last mentioned; but it is necessary to say the "Hallel" during the time either is offered: both must be roasted, and eaten with unleavened-cakes and bitter herbs; and [the offering of] both supersedes the Sabbath. . . . (Mishah Pesachim, chapter 9.3)

Peshach Sheni is a lighter observance – leaven does not need to be removed from our houses for seven days. Perhaps this leniency acknowledges that the people involved are not in a condition to undertake the most rigorous observance, even after a full month. Since Pesach profoundly celebrates awakening to spring, to harvest and sustenance, to life, redemption, birth, family connection, and sacred service, when people directly touch mortality, they can observe Pesach only partially, and late.

This passage raises the question – from what corpse did people in the Israelite camp contract ritual impurity? Among many commentators, Hizkuni, a French 13<sup>th</sup> century interpreter states two possibilities about the people who come forward to Moshe and Aaron:

They carried Yosef's bones with them when they left Egypt

They removed the bodies of Aaron's two children, Nadav and Avihu who died entering the Mishkan with strange fire on the day that it was inaugurated (VaYiqra 10:1-4).

Concerning Yosef's bones - on his death bed, with his final breath, Yosef made his request of his family,

Yosef lived to see children of the third generation of Ephraim; the children of Machir son of Manasseh were likewise born upon Yosef's knees. At length, Yosef said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that S/He promised on oath to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov." So Yosef made the Children of Israel swear, saying, "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here." (Bereishit 50:23-25)

The Exodus narrative recounts explicitly,

And Moshe took with him the bones of Yosef, who had exacted an oath from the Children of Israel, saying, "God will be sure to take notice of you: then you shall carry up my bones from here with you." (Shmot 13:19)

The people who removed the lifeless bodies of Nadav and Avihu from the Mishkan were serving the needs of the community and the sacred ritual. Fulfilling an act of lovingkindness and respect for the dead disqualifies them from participating in the Pesach celebration with their families and communities. They need and deserve a second chance.



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The second group of people who qualify to celebrate Pesach sheni are those who are far away. Some hasidic commentaries understand this description metaphorically. People who are too far from the sacred service, from the narrative of our People, from their Creator, even if it is by their own volition, have the possibility of a second chance.

#### ***Parenting a Nation***

Much later in the parasha, the Children of Israel complain about the lack of meat to eat in the wilderness. Moshe expresses his frustration with the people to God,

Did I conceive this entire nation; did I give birth to the nation that you should instruct me to carry it in my bosom the way a breast-feeder carries a suckling infant, on the land that you swore to its ancestors?" (Bamidbar 11:12)

Consider the following verse in Isaiah,

Do I bring an infant to the birth canal and not deliver it, says God; do I give birth and then hold back, says your Lord?!" (Isaiah 66:9)

Moshe compares his responsibilities towards the Children of Israel to the responsibilities of a parent towards a child. Describing acts usually associated with *motherhood*, such as childbirth and breast-feeding, Moshe uses the masculine form of the words. He associates parenting - giving birth and providing protection and sustenance - with acts that are also ascribed to God. Although Moshe does not specify the gender of the parent, our society often attributes these acts to mothers. It is not clear whether Moshe views these acts as honorable as well as burdensome.

The parallelism in both of the verses above invites us to expand our understanding of God as a parent figure, giving birth, breastfeeding, and nurturing. The verses also challenge us to understand our own parental experiences as extensions of the divine ability to give life and nurture. The gender ambiguity in Moshe's statement challenges gendered attitudes about parenting responsibilities.

#### ***Questions for Discussion***

1. Consider the relation between celebrating Pesach in our day and the First and Second Pesach discussed in the parasha, and by the sages. Where the Pesach offering is no longer relevant beyond a symbol on the seder plate, how can we better connect our festivities with the imminent experience of leaving Egypt, of the pilgrimage, and sacred service?
2. How do the male-gendered descriptions of parenting the Israelite nation attributed to



## ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

### “The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Moshe and to God complicate our understanding of human parenting? Discuss expectations of mothers to fill certain nurturing roles that we do not expect of fathers – partly because of the physical connections of pregnancy and breast-feeding. Consider whether these different expectations of men and women are fair, justified, or productive – to individuals, families, and society. What might we learn from Moshe's parental frustration? How do we relate to these parenting acts when they are connected with mothers compared with when they are connected with God? What are the implications of understanding the acts that we usually associate with parenting as divine acts? Evaluate the grounds for the sharing of parenting responsibilities, especially during infancy.

#### Study Links

[This](#) is a discussion from the tradition of the Lubavitcher Rebbe about the meaning of Pesach Sheni.

[Here](#) is a lovely take on Pesach Sheni from Jonathan Mark.

Active parenting by both men and women is critical to the gender equality of Swedish society. Sweden elected [45.3 percent women to the Riksdag-parliament](#). Sweden believes that a more just and democratic society results from women and men sharing power and influence equally, and having the same opportunities, rights and obligations in all areas of life. This implies that women and men can combine work and care of their children on the same terms. One of the cornerstones of the policy is parental leave. “Each parent has 60 days of leave reserved specifically for him or her, which means these days cannot be transferred to the other parent. The father of a newborn baby gets 10 extra days of leave in connection with the birth of their child.” ([Fact Sheet FS 8, Gender Equality](#))

#### Summary of Issues

Pesach Sheni offers the opportunity for people who are not prepared for the first date to have a second chance.

Moshe experiences the challenges of parenting his People and thereby inspires with the role model of a nurturing male.

#### Methods & Observations

It is not possible to understand from prescriptions in a text what communities observe in practice. People constantly negotiate and reformulate the concepts and ideals expressed in texts according to their life circumstances, priorities, values, and choices.

#### Contact

Please address queries and comments to  
Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman - [bonnadevora@gmail.com](mailto:bonnadevora@gmail.com)