



Born of Fire and Water

Pesahh Sheini and the Necessity of Inclusion

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Rabbi Akiva was in awe of salamanders. Rabbi Akiva, along with other rabbis of his time, believed that salamanders were born of fire. And so, whenever Rabbi Akiva would arrive at the laws of Kashrut in the Book of Leviticus that discussed the purity and impurity of such creepy crawlers as lizards and salamanders, Rabbi Akiva would exclaim, “How great are Your works, O Lord.”¹

In Massekhet Hullin, we learn that Rabbi Akiva would turn to God and say:

Talmud Bavli Hullin 127a²

You have creatures that grow in the sea, and you have creatures that grow on land. If those in the sea would ascend to the land, they would immediately die. If those that are on land would descend to the sea, they would immediately die.

Similarly, you have creatures that grow in the fire, and you have creatures that grow in the air. If those in the fire would ascend to the air, they would immediately die. If those in the air would descend to the fire, they would immediately die. Therefore, ‘how great are Your works, O Lord.’

This is a striking piece of Torah on the exquisite beauty of diversity and the vital importance of affirming all unique beings and creations. Each of these creatures has a place in God’s world.

¹ Psalms 104:24: ‘מה רבו מעשיך ה’.

² תלמוד בבלי חלין קכז.

וכשהיה ר"ע מגיע לפסוק זה אומר (תהלים קד, כד) מה רבו מעשיך ה' יש לך בריות גדולות בים ויש לך בריות גדולות ביבשה שבים אילמלי עולות ביבשה מיד מתות שביבשה אילמלי יורדות לים מיד מתות יש לך בריות גדולות באור ויש לך בריות גדולות באור שבאור אילמלי עולות לאור מיד מתות שבאור אילמלי יורדות לאור מיד מתות מה רבו מעשיך ה'



The one born of fire, the one born of water, the one born of air, the one born of earth. If we are to be like Rabbi Akiva, we too must pause in awe at the beauty that God has created.

But, we must go a step further. If we force any one of these creatures to live a life that they are not meant to live, if we demand the one born of fire to adapt to air, or the one born of air to adapt to fire, they will not only fail to thrive, they will perish. We cannot make them be what they are not. To do so, threatens the very existence of each of these creatures.

In the Book of Numbers, each household is commanded to bring the Passover sacrifice on the 14th of Nisan in remembrance of our exodus from Egypt. This is a commandment that unites all of *Bnei Yisrael* through the reenactment of our collective history. In order to bring this required sacrifice, we must be in a state of ritual purity. Through no personal sin, some may find themselves not in the right state of purity to bring this communal offering. These people will be left out, they'll find themselves on the margins of this communal celebration not because they were unfit through fault of their own but because they were occupied with performing another *mitzvah*: the act of caring for the dead. They will be excluded at a moment when all of *Bnei Yisrael* joins together. So, they cry out, "Should we be barred from offering a sacrifice along with our fellows at the time required by God?" Moses hears their cry, he consults with God, and the verdict comes back: there will be a second chance, a *Pesah Sheini*. For those who were unable to offer a sacrifice the first time around, they'll have another opportunity to join with their community and to make an offering to God.

The 14th of Iyyar, marks this day of *Pesah Sheini*, a day which has come to be known as a day of inclusion in modern Israeli society. In 2010, the Orthodox Israeli feminist organization Koleh, and Bat-Kol, the organization of religious lesbians, proclaimed it as a day of inclusion for all. Today, *Pesah Sheini* continues to be celebrated as an annual event to promote religious tolerance and inclusion of LGBTQ people in religious society.

Dina Berman Maykon and Tamar Gan-Zvi Bick, in their writing on *Pesah Sheini*, explain that *Pesah Sheini* teaches us two things:³ First, when a small minority of people protest that they will be excluded from this holiday, the Divine cares and takes note. We might have thought, we need only be concerned with the majority; we might have said, "What obligation do we have to a small minority of the population for whom Jewish law may negatively impact?" The creation of *Pesah Sheini* teaches us that we must not only hear the cries of the minority, we are called upon to create change to ensure their inclusion. Second, this inclusion only comes about through self-advocacy. Had that group of Israelites stayed silent, God's revolutionary

³ Dina Berman Maykon and Tamar Gan-Zvi Bick, "Second Passover," *Koleh*, <https://www.koleh.org.il/en/beit-midrash-en/646-second-passover.html>.





response to create Pesahh Sheini would never have occurred. With this story, the Torah invites us to never stop fighting for our rightful place within its practices and community.

While our personal *sederim* may be a distant memory, today, as we mark Pesahh Sheini, a day in which we celebrate diversity and advocate for the inclusion of LGBTQ people, think about the salamander. Think of that miraculous creature born of fire. In the same way that Rabbi Akiva marveled at the diversity of each of these creatures born of fire and water, of earth and of air, we mark this day by affirming the uniqueness of every individual as a reflection of God's miraculous diversity. On this Pesahh Sheini, may we stop in our tracks, may we lift our heads from our books and say, "How great are Your works, O Lord," as we work to create a world in which every individual has the opportunity to thrive.

