

Blemishes and the Fallacy of Perfection

Parshat Emor is the parsha of perfection. In it we're told that the Kohen (Priest) must be perfect in order to serve. Any blemish disqualifies him – *ish mi'zarakha le-dorotam asher yi'hiyeh vo mum lo yikrav le'hakriv...ish iver o phise'ah...o ish asher yi'hiyeh bo shever ragel o shever yad...* “any of your seed who has a blemish shall not approach to offer...whether it be a person who is blind or lame...or has a broken leg or broken arm. (Leviticus 21:17-19)

One wonders why – why should it be that only the Kohen who is perfect can serve in the Mikdash?

Perhaps it can be suggested that the prohibition does not stem as much from the Kohen as it does from the community he serves. In other words, the reason for the disqualification does not stem as much from the Kohen's handicap, but from the congregation that is unable to accept or receive the service of someone who is less than whole.

This is Maimonides' concept of accommodation, found in the “Guide of the Perplexed.” Some laws were given to the people to accommodate where they were at. In the Biblical era and in the era of the Temple, the community was uncomfortable being followers of leaders who were physically and, for that matter, mentally challenged.

Discomfort with those who are challenged continues to this day. Many people shun those who are disfigured, those with Down Syndrome or autism and those who are wheelchair-bound.

This dynamic especially manifests itself in the realm of leadership. Stricken with polio, the staff of US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt did all they could to make sure that the public would never see pictures of him in a wheelchair. No doubt, they believed that such an image would make it more difficult for Americans, and the larger world, to accept Roosevelt as a powerful leader.

It shouldn't be this way. Recently I was at the Skirball Center of New York University where our dear friend Dr. Phil Schneider, one of the brilliant speech therapists of our time, was being honored. He was being acclaimed because of the contributions he has made, helping people who stutter. The award was given in a ceremony that included presentations by celebrities, together with those who stuttered – many of whom were Phil's students.

Many people are uncomfortable speaking with those who stutter. But that night, Phil showed that it need not be this way. Those present were deeply moved. Phil's students spoke – at times stammering and struggling. And the audience, far from turning away, was open and able to receive their message, giving the assembled a small glimpse of the beauty of the world as it could be – a glimpse of the redemptive era.

This may be the deeper meaning of the Midrash that in messianic times, the blemished will come back to life as they were, only to be immediately

healed. (Genesis Rabbah 95:1) They will not be healed supernaturally as many authorities insist, for even then the world will be governed by natural law. Rather, to me, the Midrash tells us that they will be healed in the sense that society will not regard these individuals as deficient. In the redemptive world, people will have scars, but they will not be seen as blemished.

In sum, the Biblical period continuing through Temple times projected the dream of perfection. The redemptive period, in a certain sense, will fix this mistake. Its goal will be to create a noble society, but one which is imperfect. It will be a world where one reaches for excellence – but excellence is not perfection. It will be a world where the scarred will be welcomed.

In this vein, there are two types of synagogues. There is a synagogue that models itself after a country club. Everything that happens inside, from the details of the furnishings to the people who enter, is perfect.

And then there is a different model, the model I'm much more comfortable with. This is the synagogue that is a Bayit, a home, accepting, embracing all for who they are. As a home, it also gives room for all to grow, to develop, to heal, to become who we need to be.

Halakha, so central to life in general and synagogue life in particular, reflects this very idea. Halakha comes from the word *halakh*, to go, as it teaches a lifestyle that leads towards a world of redemption. My sense is that halakha blueprints a lifestyle of excellence – not one of perfection. Halakha does not demand our lettuce be perfect by checking and removing

bugs we cannot see; it does not demand that the boxes of our tefillin be perfectly square. This is the meaning of the Talmudic dictum *lo nitnah Torah le-malakhei ha-shareit* - “The Torah was not given to ministering angels.” (Me’ilah 14b)

Built into halakha is the principle of *bi-de'avad*, post-facto. Even *le-khathilah*, the optimal way, means the best way, not the perfect way. There is only one perfection – God. If halakha were perfect, there would be a denial of the One and Only Perfection, God Himself. In fact, perfection is the enemy of the larger good. If we go to extreme perfection to fulfill a certain aspect of halakha, it undermines the energy required in other areas of halakha.

This is the larger meaning of the Aggadah which proclaims that for Beit Shammai, God first created the heavens – *shamayim nivre'u tehilla* (Hagigah 12a). For Beit Shammai, life is measured by the heavens, by perfection. That is why he throws out the convert who cannot accept halakha perfectly.

We, on the other hand, are Beit Hillel Jews. For Hillel, *eretz nivreit tehilla*, God first created the earth – the real world with all its built in fissures and imperfections. The convert Shammai rejected, Hillel embraces and welcomes.

Leonard Cohen, the famed folk singer, sings about bells. On some level, bells are like our shofar – ushering in the time of redemption.

What kind of bell should one ring? One would imagine that it should be a bell that is perfect. But is there a perfect bell?

And so, Leonard Cohen sings:

Ring the bells that still can ring,
Forget your perfect offering,
There is a crack in everything,
That's how the light gets in.

This is the redemptive world, a world of excellence, a world that is real, a world that embraces the scarred (and who amongst us is not scarred), a world of cracks. It's through the cracks that light gets in.