

Parashat Emor
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What do we know about kohanim? Let's start with general before we dig into particulars: (and I of course have a joke, if we have time and you ask me)
If you generate a list of what you know about the ancient Israelite priesthood, it might include the following attributes:

Hereditary

Male only

Functionary in avodah—worship in mishkan and later Temple

Did not inherit land when the other tribes were given portions

Supported by trumah and tithing. (Trumah special tithing that supported Levi'im and kohanim)

Trumah permitted only to kohanim and their dependents (eg, wife and children until daughters married and were in another's household)

More specifically from today's parsha: Higher demands of purity manifest in

For whom they can become ritually impure at death

Who they can marry

Kohanim cannot serve in the Temple if physically impaired.

In Leviticus 21:17 we read that any *kohen* who has a *mum*—blemish or defect—is explicitly forbidden from “offering the food of his God” (21:17). *Kohanim* thus disqualified include those who are blind, lame, have a limb length discrepancy, are hunchbacked, have a broken limb, and many others. They are forbidden from ritual leadership throughout the ages; though not stripped of their priestly status and are permitted to eat sacrificial meat. They are not permitted to come behind the curtain



or approach the altar. They mustn't profane these places which God has sanctified (21:22–23).

Now I need to take a serious detour here to acknowledge the discomfort this passage raises. True, in practical terms this is entirely irrelevant. No kohanim serve in worship so none are disqualified for physical nonconformity. It is a non-issue in real life. But I do not want to skip past this too quickly. It **should** give us pause. The Conservative movement's first blind rabbi, Lauren Tuchman writes, "Leviticus 21's list of *kohanim* who are forbidden from sacrificial service points toward a desire that only socially normative bodies be the representatives of the people to the Holy One. But if we are all made in the image of God, as Genesis 1:27 teaches us, isn't that a bit of a contradiction? Are we so concerned with supposed physical imperfection—I see nothing in this text about spiritual sensitivity or emotional maturity—that we assume that a supposed broken body equals a broken person? What does that say about the ways in which we subconsciously or otherwise dehumanize those without a perfectly normative presentation?"

For our purposes today, we can ask how do we respond to physical disabilities in our worship?

We have a pretty good track record for making our sanctuary and our services accessible for physical challenges – the ramp,

livestream (which we had even before COVID, for people who are homebound), a highly functional Hesed committee that reaches out

to congregants with any physical illness or injury, large print Siddurim and audio aids for hard of hearing.

I am proud to note that we are making great strides in inclusion for congregants with social/emotional/ challenges: Within just a few years the Mental Health Initiative has created a resource book of providers and other community resources, has presented numerous speakers about, among other topics, neurodivergency, depression, parenting special needs children. MHI works doggedly to fulfill one of its original goals which is normalizing mental illness to the point that any congregant can feel comfortable reaching out for support, knowing that we will offer to drop off a casserole when a family member is struggling with depression no less than if he or she were undergoing cancer treatment.

And so, choosing my words very **very** carefully, I want to address a different barrier to congregational life. We have many members of our shul who do not feel comfortable, welcome, at home in this beautiful sanctuary. It is not a physical or social/emotional disability. It is assuredly not something they have done wrong. But there is an obstacle that prevents them from finding in these Shabbat hours what many of here find every week. I want to consider members of our community who may have no limitations in mobility or vision or hearing, but who

simply can't keep up with the service. Who might feel an attachment to prayer or a hunger for Torah learning but who can't read or understand Hebrew. Or don't know the tunes. Who just don't feel at home here.

It is now official that I will serve as interim rabbi for another year, although I hasten to remind everyone that my status will continue to be part time, but I want to devote some of that time to exploring how we can overcome the barrier of long services mostly in Hebrew. What ramp, what handrails can we create? Maybe we'll explore a service that is inherently less intimidating. Maybe it's shorter, maybe it includes more teaching.

Or maybe we'll conclude we should leave services as they are, bring potential participants along. Some ideas we might want to consider include:

- Provide transliterated siddurim

- “Synagogue choreography”

- “Shul buddies”

- The parshat HaShavua study that pairs our religious school students and adult, even senior members in a hevruta-style class.

- More explanation of the service as we go through it.

A word about members of the community who are not interested in Shabbat services, no matter how appealing (short, English, “accessible”) we make them:

Not everybody joins a shul for the same reasons, and we are happy to serve in any capacity. Many members will turn to the synagogue for Hebrew school, social programs, the connection of sisterhood or men's club events, programs that

celebrate our connection to Israel. These are all fine reasons to affiliate, and I'm not finding fault with congregants who are not currently looking for a way into Shabbat services. I'm addressing members who might find meaning in services but cannot find their way – who feel embarrassment, or even terror when offered an honor, despair at ever being able to follow service, those who feel shy, or who would like tradition and ritual after a loss but don't know how to recite Mourners Kaddish, or keep up with weekday Ma'ariv (which really flies).

This week, in my conversion class, we concluded a unit on prayer. We examine the structure of the Shabbat and weekday, service, prayer objects like tallit and t'fillin. It is consistently an extraordinary moment when I open a Sefer Torah and the students come close and look in, typically it is their first peek inside the scroll. We practice the bowing and the bending and the bobbing up and down.

And then comes the part of class where I fail every single year.

I try to convince my students that they are not the only people in shul who can't keep up, who are self-conscious, who are intimidated by the prayers and by the **pray-ers**. I tell them I know you feel there's a neon sign above your head that says, "does not know the prayers", but there's a reason your rabbis announce the page so many times every service, and it's not just you. Open secret is many many Jews, even members of Conservative shuls, need the pages announced. They need transliteration. Or a crash course in synagogue choreography. Or, painfully,

painfully, they don't need any of that because they don't come to services. They don't come to services not because they're lazy, or spiritually uninterested, or because they are not in touch with their Jewish identity. They don't come to services because they don't **get** services. Share part of a letter from a congregant. This is a congregant from another shul, but I think it's fair to share because I've heard, one way or another, the same sentiments expressed here at our shul: *I've been thinking back to why I, as a non-observant, cultural Jew, had been so resistant to attend Shabbat services, and I realized it was because I felt so "other" when entering the sanctuary on Saturday mornings. By this point in my life, as a somewhat long-standing member, how is it that I still feel so uncomfortable walking into that part of the synagogue? I know the tunes. I sort of know the basic structure of the service. I know to stand up when others stand and to sit down when others sit. I don't grab a siddur because it doesn't do me any good - I don't read Hebrew and I never know where we are in the service anyway. It's a general feeling of imposter syndrome. Everyone else looks like they know what they are doing, so I must be the only one who is the outlier.*

But...I have learned that if I am experiencing something, I am probably not the only one.

I am confident that in our community too we have more than one member who feels like an outlier, or an imposter in our beautiful sanctuary.

We can figure out any number of solutions once we acknowledge we have a need we want to address. Once we say to all our members, you are an honored member of this shul whether or not you can keep up with this pace. First we have to say to all our members, we value you now, just as you are. Because even in our parsha there is no impediment to participating fully in community and in worship. Even a kohen who is disqualified from offering sacrifice is still a kohen, still embraced by his clan and entitled to the support of trumah

I love the feeling of looking at the congregation from the bima and seeing all the regulars in their regular spots -mkom kavua. But I want to open this room, this space, this beautiful Shabbat experience to others who do not yet feel comfortable here.