

**Parshat Emor 5772/2012**  
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The priesthood is a focus of this week's torah reading, which includes all kinds of rules for the priests and their work: their relationships with family, how they maintain a pure status, and their service in the Temple. Among these instructions to the priests is a series of verses that are really quite difficult to understand. (Vayikra 21:16-24).

כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-בּו מוּם, לֹא יִקְרָב

Any priest with a physical blemish may not draw near [to participate in the sacrificial service]

The Torah proceeds to list specific blemishes that disqualify the priest: blindness, lameness, various kinds of physical disfigurement, marks on the skin and so on.

כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-בּו מוּם, מִזֶּנֶע אֶהְרֹץ הַכֹּהֵן לֹא יֵגֵשׁ, לְהִקְרִיב אֶת-אֲשֵׁי ה'

Ant of these may not be included in the priestly service in the Temple.

Many have quite justifiably expressed concern about these verses. We can understand quite well some of the other grounds for disqualification. It makes sense, for example, that a priest should not serve while inebriated. It also makes sense that a priest who is *tamei* may not serve. After all, such a priest can become *tahor* once again. But our sense of reason and fairness rebels against the notion that a physical disability should disqualify someone from taking up one of the most prized religious offices of ancient Israel. What is more, our innate sense of justice and injustice is supported by countless statements throughout the Torah that seem to come into direct conflict with this exclusion of the disabled.

The first king of Israel was King Saul, who was a very tall and handsome man. He was physically quite impressive. The prophet Samuel remarks about Saul that there was nobody else like him among the people - אֵין כָּמֹהוּ, בְּכָל-הָעָם (I Sam 10:24)

Yet Saul sins and is rejected by God; his son will not inherit the monarchy. Samuel, then, is sent to find the next king, whom he knows will be a son of Yishai. When Yishai's sons are paraded before him, Samuel's gaze comes to rest on Eliav. Because of his impressive looks, Samuel assumed he must be the king-to-be. God, however, redirects Samuel's attention away from physical appearance and towards inner character: (I Sam 16.7)

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-שְׁמוּאֵל, אַל-תִּבְט אֶל-מְרֹאֵהוּ וְאֶל-גְּבוֹהַ קוֹמָתוֹ--כִּי מֵאִסְתִּיהוּ

God said to Samuel, Do not look at his appearance or at his height, for I have not chosen him.

And then God goes on to say something of tremendous power and importance:

כִּי לֹא, אֲשֶׁר יִרְאֶה הָאָדָם

כִּי הָאָדָם יִרְאֶה לְעֵינָיו, וְה' יִרְאֶה לְלֵבָב

For God does not see as human beings see.

For human beings look at the outward appearance, but God looks into the heart.

Consider the Talmudic story (Ta'anit 20a-b) which describes a rabbi, R Eleazar ben R Shimon, riding along on his donkey in very high spirits.

והיתה דעתו גסה עליו מפני שלמד תורה הרבה

He was very self-satisfied because he had learnt so much Torah.

R Eleazar comes across a man who is מכוער ביותר – he has a particularly unsightly deformity. The man opens with a respectful greeting: Shalom Rabbi! But R Eleazar does not respond in kind. Instead he issues this terrible insult:

ריקה כמה מכוער אותו האיש שמא כל בני עירך מכוערין כמותך

Worthless one, how ugly you are. Is everyone in your town as ugly as you?

The man responds to this tremendous slight with great patience and insight:

לך ואמור לאומן שעשאני כמה מכוער כלי זה שעשית

Go and tell the artisan who made me how ugly is the vessel that he made.

The story begins with an insult to a person who appeared physically different. But it turns this critique on its head. Physical appearance originates with the Creator. But ugliness of our own opinions and attitudes is within our control. The Talmud powerfully demonstrates that the rabbi who was so self-satisfied with his Torah study had in fact learnt nothing at all if he had not absorbed this basic lesson.

Many of our greatest leaders struggled with disabilities. When Moses was chosen by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, he initially refused to accept the responsibility because of his speech impediment. God's response was that it is God who creates us; physical difference is not a reason to be excluded.

ויאמר ה' אליו, מי שם פה לָאָדָם, או מי-יָשׁוּם אֵלֶם, או חֲרָשׁ או פֶּקֶח או עִוֵּר--הֲלֹא אֲנִי ה'

And the Lord said unto him: Who makes a person's mouth? Who makes a person mute, deaf, seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?

And it is not just Moses who struggled with a disability. Isaac was blind. King Saul, as we just heard, was physically beautiful but he was stricken with a debilitating mental disorder. Perhaps the best example is that of Jacob. He was born as אִישׁ תָּם, a perfect human being. And yet in his fight with the angel, he becomes lame. At precisely the moment when he acceded to the leadership of his people, when he received the name "Israel," he was stricken with a physical disability.

Whatever kind of body a person has, whatever kind of disability may make someone's life difficult, we all have a body which is created by God, and we should all be fit for communal inclusion and leadership and the deepest respect of others.

How, then, do we understand the disqualification of the priests for having physical blemishes or disabilities? Jacob himself would have been disqualified from priestly service in the Temple. There seems to be something specific about the activity in the Temple rather than the priesthood in general that requires physical perfection. These blemishes only disqualify priests from taking part in the sacrificial service in the Sanctuary. All other privileges of the priesthood are still open to them. And it does not escape our notice that the blemishes that disqualify the priests are more or less the same as those that disqualify animals from being offered as sacrifices, as described just a few verses further on. (Vayikra 22:17-25)

כל אֶשֶׁר-בוֹ מוֹם, לֹא תִקְרִיבוּ

Any animal with a blemish, may not be sacrificed.

Priests and animals alike must be physically perfect to be involved in the Temple service.

[See here for Rabbi Linzer's discussion of this issue:

<http://rabbidovlinzer.blogspot.com/search/label/A%20Thought%20on%20the%20Parsha%20-%20Parshat%20Emor>]

Rambam offers us a way to think about these disqualifications. He points out that even if God does not discriminate based on physical looks and abilities, we humans are different: "For the masses do not evaluate people by their true, inner form but by the perfection of their physical body and the beauty of their clothing. And the temple was to be held in great reverence by all." (Guide for the Perplexed 3:45)

In other words, despite ourselves, we human beings are prone to discriminate based on looks. And the Temple was such a sacred place that there was a fear that the attending worshippers, who were human after all, would be distracted from their worship by any unusual physical appearance of the priests, or would devalue the Temple if it were manned by people with bodily imperfections. These verses, then, about priestly disqualifications, are just a necessary concession to human prejudices.

It makes complete sense that if there is one place a concession of this kind would be enacted, it would be in the Temple because in some ways the Temple in its entirety is a concession to the inappropriate human obsession with externalities. Don't forget that the origin of the Mishkan was in the golden calf. In Moses' absence, the people could not bring themselves to remain faithful to God without a physical manifestation of God's presence. This is why they made the golden calf, the ultimate theological crime. As a penance, but also as a concession to this particular human weakness, God commanded that the Tabernacle be built, with its precious metals and the finest fabrics.

Indeed, for Rambam, even the animal sacrifices are part of this concession to the human focus on externalities. According to Rambam, it would have been better for the people to be able to worship without any sacrifices at all, but it was too hard to wean them off pagan worship overnight so the Tabernacle sanctuary was a kind of half-way house: worship in an imperfect way, but in a controlled setting. No wonder, then, that it is in this setting that physical appearance matters in the animals that are being sacrificed, and even in the people bringing them.

In truth, this focus on externalities and human prejudice against physical difference is not just a relic of the ancient world. We all know of the studies which demonstrate the real effects of human prejudices against people who are shorter, who have disabilities, who have brown or black skin and so on. But we can't fall into the trap of confusing an "is" for an "ought." A description of how the world works must not be taken as an endorsement of how the world should be. Just because prejudices do exist doesn't mean that we should not fight against them with all our might.

The shift away from a misplaced emphasis on good looks lies at the root of a midrash about the messiah in Sanhedrin 98a where the messiah is depicted as a leper, bandaging his wounds. This

messiah, with his physical afflictions, would certainly not have been able to take part in the priestly service. The messianic standard, though, the one to which we are constantly striving, is different from the one in the ancient temple. It does not submit to human prejudice about externalities.

כִּי הָאָדָם יִרְאֶה לְעֵינָיו, וְה' יִרְאֶה לְלֵבָב

For human beings look at the outward appearance, but God looks into the heart.

How do we move towards this messianic vision and overcome our innate prejudices? Rabbi Benny Lau has written powerfully about how the halakha contains within itself the tools for doing so. [See: <http://jewishdisabilityunite.wordpress.com/2010/01/28/disability-and-judaism-societys-influence-on-halacha-rabbi-dr-benjamin-lau/>] These rules about blemished priests have almost no practical ramifications today except in one area: The priests who bless the people even today with the priestly blessing are also subject, in theory, to disqualification based on physical disability or deformity. The Mishna in Megilla teaches: “A priest who has blemishes may not raise his palms [to participate in the priestly blessing] (Megilla 24b). But the Talmud immediately asks: What of the priest in R Huna’s synagogue who had blurred vision and yet blessed the people? What of the person in R Yohanan’s synagogue who was blind and yet blessed the people?

The answer is given that **ההוא דש בעירו הוה** - these priests were familiar to their communities and accepted among them. And this is the ruling in the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 128.30). If the priest is known by the community – and we assume that every priest is known by the community in which he lives – the disability is no longer a disqualification. This is a striking psychological insight. Our focus on externalities may lead us to characterize someone by their appearance, “a blind person,” or “a person in a wheelchair,” or whatever. But once the person is known to us, their physical appearance becomes irrelevant. We know them for who they really are.

The prejudice against physical difference is not God’s; it is our own. It is, therefore, our task to work to overcome these prejudices and that in turn has an impact on the halakha. As we learn to accept people in all their physical varieties, so the halakha abandons its disqualifications based on physical considerations and embraces instead God’s perception, the messianic perception of what is important.

This aspect of the halakha emphasizes to us the critical importance of a self-conscious effort in our personal and communal lives to make sure that we include and provide access for all people, irrespective of any kind of disability, or physical difference. We are delighted that our new synagogue, when it is rebuilt, will have very greatly improved wheelchair access. As a community we also need to think hard about other kinds of access. I was told recently of someone who is hard of hearing and finds it very frustrating to come to shul because it so difficult for her to know what is going on. What do we do to make it easier for the deaf or the blind to participate in our events? Do we make sure to create room for adults and children with developmental disabilities in our synagogues, schools and summer camps? Do we provide access for the elderly or infirm?

We end by returning to the midrash of the leprous messiah. As he was tending to his wounds, he was asked: “When will you arrive?” His answer was **היום** - today - if only God’s word will be accepted. The messianic age is ready for us to arrive, if only we let him in, bandages and all.

כִּי הָאָדָם יִרְאֶה לְעֵינָיו, וְה' יִרְאֶה לְלֵבָב

For human beings look at the outward appearance, but God looks into the heart.

On that day that we force ourselves to see things from God's perceptive and overcome our human prejudices; on the day that we are ready to invite into our community everyone, irrespective of their appearance or physical abilities; on that day we will find the messiah in our midst.