

Shabbat Parashat Emor
May 12, 2001 – 19 Iyar 5761
Blemished People, Unblemished Tools

Torah Reading: Leviticus 21:1 –24:23
Haftorah Reading: Ezekiel 44:15–31

Finally, our society is beginning to discuss the countless ways in which we have made life difficult for the people who are lame, blind, deaf, mute, or who suffer from one of the many physical impediments that can restrict their lives.

Over the centuries, most of humanity responded to handicaps in others ways, by turning their backs to them, preferring to blame them in some ways for their disabilities rather than make the effort to strengthen the human connection that binds each to all. The mentally ill, schizophrenics, and others were isolated in institutions—more often to shield the members of society from the reality of such people and their suffering than to provide any real assistance to them. Only of late are efforts being made to communicate and to educate people who in ages past would have been consigned to a life of silent degradation and exclusion.

The Torah also speaks about disabilities—reflecting a complex balance of values, priorities, and perceptions. On the one hand, many of the biblical leaders themselves suffered from physical handicaps. Jacob was crippled in his walking, Moses was a stutterer, Miriam suffered from leprosy, and Isaac from blindness. Saul had bouts of insanity and severe depression. These leaders, and many others in the Tanakh and rabbinic literature, were able to surmount their disabilities and to lead the Jewish people in exemplary fashion.

Yet the Torah clearly prefers "wholeness." In describing what disqualifies a Kohen from offering sacrifices in the Temple, this week's Torah portion states that "No man of your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the food of his God." (Leviticus 21:17) The Torah then goes on to specify what those defects are: those who are blind, lame, who have a limb too short or too long, broken arm or leg, those who are hunchback, dwarfs, those who have a growth in their eye, a boil scar, scurvy, or crushed testes. All those who suffer from these afflictions are prohibited from offering a sacrifice in the Temple.

Certainly this passage, and others like it, lent biblical weight to the dehumanization of the disabled. Legislation in rabbinics confirmed that the blind, deaf-mute, and developmentally disabled were not allowed to participate as full members of Jewish society—either by functioning as acceptable witnesses in legal proceedings or as members of the minyan in religious services. While those prohibitions may have been reasonable in a time when no one could figure out how to educate or communicate with the disabled, the legacy those rules leave remains a tragedy in our day.

But there is another way of understanding this verse as well. Medieval commentators noted that precisely those traits which disqualify a kohen from performing his duties also disqualified an animal from being a sacrificial offering. Both the sacrifice and the one performing the sacrifice could not suffer from any mum, defect. At the same time, anyone, regardless of suffering those defects or

not, was certainly welcome to bring a sacrifice to the Temple, and that sacrifice would be accepted by the kohanim, and would function to bring atonement between the individual and God.

In other words, both kohen and animal functioned not as representatives of human values and ideals, but rather as instruments in the Temple ritual. Just as you wouldn't use a broken hammer to build a house, the Torah insists that only kohanim whose body can represent the typical Israelite (by virtue of its lack of any singular or distinctive traits) is a fitting implement for repairing God's relationship with Jewish individuals.

Midrash Va-Yikra Rabbah picks up on this essential insight, and makes explicit that no one is disbarred from offering a sacrifice, regardless of their disability or handicap. To the contrary, God cherishes those who wrestle with their handicaps and have to make a greater effort to live their lives: said Rabbi Abba bar Yudan, "Whatever blemish God declared invalid in the case of a beast was declared valid in the case of a person. Just as God declared invalid in the case of a beast "one that was blind or broken," so God declared the same valid in the case of a person: "a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." In a very real sense, we are all handicapped, all of us disabled. Each of us balances personal weaknesses, inability's, injuries, working to compensate for them so they don't prevent us from living our lives to our fullest.

In this regard, the midrash, and even this Torah portion remind us that only implements--like hammers, kohanim, and sacrifices--lack blemish. And only in them is a blemish a disqualification. For the rest of us, struggling to be decent, loving, and good, blemishes and disabilities are the catalysts that force us to wrestle with our own fears and inadequacies, and to grow.

Shabbat Shalom.

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