

Parashat Emor
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Leviticus 21:16-24

And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying:

17

Speak unto Aaron, saying: Whosoever he be of thy seed throughout their generations that hath a blemish, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God.

18

For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath any thing maimed, or anything too long,

19

or a man that is broken-footed, or broken-handed,

20

or crook-backed, or a dwarf, or that hath his eye overspread, or is scabbed, or scurvy, or hath his stones crushed;

21

no man of the seed of Aaron the priest, that hath a blemish, shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the LORD made by fire; he hath a blemish; he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God.

22

He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy, and of the holy.

23

Only he shall not go in unto the veil, nor come nigh unto the altar, because he hath a blemish; that he profane not My holy places; for I am the LORD who sanctify them.

24

So Moses spoke unto Aaron, and to his sons, and unto all the children of Israel.

No less than 5 times, in the space of 9 verses, the Torah tells us in no uncertain terms that a Cohen may not approach nor offer a sacrifice if he is a **Ba'al Mum**. There is a classic clal, prat clal structure in which a general principle is offered followed by a series of specific examples concluding with a restatement of the general principle from which we understand that the specific defects listed are not comprehensive but rather point us toward categories and we are to surmise that there are many other disqualifying defects for a priest. One defining characteristic of these mumim is that they are immutable. Whether congenital or developed later in life they are nonetheless beyond the Priest's capacity to change.

Sforno understands this prohibition with the following comparison. We would not approach a king of flesh and blood in anything less than our most appropriate attire.

כי כל איש אשר בו מום לא יקרבו, to stand and perform the Temple service. The principle is familiar to us from when Esther was aghast when her uncle Mordechai appeared wearing sackcloth in the courtyard of the Royal Palace (**Esther 4:2**).[Sforno on Leviticus 21:18]

One's attire is an external manifestation to be sure and even in our own time we use our dress to convey something about our

appreciation for the context in which we find ourselves. But can we really accept that clothing is an apt comparison to a mum?

A priest with a physical defect, whether visible to others or not, cannot simply change his clothes. He can't borrow an arm or eyesight. I am fully prepared to accept the idea that we expect more of our leaders and most certainly more of those who are employed in the daily service of Gd. We want this both because of a collective reverence and awe for the divine being who dwells in our midst and because we might hope to emulate those deemed closest to Gd. But I recoil at the privileging of the aesthetic. Can it really be that Gd views the presence of these mum-afflicted priests as a *desecration* of sacred space? It does appear to be the plain meaning of the text (read v. 23).

I can't help but apply my 21C sensibilities to this issue. I know that we have but to examine Torah Sh'bikhtav- to see that externalities, and physical beauty/perfection are both noted and valued. Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, Yosef, Shaul, David, Batsheva, Avshalom, Esther. And yet, I have been educated to believe that we are more than our appearances. Woe unto me if I choose to judge another human being on the basis of their outward appearance, whether that be for an altered physical state or the color of their skin. Isn't there a kal V'chomer here? If I am to treat all of Gds children as created in Gds image, then shouldn't Gd lead the way? And I do believe that on the whole, Jewish textual tradition has supported that belief. When the prophet Shmuel is in search of a replacement for the deposed Saul he comes upon Eliav but is quickly admonished by Gd.

I Samuel 16:7 But the LORD said unto Samuel: 'Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have rejected him; for it is not as man seeth: for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart

(read Shmuel source.) And perhaps you are familiar with the story in Masekhet Ta'anit of Rabbi Elazar.

Ta'anit 20a/b

It once happened that R. Eleazar the son of R. Simeon was coming from Migdal Gedor, from the house of his teacher, and he was riding his donkey by the river and he felt a great happiness and full of himself because he had studied a lot of Torah

A particularly ugly man happened upon him and said to him,

Peace be upon you, Rebbi,
and he [R. Eleazar] did not respond.

He said to him,

Good for nothing! How ugly this man is!

Are all the people of your city as ugly as you are?

The man said:

I do not know, but go and tell the artisan who made me, how ugly is the vessel which you have made.

When he [R. Eleazar] acknowledged, in his gut, that he had done wrong he got down from his donkey and prostrated himself before the man and said to him,

I submit myself to you; forgive me.

He said to him:

I will not forgive you until you go to the artisan that created me and tell him: how ugly is the vessel that you created.

Clearly the message here is that of the Little Prince: That which is essential is invisible to the eye. And even more so, that which may appear to be disfigurement is in fact a creation of the divine.

So I go back to the priests. I imagine one of those priests who knows that his disability means he will never be able to offer a sacrifice. And yet he lives among his brethren, eats with them, watches them train for their role. Watches them (or even helps them to) dress for their role. What is he to make of his destiny? And what are we to make of the priestly caste's ultimate descent into corruption and immorality that we read about so poignantly in the later prophets. It seems to me that we rejected the Greek idealization of the physical for good reason. All this focus on external beauty and status can't end well. Not for the excluded Kohen, and not for the Jewish people.

I am upset by these verse because I take Torah seriously and I want it to speak to me today. And yet the more I reflected, the more the adolescent voice in me was thunderous. Blaring my frustration much like the music I listened to when I really was a teenager. Frankly my adult ears could no longer appreciate the intensity. I needed a new perspective and a new milder tune.

I came upon a somewhat controversial text from Rav Kook. The text, *I'nevuchei hador*, was published posthumously and is apparently from from the early 1900's written during the period of time before Rav Kook came to Israel when he was still in Latvia. Although I missed being with you and hearing Yehuda Mirsky's talk, I did have a chance to ask him about this text. It takes a markedly different one than his later writings and while concerned with ethical issues barely mentions Israel. I will not even pretend to know more about this text than that. But I would like to excerpt a piece which spoke to me deeply and helped me to grapple with our text in Emor in a more constructive vein.

(For the Perplexed of the Generation Chapter 23) However, in regards to badness, when an injury occurs, there are

times when a bad occurrence obligates amputation of one or more limbs, and nevertheless life does not depend upon such limbs. The living creature will rise up to reclaim the integrity of his life, though he remain blemished...

However, if he is in a situation where he must remain a blemished person, nevertheless, his blemish is only external, but the power of life itself cannot be blemished...

Anyone connected to life there's confidence that a perfect, whole life force will emerge from him, which will aid with all the splendor of its wholeness and perfection, himself and his fellow.

As I read this I wondered, if I had been a coach back in temple times, and one of the priests with a mum had come to me in his existential angst about losing his primary vehicle for expressing his purpose in life, how would our sessions go? After hearing him out and letting him vent a bit, I probably would have asked him, so how is this working for you? You are clearly beating yourself up about something over which you have no control. What if you were to shift perspective? Rather than seeing this as a punishment or a torment what if the loss of this role were an opportunity? What if you have gifts beyond your wildest imagination which, if you were to explore and give voice to them, might in fact connect you to Gd in ways you can't yet conceive?

Anyone connected to life there's confidence that a perfect, whole life force will emerge from him, which will aid with all the splendor of its wholeness and perfection, himself and his fellow.

In my mind's eye I see him stand up a bit straighter. I see him walk away disabled in body but inspired in spirit.

And perhaps—I can be so audacious as to imagine that Gd intended that very outcome. While on the one hand insisting on an aesthetic standard for Gds home, nevertheless understanding that when one door closes, and a seeming darkness sets in, our divinely inspired images are programmed to create our own light...