

Cassey Ho, a fitness blogger, recently posted a video she created in response to the many body-shaming comments she was receiving from critics online. The video went viral. It first shows Cassey, clearly athletic and healthy, walk over to a mirror, smiling happily. But as the video progresses, a barrage of unpleasant social media comments appear. Cassey's hand then becomes an image-editing tool, and we watch as Cassey, now humiliated, sadly scrapes away parts of her body. The dejection communicated by the music and her facial expressions makes it a powerful experience for the viewer, difficult to watch as she mutilates her body into a caricature of the "perfect" body.

In the text accompanying the video, Cassey explains her motivation for making it, saying that viewers "will experience what it feels like to be constantly bombarded with outrageous negativity. You will see what it looks like to have your self esteem stripped away. You will read real comments left by real people. You will see me struggle with my own appearance."

The terribly painful-to-watch Photoshop-scraping in the video brings to mind the rules God lays out for the *kohanim* (priests) in this week's parashah. God makes clear in Leviticus 21:5 that the *kohanim* are not to cut their flesh, nor alter their bodies in other ways. It makes sense for the *kohanim*, the most public Israelite figures, to be prohibited from defacing their bodies. This kind of harmful attention to the physical body was a Caananite mourning practice, so forgoing such attention was an effective way of ensuring Israel's distinctiveness. And by not focusing too much on their bodies, the *kohanim* were able to devote their whole selves to serving God.

The obsession with physical perfection has reached an unhealthy level today, to the point that Cassey Ho felt she had to dramatically demonstrate the shame that her critics had wrought. With body shaming and cyber bullying seemingly trending without end, Emor reminds us that our bodies are not the totality of our worth. When our bodies are healthy and strong but not the center of our attention, then we are *capable* of pursuing the higher spiritual purposes of our Jewish lives and *free* to do so.

Parashat Emor 5775

פרשת אמר תשע"ה



The Rigors of Leadership

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs,
The Rabbinical School, JTS

In the wake of violent religious extremism that plagues our world today, why are some religious leaders not expressing their opposition to bloodshed in the name of God? By turning a blind eye and silencing their voices, religious leaders tacitly give their approval to the violence—both tarnishing their reputation as leaders and diminishing God's presence in this world. Leadership, especially religious leadership, demands scrupulousness and accountability.

Our parashah this week, Parashat Emor, underscores this notion. The Torah reading opens by discussing the many behavioral stringencies that apply to the priesthood. As members of an elite that mediates the relationship between God and the people, the *kohanim* (priests) must be mindful and deliberate in their service to God. The Torah proclaims, "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Instruct Aaron and his sons to *keep themselves apart (veyinazru) from the hallowed things* [or JPS translation: *to be scrupulous about the sacred donations*] that the children of Israel consecrate to Me, lest they profane My holy name" (Lev. 22:1–2). As leaders of the Israelites, the priestly class is explicitly being held to a higher standard. What is the import of raising the bar so high for those who are so diligently serving God in the sacred precincts?

Guided by the Hebrew word *veyinazru*, translated variously as "to separate" or "to be scrupulous," Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888, Germany) elaborates on the linguistic root (*n-z-r*):

The basic meaning of *nezir* definitely has the idea of exclusion from some sphere . . . the command that "they keep themselves apart from the hallowed things of the children of Israel" accordingly, makes the demand to the *kohanim* that they are not to consider themselves simply unconditionally entitled to the "holy

things” which are handed over to them by the people. There are times when they have to consider themselves excluded from them, to stand as strangers (*zarim*) towards them, and may neither deal with them for the sacrificial service nor eat them. (*Hirsch Commentary on the Torah: Leviticus II*, 610)

Quite beautifully, Hirsch goes far beyond the *peshat*, the literal meaning, of our expression *veyinazru*. He connects the word not only to *nezir* but also to *zarim* (strangers). There is a time for the priests to be insiders but there is also a time when they will be outsiders or strangers. The lesson is critical. Given their elite status as leaders in the community, Torah expresses the ever-present concern that “absolute power corrupts absolutely.” When one achieves a certain status, there is a feeling of invincibility and self-importance. Such people often feel a sense of entitlement and excessive comfort. And too often, these feelings lead to abuses of power. For a person in the role of priest, the danger becomes all the more serious. Because priests are servants to and representatives of God, their missteps will undoubtedly be projected onto God and the entire religious system. One must be ever-vigilant when serving the people in this capacity.

Vividly, one calls to mind the opening chapters of the First Book of Samuel, which relate not only the appearance of the prophet-judge Samuel, but, more importantly, gives us a sense of the chaos and corruption that led to an alternative form of rule for the Israelites. Eli, who was the High Priest at the time, oversaw a troubling and corrupt culture in the Israelite devotional site of Shiloh. Tellingly, the first book of Samuel relates,

Now Eli’s sons were scoundrels; they paid no heed to the Lord. This is how the priests used to deal with the people: when anyone brought a sacrifice, the priest’s boy would come along with a three-pronged fork while the meat was boiling, and he would thrust it into the cauldron or kettle or the great pot, or the small cooking pot, and whatever the fork brought up, the priest would *take* away. This was the practice at Shiloh with all the Israelites who came there . . . the sin of the young men against the Lord was very great, for the men treated the Lord’s offerings impiously. (1 Sam. 2:12–17)

As Rabbi David Silber points out in a brilliant and illuminating essay, when the Torah speaks about the Priestly gifts, it is always

about priests *receiving* gifts. It never discusses priests *taking*. The Talmud goes even further, explaining that the priest is not even allowed to give the appearance of taking. He is supposed to wait until after the animal is sacrificed and the incense is burned on the altar. Only then may a priest gather up his priestly portion. (“The Birth of Samuel and the Birth of Kingship,” in *Tanakh Companion: The Book of Samuel*, 5).

David Silber gets at the heart of the matter: those with religious power must behave with moral and ethical fortitude and, above all, with *derekh erez* (respectfully, or with propriety). For if religious leaders cannot be trusted to behave properly and set the tone, it is a deep, painful, and troubling setback to the aspirations of a society.

True leadership is multivalent—requiring attention to one’s internal life and external actions. This lesson is especially true for those of us in public positions of leadership. One must be consistently mindful, introspective, and self-critical. Only through placing a lens to one’s self and being conscious of one’s own flaws can one avoid the pitfall of pridefulness, and the awareness that one’s instinctive allies may also deserve critique. Being an insider requires knowing full well when you must also be an outsider. That indeed is the sacred lesson of Parashat Emor.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Bodies and Their Critics

Yonah Kirschner, William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education, JTS

It’s hard to be content with the shape of your body when people are constantly telling you how fat you are, how much weight you need to lose, how much weight you need to gain . . . literally what do people want? The body shaming, the mean comments, the cyber bullying—all of this messes with us . . . and it hurts.

—Cassey Ho, “The ‘Perfect’ Body,” *Blogilates*, April 17, 2015