

The Problem of Embodied Perfection

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Parashat Emor (Leviticus 21–24) opens with a passage describing limitations placed on individuals whom a *kohen* (priest) may mourn or marry, as well as limiting sacrificial service in the Mishkan to those who are able-bodied. We learn in Leviticus 21:17 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).

This is a deeply problematic and profoundly painful passage. It is easy to ignore this passage, given that *kohanim* no longer enjoy the privileged status once afforded them in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction. We might be horrified by this passage, but we might also comfort ourselves with the knowledge that no longer are individuals with disabilities explicitly forbidden from ritual or communal leadership, as evidenced by the tiny but steadily growing cohort of rabbis, rabbinical students, cantors, and others who are bravely and boldly exercising spiritual leadership that is so desperately needed. We might think to ourselves that we are working ceaselessly for change, that in the aftermath of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) life has improved for individuals with disabilities in our society. We can look at this passage as a mere relic of its day, congratulate ourselves for moving past it, and find a more spiritually compelling theme in our parashah. But can we really?

I wish to boldly wrestle with Leviticus 21, and I do so from my perspective as a blind rabbi for whom this passage is at once profoundly painful and a call for change. I do not claim to know the experiences of anyone for whom the above categories are relevant other than my own and speak only for myself.

When I think about the tradition I love, the community I love, and the beloved teachers, friends, and mentors from whom I have learned incredible Torah and from whom, with God's help, I will continue to do so, I feel I receive incredible strength to keep going on this journey of a lot of trailblazing firsts, this journey which has been both immensely painful and an incredible privilege. When I think about the great work that rabbinic trailblazers of all kinds have done, I know, in the deepest part of my being, that I am standing on the shoulders of giants for whom I have nothing but incredible gratitude and overflowing respect. They have boldly wrestled with Torah that is painful or exclusionary, be it with regards to the status of women, people with disabilities, or those in the LGBTQIA community, and with incredible intellectual honesty and integrity offered up *hiddushim*—new interpretations and understandings that unapologetically assert that we can be accepted for who we are in our spiritual communities, and that there are leaders we can turn to who understand our experiences on a deep level; that we, too, can take hold of Torah and bring our full selves to its study, and that those who misuse religious texts as a means of hiding behind their bigotry cause incredible harm and shouldn't enjoy the unchallenged authority they so often do. It is my prayer that I humbly continue in that tradition.

Our sacred texts continue to be used as weapons of exclusion. Those of us who are seeking to carry the mantle of sacred leadership forward have the responsibility to wrestle authentically with this text, teach it with immense

sensitivity, and be there with and for those in our communities who are grappling with the pain of it in the most visceral of ways. We are losing so much Torah when we fail to do so.

Though it is easy to claim that individuals with disabilities are no longer impacted by Leviticus 21 because our society has evolved, I am going to problematize that. When you look at your communities, how often do you see individuals with disabilities exercising leadership? Though I find this passage immensely painful, I am in a very uniquely privileged position. I am at once an insider and an outsider, in the rabbinate and simultaneously acutely aware of the ways in which marginality impacts my ability to make my voice heard. I am able to study Gemara while painfully aware of what a privilege that is for someone with my disability due to the ableist assumptions that preclude access to text for the vast majority of blind Jews. And I am deeply grateful for the ways in which I am able to teach Torah as I wonder how I will be received by the wider community, regardless of how hard I work.

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?

We live in a world in which those of us who find ourselves on the social margins are not seen as equally trustworthy, equally competent. The converse of this is that far too many religious leaders feel that they must hide an essential aspect of themselves for fear of losing the position they have worked so hard for or because they fear stigma. And though it is often unintentional and subconscious, we still place immense barriers in the way of so many who have such

enriching Torah to teach due to our collective inability to get over our own ingrained prejudices.

And these obstacles don't only affect those in explicit leadership positions, but also the ability of those on the margins to find a home at the center of our community. How often do we fail to talk about difficult subject matter because either we feel it isn't applicable to us or because "people like that" aren't here? When we privilege supposed physical perfection—a deeply problematic term, one which disability rights activists and others have problematized and deconstructed—we send a painful message about the value of those who can't meet that impossible standard.

When reading or teaching Leviticus 21, don't shirk it off and pat yourself on the back for the fact that times have changed. Ask hard questions. In what ways is this text still so relevant to our current society? Do we truly value the divine spark that is within each of us, as Genesis teaches us, or do we seek perfection in those who lead us? How do we silence those who are different, subtly and explicitly, because their stories and experiences, their truths, make us uncomfortable? May we continue the ceaseless process of undoing the barriers that preclude so many from being their authentic selves. May the day soon come speedily in which the inherent dignity and worth of everyone is sacrosanct.

To learn more about Rabbi Tuchman and her work, visit rabbituchman.com