

Parshat Emor 2019/5779
Wither the Defect
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I have always been troubled by the psukim in parshat Emor that exclude a kohen who has a *mum* -- variously translated as a blemish or a defect -- from performing the Temple service. The Torah specifically lists the following among those who may not perform the Temple service on account of their *mum*: a kohen who is blind or lame, who has a broken arm or leg, who has one limb longer than the other, who is a hunchback or a dwarf, who has a growth in his eye, who has certain skin conditions, or who has crushed testicles. (See Vayikra 21:16-23.)

To our modern day sensibilities this seems incredibly harsh. Why should a person's external features affect their ability to perform ritual acts in the Temple? Does God really care what a kohen looks like?

It is not only contemporary society that found these provisions troubling. Discomfort with these exclusions from priestly service seems to date back to the time of the Mishna.

At the time of the Mishna the kohanim are no longer offering sacrifices at the Temple, and the focus of public worship has shifted to prayer. The kohen's role is now to bless the people with *birkhat kohanim*, the priestly blessing. And here, too, we find a disqualification from service on account of a *mum*. The Mishna states:

כהן שיש בידיו מומין לא ישא את כפיו. ר' יהודה אומר אף מי שהיו ידיו צבועות סטיס לא ישא את כפיו מפני שהעם מסתכלין בו.
A kohen who has *mumim* on his hands may not lift his hands [to recite *birkhat kohanim*]. Rabbi Yehudah says even one whose hands are colored with *satis* (a blue dye), may not lift his hands [to recite *birkhat kohanim*] because the people will look at him. (Talmud Bavli, Megilla 24b)

A *breita*, another teaching from the time of the Mishna, describes the disqualifying defects as *mumim* on the kohen's face, hands, or feet. Both the Mishna and this *breita* have limited the disqualifications to those found on the visible parts of the kohen's body. Moreover, the Mishna pairs this type of disqualification with another -- a kohen whose hands are temporarily discolored with a blue dye, which typically occurs from touching a certain type of plant. And a reason is stated -- because the people will stare at him while he is reciting the priestly blessing. The focus has shifted from something inherently "wrong" with the excluded kohen to something that could be distracting to the congregation.

The Gemara takes this development a step further. It gives several examples of kohanim who had particular disqualifying defects but were nevertheless permitted to recite the priestly blessing because they were familiar in the community. An example is the following story:

אמר רבי יוחנן: סומא באחת מעיניו לא ישא את כפיו. והא ההוא דהוה בשיבבותיה דרבי יוחנן דהוה פריס ידיה. ההוא דש בעיר הוה.

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: One who is blind in one eye may not lift his hands to recite the Priestly Benediction because people will gaze at him. The Gemara asks: Wasn't there a certain priest who was blind in one eye in the neighborhood of Rabbi Yoḥanan, and he would lift his hands and recite the Priestly Benediction? The

Gemara answers: That priest was a familiar figure in his town, and therefore he would not attract attention during the Priestly Benediction.

(Talmud Bavli, Megilla 24b, Steinsaltz translation, William Davidson edition, at Sefaria.org)

Once people were accustomed to a particular kohen and his defects, those defects were no longer seen as distracting. As a result, the defect was no longer seen as a disqualification.

In light of this history, perhaps we can see the priestly disqualifications in parshat Emor as reflecting a time when the sight of a kohen with a *mum* would have been jarring to the people, and may have even led to their viewing the priesthood with less esteem. Over time, as people became more comfortable seeing kohanim with a particular *mum*, that *mum* ceased to be a disqualification.

Similarly, today, as we become able to imagine a wider array of people in various positions of authority, the categories of people who can (and do) occupy those positions can grow.

The Gemara's approach to kohanim with a *mum* can serve as a model for how to relate to individuals with disabilities. Today, all too often, people see the disability rather than the person. We tend to stare at someone in a wheelchair or with other obvious physical conditions. If a person is accompanied by a caregiver, we may address the caregiver about the person rather than address the person directly. Although this type of conduct is not intended to offend, it often has the effect of making the person with the disability feel uncomfortable or non-existent.

The Gemara teaches us that there is a way to train ourselves to overcome these demeaning behaviors. As we increase our interactions with people who are different from us, over time those differences -- including physical disabilities -- will no longer be the defining feature of the person, and we will become able to see each person as his or her whole self.



Rabbanit Gloria Nusbacher came to Maharat after a career in corporate law, including almost 20 years as a partner at one of the 100 largest U.S. law firms. She interned at Congregation Ohev Sholom - The National Synagogue in Washington, DC, the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, and New York Presbyterian - Allen Hospital, and co-founded and ran her community's women's tefilla group. Rabbanit Gloria earned an AB from Barnard College and a JD from Columbia Law School, and has studied at Drisha. She lives in Riverdale and West Hempstead, NY with her husband, Burt, and is a proud mother and grandmother.