

EMOR (LEVITICUS 21:1-24:23)

Beauty and the Priest

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

[DISCLAIMER: I often ask challenging questions and then present answers from the Talmud or various Torah commentaries. In this week's message, I am offering my own personal opinion as to what MAY be the answer to the question. I may be wrong. As always, I welcome the insights of others. If you have a better answer than the one I present here, I'd love to hear from you.]

With responsibility comes privilege. The Kohain-Priest, the man who officiated in the Temple, was a man to be treated with respect. The Priests brought offerings on the Altar, kindled the lights of the Menorah, and conducted all the various Services in the Temple. Consequently, they enjoyed an elevated status:

"Sanctify him, for he offers the food of your G-d; he will be holy to you because I, the G-d who sanctifies you, am holy." (Leviticus, 21:8)

The Kohain is to be honored in all matters of holiness. The first person to be called to the Torah reading is the Kohain. When people are reciting the Grace after Meals together, the Kohain is supposed to be called upon to lead the prayers. It is not appropriate to have a Kohain serve you, unless it is his salaried job, or unless he volunteers to. (There are people who would not ask a Kohain who is dining with them to please pass the salt!)

Several different types of tithes and offerings were given to the Kohain. As a "civil servant", the Kohain was supported by the community. In all, there were 24 gifts to which he was entitled.

And with privilege comes responsibility. As the major religious functionary, the Kohain was given additional restrictions as to where he is permitted to go, and to whom he may marry. (While most of the 24 gifts were only applicable in the time of the Temple, the additional restrictions apply nowadays as well.)

The Kohain was required to carry himself with dignity. As a Temple functionary, he was often the center of attention, and needed to command respect. And therein lays the difficulty:

G-d spoke to Moses, saying, "Tell Aaron: 'Any man of your offspring ... in whom there is a blemish shall not come near to offer the food of his G-d...'" (Ibid, verse 16)

The Torah goes on to give a list of “blemishes” that disqualify the Kohain from officiating in the Temple Service. (Mr. Cohen, I hope your lawyer is taking notes!):

“... a man who is blind or lame or whose nose has no bridge, or who has one limb longer than the other... who has a broken leg or broken arm... abnormally long eyebrows, a membrane on his eye or a blemish in his eye... any man from the offspring of Aaron who has a blemish shall not approach to offer the fire-offerings of G-d...” (Ibid, verses 18-22)

There you have it – discrimination against people with disabilities!

What’s going on here? Shouldn’t there be a “Kohain with Disabilities Act”?!! Why is the Torah discriminating against a Kohain just because he looks a little different? Is this a beauty contest?!!

This is not a concept that is easy to explain. I called a colleague of mine and told him, “Give me a clear, Politically Correct, Jewish-outreach-to-the-uninitiated explanation to these rules. How do I explain the Torah’s apparent prejudice against Kohanim with disabilities?”

My colleague’s response: “Good luck!” :)

The Torah tells us why a Kohain who is physically deficient may not officiate:

“...he shall not come to the Curtain, and he shall not approach the Altar, for he has a blemish, and he may not desecrate my sacred offerings because I am G-d Who sanctifies them.” (verse 23)

The Temple is a place of G-d’s Divine Presence. G-d, of course, is flawless and perfect. The abode of G-d’s perfect presence should be a place that is as close to flawlessness as possible. Even a slaughtering knife that was nicked had to be immediately replaced. (Replaced, NOT repaired!) A Priest who demonstrates an obvious physical imperfection does not properly convey this message of perfection.

The question is obvious. Is this fair? Should we really be viewing a person with a physical handicap as lacking in perfection in a spiritual place? Isn’t that petty? Should we blame the Kohain who was born a little different than the rest of us? Should we not, rather, celebrate the Kohain’s efforts to overcome his handicap and live a normal life? Why are we condemning him and labeling him as being less of a Kohain than his brothers?

I think I may have come up with a partial answer to this question. I believe that there are a few important messages here.

The Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, incorporates some of these Temple-era laws in a practical, up-to-date, sense. Among the duties of the Kohain is the Mitzvah to bless the people of Israel. This was a daily practice in the Temple, and in many places in Israel it is still performed daily. In most places outside of Israel, it is required to be done thirteen times a year, on the major Jewish holidays. A Kohain who has misshapen limbs, certain skin ailments, blindness in one eye, or various other abnormalities is not permitted to stand before the Congregation to bless the people. However, if he is a local resident who is well-known to the community, or, if the local custom is for the Kohain to be covered with a Tallis during the Blessing Ceremony, the Kohain is permitted to carry out his duties normally.

The reason given is that people stare at people who look different, and are, therefore, distracted from their prayers. No, it's not right, but that's the way people are. When the Priests stand before the congregation and bestow G-d's blessings upon them, the people should be concentrating on thoughts of holiness. Anything that distracts them, including the unusual appearance of the Kohain, should be avoided. This is accomplished by A) only using Kohanim who don't look obviously different than the norm; B) using Kohanim who are familiar to the community, thus avoiding the distraction caused by a rarely-seen-before "imperfection"; C) covering the "offending" blemish.

It would be wonderful if people accepted other people for who they are rather than what they look like. However, that is not the way people are. We do notice. We may try to look away, but we can't ignore an obvious difference.

And I'm not even sure that we should. There is a blessing to be recited when we see a person with obvious physical differences. When seeing someone who is unusually tall (8 feet?) or unusually short (3 feet?), one acknowledges that G-d is the "*...Meshaneh Habrios — He Who makes different types of creations.*" I don't know the parameters of when this blessing is necessary, but we see from here that we are supposed to recognize G-d's wisdom in all of the diversity he has placed into His world.

The Kohain who is disqualified for performing the Temple Service is not discarded as a pariah. He is given other honorable duties to perform in the Temple. He is still entitled to eat the tithes and other sacred foods that are off-limits to a non-Kohain.

Perhaps the message of this law is that we need to learn to accept the roles assigned to us. G-d has made certain decisions for us; we need to recognize that. Men and women have different roles in Jewish life. Every morning a Jewish woman says a blessing, thanking G-d, "*...Who has made me according to His will.*" No, that is not, G-d forbid, an acceptance of a secondary role. It is a recognition that we all have our own assignments, and we excel when we fulfill those assignments.

When I was in my early forties, I looked into the possibility of becoming a chaplain in the military. The problem was that chaplains were only being accepted until age 40. Oh, well... later on I learned that due to a shortage of rabbis in the military, Jewish chaplains were now being accepted till age 50. Great! It was a month before my 51st birthday!! Maybe “Uncle Sam Wants You,” but he obviously has no interest in me! Should I write a letter to my congressman? Should I file suit against the armed forces for age discrimination, or should I be an adult about it and accept my limitations?

The U.S. Army tells us to “Be all you can be.” It’s an important message. We should not limit ourselves and accept anything less than meeting our full potential. But there’s another point as well. We should not fool ourselves by trying to be what we CANNOT be.

And we should always pray for the wisdom to know the difference.

Have a great Shabbos.

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