

## Understanding Disability in Leviticus 21

“The LORD spoke further to Moses: Speak to Aaron and say: No man of your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the food of his God. No one at all who has a defect shall be qualified: no man who is blind, or lame, or has a limb too short or too long; no man who has a broken leg or a broken arm; or who is a hunchback, or a dwarf, or who has a growth in his eye, or who has a boil-scar, or scurvy, or crushed testes. No man among the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the LORD’s offering by fire; having a defect, he shall not be qualified to offer the food of his God. He may eat of the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy; but he shall not enter behind the curtain or come near the altar, for he has a defect. He shall not profane these places sacred to Me, for I the LORD have sanctified them.”

(Leviticus 21.16–23 JPS)

What can we do with these verses, which seem to support the notion that those with brokenness in their bodies are somehow less qualified to take leadership positions or participate in religious life?

One approach, perhaps the simplest and most honest approach, would be to excise the verses from Torah. Cross them out ... remove them from the text ... in big, bold letters, explain that this section speaks about an outdated system that is no longer active or relevant. However, for those who believe that the Torah is and remains sacred literature, for whom every part of Torah continues to have some relevance, and who continue to read all of Torah over the course of 1-3 years, the more difficult challenge is to find a way to read these verses.

Is there an honest way to read these verses that still affirms the value of people with disabilities to participate at any level in religious life; and even better, which supports the notion that people with disabilities are in fact not to be pitied, but to be valued as contributing members of a community?

A number of readings have been proposed by commentaries, classical and modern. We might say that kohanim with these kind of physical disabilities would not be able to do the heavy work that was performed in the Temple, and were therefore exempt. This might explain the exclusion of those who have severe disabilities, but does not explain why one who has a scar is also excluded. Further, note that a physically non-disabled young man of small stature also might not be able to handle a heavy animal easily. Had the Torah been concerned that the kohen needed to have a certain amount of strength to do the job, the description of disqualified kohanim would have been different. The Torah does not include or exclude people based on physical strength.

Perhaps we might explain that Kohanim with physical imperfections would be a distraction to the worshippers. Rather than focusing on the glory of God, the congregation might be gawking at the physical abnormality of the kohen. However, would not Brad Pitt (or Angelina Jolie) or other exceptionally beautiful men and women also be a distraction to the worshippers? Would not the presence of ugly men and woman not serving as priests but rather simply bringing

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offerings to the priests also be a distraction? This too, does not seem an adequate explanation for the exclusions listed in Leviticus 21.

Rabbi Jack Riemer, in a sermon on the subject of disability summarizes several explanations of others on Leviticus 21, and adds an explanation of his own - all of which are lacking.<sup>1</sup>

One might explain that kohanim with imperfections are excluded is a reminder to us that in fact every human is imperfect, because only God is perfect. If that is the sense of the verse, then humans with obvious imperfections are no more imperfect than the rest of us -- and we should either all be excluded or all be included. In addition, from a disability rights perspective, to say that every human being is imperfect, while true, does not acknowledge that people with disabilities are living with bodies that are likely to be seen as more imperfect than people without disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Judith Abrams writes that the Temple was a place of liminality, where heaven and earth, mortality and immortality, purity and imperfection, met. Liminal places are dangerous, and therefore the kohen had to be healthy and strong and pure in order to serve. This might be a true, historically and contextually accurate reading of the passage, but does not lessen the negative impact of this passage on a community of abled and disabled people.

Rabbi Jack Riemer writes that we have to understand the backdrop against which the Torah was originally read. The most prominent voices in the Greco-Roman world advocated infanticide and euthanasia for infants and people with disabilities. Compared to this, the restrictions of the Torah are mild. Moreover, the Rabbinic tradition, built on this Biblical platform, is strongly inclusive of dignity of people with disabilities. Basically, his answer is "It could be worse." This is a reasonable historical explanation, but does nothing to help us find meaning for ourselves in this passage of Torah.

To understand the reading I am proposing, we need to consider the nature of what it means to be perfect or imperfect; then we need to consider the essential meaning of sacrifice; then we will understand what the Torah understands the role of a priest to be.

Let us start with the proposition that all human beings are created in the image of God. This means that human beings with disabilities and differences, physical, emotional, and mental, are as much the image of the Divine as human beings without obvious disabilities.

This is not, however, true for non-human living beings and objects. When we go to the store to buy fruit, we might quite rightly pick through the apples to choose the most aesthetically beautiful apples. We are not discriminating against apples by choosing not to buy the imperfect and bruised ones. We are not being racist or speciesist by favoring the salmon with the deepest red color, or the chicken that looks the freshest. There is no theological problem created by the Westminster Kennel club competition in which breeds of dogs are evaluated against an arbitrary

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set of physical characteristics; or the blue ribbons awarded to horses, pigs, cows, sheep, and chickens at 4-H competitions at County or State fairs.

What's the difference? Fruit, vegetables, and animals are not created in the image of God; human beings are. Unlike human beings, animals, plant matter, and objects are commodities. It's OK to discriminate among them.

When making a sacrifice, it is desirable to give both the first (as in first born, first fruits) and the best to God. It would be unseemly and ungrateful to pick out the bruised apples and the wormy grapes to bring as an offering, while keeping the tastiest and most beautiful fruit for one's own use. Animals offered in the Temple had to be perfect, unblemished.

Focusing in on the animal offerings, most particularly the purification offerings, the most ancient purpose of an offering to God was as a substitute for one's own life. The Hebrew Bible is clear on its abhorrence of human sacrifice. Instead, the human beings offer an animal to God in his or her place. In doing so, however, one is making a troubling equivalence. How do you substitute a commodity for a human being? The human being is of infinite worth, while the commodity has a variable price, set by the marketplace, depending on its quality. It is precisely because the human being is of infinite worth that the Torah actually sets an arbitrary fixed price on men, women, and children should someone make a vow to give their own value to the Temple.<sup>3</sup> Note that while men are considered more valuable than women, and women more valuable than children, there is no distinction between men, women, or children with disabilities or without disabilities.

The act of making a sacrifice, substituting a commodity with a fixed value for a human being of infinite value, devalues and degrades the human being. Therefore, the Kohen, rather than serving in the highest and most honored spiritual role in the community, is actually serving as a symbol of the commoditization of human beings. In addition, on the grossest level, the kohen's job is to butcher animals and collect some of their blood. From the beginning of Genesis, it is clear that the consumption of meat is a concession to human appetites, but the ideal diet, that of the garden of Eden, is vegetarian, possibly even vegan. The essential role of the kohen, rather than being highly elevated and spiritually close to God, is antithetical to the ideal human messianic vision.

As an aside, note that in the Torah Levi and in particular the two of the children and one of the grandchildren of Aaron, the first kohen, are violent, impulsive people (see the incident of Shimon and Levi in Genesis 34, the incident with Nadav and Avihu in Leviticus 10, and the zealotry of Pinhas in Numbers 25). The Priesthood, with its central task of killing animals, was a perfect place to stash a tribe of people who have a propensity for killing. By "elevating" them to a position that requires a high degree of purity (e.g., not coming in contact with human corpses), God is channeling their violent, zealous nature into an acceptable arena.

Therefore, as the Torah describes the characteristics of the kohen, it treats the kohen not as a human being created in the image of God, but rather as an animal, a commodity. Rather than

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looking at the service of the Kohen as an ideal to which each Israelite should aspire, the Torah presents the Kohen as an agent of the lowest level of service to God. Therefore, the Kohen, in his service to God, is restricted to the same characteristics and the same physical perfection as the animals which he offers. Note that every Kohen, regardless of physical appearance, is permitted to enjoy the food of the offerings when not serving in his role. Even in the restrictions, the Torah is very careful to focus only on those characteristics that connect the Kohen to the animal world. When we step away from the mechanics of making offerings and focus instead of what it means to be a human being serving God through the consumption of offerings, we no longer recognize physical differences as important.

This reading of Leviticus 21 is consistent with the “Holiness code” of Leviticus 19, whose message is to see each other as whole sacred human beings. It is consistent with the notion that people with disabilities are not viewed by the Torah as broken or imperfect creatures, but rather as beings charged with living their lives with holiness. May our communities be accessible and inclusive of all people, with and without disabilities; and welcoming of all religious seekers searching for the meaning in Torah.

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1. “One of the Most Embarrassing Passages In the Whole Torah – Parashat Emor”,  
[www.uscj.org/One\\_of\\_the\\_Most\\_Emba7549.html](http://www.uscj.org/One_of_the_Most_Emba7549.html)

2. This explanation is shared in the name of Rabbi Brad Artson. However, in a commencement address entitled “If I am There, All is There,” Rabbi Artson clearly rejects this answer as inadequate.

3. Leviticus 27