



Parashat Emor

Difference and the Service of the Lord

by Amy Soule on Friday April 30, 2010

16 Iyar 5770

Leviticus 21:1 - 24:23

God said to Moses,

Say to Aaron: 'For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is hunchbacked or dwarfed, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the offerings made to God by fire. He has a defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God. (Leviticus 21:16-21)

According to these rules imposed by Torah, any kind of difference renders one ineligible to serve God as a religious leader. Does this mean some of our spiritual giants recorded in Scripture would have been ineligible for priesthood roles if there had been a priesthood when they lived?

One Talmudic tradition (Yevamot 64a-b) states that Abraham and Sarah were *tumtumim*, meaning they were of uncertain sex. Since Leviticus clearly states priests, like the animals they sacrifice on behalf of their congregants, have to be completely male, Abraham couldn't have served as a spiritual leader. He was responsible for instituting the *Shacharit* (morning) service according to a second Talmudic tradition (Berachot 26b) but due to his difference he is deemed unfit to serve according to the rules imposed by Leviticus 21. Obviously Sarah couldn't have been eligible due to her sex, since men alone were eligible for jobs within the priesthood, but even if she had been a man instead she had exactly the same difference as her spouse, meaning she would have been ineligible even if she had been born as the opposite sex.

Isaac and Leah are both interpreted by many people as having low vision. Due to this difference, despite being recognized as being great (Isaac is recognized as instituting the *Minchah* (afternoon) service according to Berachot 26a-b and Leah is given credit for being the first human being to praise God according to Berachot 7b), they couldn't have had any kind of



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leadership position within the Temple. Again, I'm aware that only men could serve within the priesthood but it seems biological sex hardly means anything; if you're different you're not eligible despite anything else that can make you seem like a perfect candidate.

Jacob, after wrestling with the angel, is left differently-abled. His struggle with God's messenger leaves him with mobility issues. Does his limping prevent him from being a very spiritual person or mean he stops serving his Creator? No, of course it doesn't. He is also held responsible for instituting *Aravit* (evening) worship (Berachot 26b) but according to rules imposed by Scripture he may have been ineligible to serve within a certain role.

Even Moses, according to the rules of our *parashah*, couldn't serve as a member of the priesthood. He stuttered due to an incident during his childhood (Exodus Rabbah 1:26), which left him with a scarred tongue that made it hard for him to pronounce words and ask his brother to come with him whenever he had to relay any kind of message to the people. Moses may be recognized as our greatest prophet, as Deuteronomy states, but it appears, once again, that a great spiritual person is viewed as ineligible to serve because of a physical difference.

Looking at those treacherous verses in Leviticus also seems enough to give anyone an extremely distorted sense of body image or feel guilty if they have anything to help compensate for a difference they live every day (e.g. glasses). How many people have spent extended time periods at the gym, trying to shape their bodies to be "perfect"? How many people, predominantly women, have dealt with some kind of eating disorder trying to "perfect" their bodies? How many older people have spent money on botox or other cosmetic procedures to look younger in our youth-obsessed culture?

Invisible differences are no different. *Parashat Emor* clearly states that anybody with a "defect" is unable to serve God as a priest. According to this, anyone who has a learning difference is ineligible. Verse 22 might seem like an attempt to soften this harsh edict, since it states that "imperfect" people can eat of the holy and most holy sacrifices, but the next verse completely undoes it.

Verse 23 attempts to explain why only "perfect" people can serve as priests. It explains that God sanctifies the sanctuaries and people may not profane them.

Some differently-abled people might be happy to have some kind of explanation for their exclusion, since they can rationalize everything as being included in ritual purity rules, but as far as I'm concerned, *lo dayeinu*: it's not enough.

Perhaps people have to have accommodations if they want to serve God and happen to be different, but that fact alone shouldn't prevent anyone from being able to serve. As Vinny Prell



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wrote in her commentary “Some say that making an offering to God is such a dangerous business that sometimes, even the average people don’t survive.”

She also writes that such statements assume those who are different are supposed to be grateful they are ineligible for a job that has such drastic potential consequences. To me, that’s about as effective as the Orthodox reminding me I’m exempt from many *mitzvot* due to anatomy. Simply being a woman doesn’t mean I don’t want to be involved as much as men. Second, I’m willing to argue that if you’re “different” in any way and you choose to participate in something where you’re under no obligation to be involved your contributions should mean more because of their voluntary nature.

Looking at *Parashat Emor* it’s hard to avoid feeling Torah is contradicting itself. Genesis tells us all of humankind was created in God’s image (1:27), Exodus tells us we are to be a nation of priests, a holy nation (19:6) and Leviticus tells us we are all capable of being holy (19:1).

If Genesis is right in asserting that all of humankind was created in God’s image, why is God suddenly doing a 180 and proclaiming that some people are prevented from serving due to being impure? God created everyone, whether “perfect” or “imperfect”, so why should there be any kind of excuse?

Can we honestly be a nation of priests, let alone a holy nation, if we prevent people from serving? We are told we are all capable of being holy and we deserve to be able to fulfill that divine, God-given mission, even if we are different.

As someone living with a number of differences and working toward being an Educational Assistant, I’m very frustrated by *Emor*. It (half) helps to be able to put it in context due to its position in terms of ritual purity rules but it frustrates me that, according to the “straight” meaning, the children I love helping are viewed as unable to serve God at the highest level. They were created as they are and they can reach their holiness potential as much as average people even if that potential happens to be different.



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