



Parashat Emor
Irreconcilable Differences

by Vanessa "Vinny" Prell on Friday May 09, 2008

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Leviticus 21:1 - 24:23

Parshat Emor, though mysterious in its reasoning, seems clear enough. Male Levites whose bodies were outside the norm: “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” (Leviticus 21:18-21) is permitted to offer food to God. These people are described not just as different, but as having a defect and profaning holy places. What does this mean? Why is this text sacred to us?

Some say that making an offering to God is such a dangerous business that even the able-bodied don't always survive. This argument intimates that those of us who aren't qualified to make offerings should be glad, or at least relieved, not to have a duty that holds such a heavy potential consequence. This explanation does not soothe me. Just the opposite, it feels like an insult to people with disabilities and genders other than male. Are we too weak to meet God face to face?

This painful exclusion reminds me of the medicalization of disabilities and transgender identity, which recognizes physical or gender-based difference as a “defect”. A person with a disability is sometimes identified by a diagnosis (i.e., muscular dystrophy or gender identity disorder). A person with such a diagnosis is seen as “unwell” or “sick” rather than simply “different.”

For disabled and transgender persons, visibility in society can sometimes depend on a note from one's physician. In today's world a person who comes out as bisexual, lesbian, or gay, is presumed to be so from then on. There is no federal test for 'gayness', no membership card, and no special license plate required to prove one's sexual identity. But, this is not so for transgender people. To receive necessary services from federal and state agencies when one is transgender, an individual must first be recognized as suffering from an illness. Only then is it possible for some persons to obtain a prescription for hormone “therapy” and sex reassignment surgery. After an individual is proclaimed “sick,” a transgender person may change name and gender identification on legal documents including the birth certificate or driver's license. This process is long, expensive, bureaucratic, and designed only for people transitioning from male to female (MTF) or female to male (FTM). If you're a transgender



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person who chooses a gender that is neither male nor female, society has no official pathway (not even “illness”) to recognize you.

Similarly, people with disabilities are deemed so only with doctor approval. While medical diagnoses are important for the treatment of many physical and psychological disabilities, our government and medical systems use the diagnosis to determine what a person needs, instead of asking the person directly! Access to knowledgeable healthcare providers, a hotel room that a wheelchair can navigate, or an American Sign Language interpreter in the hospital emergency room is not automatic; it depends upon the enforcement of laws made to include people with disabilities and the content of those laws. With this kind of treatment it is no wonder why many people with disabilities struggle with feeling defective.

Unfortunately, this perspective does not help me reconcile with *Parashat Emor*. In both cases a *higher power* dictates what these individuals can do with and to their bodies, not the people themselves. Who knows what would happen if we had the final say over our bodies and our abilities? Perhaps we would have offered food to God and died for being profane. Perhaps we would have offered food to God and lived with the knowledge of our holiness. I don't know. But I do know this: the Torah has not left each of us alone in our differences. We are together, struggling to understand what it means to have a defect or profane a holy place. Hopefully together we can find meaning and affirmation in Emor and in all our traditions.



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