

The Disqualified Kohen Simon Italiaander



It's exciting when a question in Torah *actually* bothers you. A discerning learner of Torah is always on the lookout for things to dig into, - inconsistencies, oddities, vagueness- so it's a welcome treat when there's a question that actually keeps me up at night. In this midst of Parshat Emor is a curious passage that's been standing out to me since my Torah learning journey began. In its discourse of telling the laws of a kohen, the Torah lists physical imperfection and deformities that disqualify a Kohen from offering a sacrifice in the mishkan. Among them are עֵוֶר (blindness), פֶּסֶח (lameness), אֵו שְׂרָוִיעַ אוֹ שְׂרָוִיעַ (disproportionate limbs), אֵו שְׂבֵר יָד אוֹ שְׂבֵר רֶגֶל (a damaged limb), גִּבְנוֹ (hunchback), דִּזְקָה (dwarfism), תִּבְלָל בְּעֵינָיו (growth on the eye), מְרוֹחַ אֶשֶׁר (reproductive dysfunction), and a few others (Vayikra 21:16-21).

What bothers me about this passage is not that it potentially marginalizes people with disabilities- as the bulk of responses to this query on the internet are concerned with. I don't think that the Torah's values need necessarily to be beholden to our modern-day sensitivities. However, it contradicts what I believe to be the Torah's own attitude toward physical prowess and human perfection. In the *Al HaNisim* prayer recited on Chanukah, the disapproval of the Hellenistic focus on human physicality is clear. In Pirkei Avot (2:8), Hillel warns - מרבה בשר, מרבה רמה - the more one indulges his body, the more worms will eat his flesh in his grave. In fact, the Gemara in Taanit (7a) that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya was called severely ugly by the emperor's daughter. He replied back by asking her "does your father keep his best wine in silver or gold vessels?" "Of course not", she replied, since it's known that wine spoils quickly in metal vessels. Rather, wine is kept in unsightly clay vessels, since fine material (Torah) is kept in unattractive vessels. A person's physical appearance should have no bearing on his value and potential.

After poring through a few unsatisfying explanations for this phenomenon, I found a comprehensive essay on this exact question written by Rav Uri Cohen and published in Midreshet HaRova's newsletter ("The Disabled, the Kohanim, and us"). The author brings numerous, and diverse sources that HaKadosh Baruch Hu highly values people with disabilities, and that's worth reading in the article. The concern, he writes, is the effect a leader with a glaring disability will have on his constituents. "It is because of the weakness of the people, who do not feel the same respect for someone with a *mum* [blemish] as for someone who's healthy in every body part". In order to instill confidence, respect, and awe in the people, their leader needs to look and act the part.

Why should Hashem make requirements for Divine service based on man's flaw in acceptance? Perhaps He should sooner have allowed, or required flawed individuals to perform the service in order to dispel this way of thinking. Rather, the Kohen is a messenger from the people to Hashem, as well as a messenger from Hashem to the people, and thus need to be an expression of perfection on humanity's terms. In *shamayim*, there's no projecting a person's value based on his physical appearance, but in this world that is where we make our first judgments. So in order to express an attitude of sanctity, seriousness, and nobility- both the sacrifice and its sacrificer need to be without blemish.

Although disheartening, this shouldn't come as a surprise to us. During Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidential campaign, his team went to great lengths to hide the fact that he was paralyzed from the waist down. Even after it was publicly known, newscasters posed him in such a way that his audience wouldn't be reminded of his handicap. Our leaders are supposed to be our "best foot forward", in character traits, in background, and even in appearance. There is, however, progress to be made in this area. The rabbinical parallel to this Torah law is that a Kohen with deformities of the hands or feet is disqualified from performing *birkat kohanim*. The rabbis feared that people would be busy talking about the disabled kohen rather than focusing on the beracha. If the person, however, is a local resident and the recipients are already used to his deformity, then he may duchen. It seems that it's possible that if a community of people stop seeing a person's physical flaws, and start seeing the person, then the halacha will change.

I hope this approach will help us appreciate lengths to which Hashem goes to demonstrate seriousness in the holy *avodah*, and to accept the notion that not every member of klal yisrael is fit for each role.

Good Shabbos!
Simon Italiaander