

Parashat Emor

Guiding Question

What insight can be gleaned from Torah about where we, consciously or unconsciously, draw lines around who is allowed to stand at the center of communal life?

Torah Text: Leviticus 21:16-23

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר אִישׁ מִזֶּרְעֶךָ לְדֹרֹתָם אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בוֹ מוֹם לֹא יִקְרָב לְהַקְרִיב לַחֶם אֱלֹהֵיוּ: כִּי כָל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־בוֹ מוֹם לֹא יִקְרָב אִישׁ עֹזֵר אוֹ פֹסֵחַ אוֹ חֲרָם אוֹ שָׂרוּעַ: אוֹ אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־יִהְיֶה בוֹ שֶׁבֶר רֶגֶל אוֹ שֶׁבֶר יָד: אוֹ־גִבֹן אוֹ־זָק אוֹ תִבְלָל בְּעֵינָיו אוֹ גֵרֵב אוֹ יִלְפָת אוֹ מְרוּחַ אֲשָׁד: כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־בוֹ מוֹם מִזֶּרְעוֹ אֲהַרֵן הַכֹּהֵן לֹא יֵאָשׁ לְהַקְרִיב אֶת־אֲשֵׁי יְהוָה מוֹם בוֹ אֵת לַחֶם אֱלֹהֵיוּ לֹא יֵאָשׁ לְהַקְרִיב: לַחֶם אֱלֹהֵיוּ מִקַּדְשֵׁי הַקְּדוֹשִׁים וּמִן־הַקְּדוֹשִׁים יֹאכַל: אֲךָ אֶל־הַפְּרֻכָּת לֹא יָבֹא וְאֶל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא יֵאָשׁ כִּי־מוֹם בוֹ וְלֹא יַחֲלִל אֶת־מִקְדָּשֵׁי כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה מְקַדְּשָׁם:

GOD spoke further to Moses: Speak to Aaron and say: No man among your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect shall be qualified to draw near and 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 GOD'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, GOD, have sanctified them.

Rashi

[1040-1105, France]

Lo yekrav – to draw near and offer. This refers specifically to the service of the altar; but he may eat of the sacred offerings.

Maimonides

[1138-1204, Egypt]

It is for the sake of honoring the Temple that one who is not physically whole does not serve, for the masses do not evaluate a person based on their true essence, but rather according to their appearance.

Sefer HaChinuch

[13th Century, Spain]

The root of this commandment is that a person is judged according to his actions, and actions awaken the heart. Therefore, it is fitting that the one who performs sacred service be of pleasing and complete form.

Question

If the concern is how “the masses” perceive holiness, does that make this law a concession to human weakness or an endorsement of it?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

[1808-1888, Germany]

The exclusion is not a statement about the worth of the individual, but about the symbolic completeness required in the sanctuary. The altar demands representation of wholeness.

Ramban

[1194-1270, Spain]

The offerings must be perfect and so too those who bring them, for the service is directed toward perfection without deficiency.

Philo of Alexandria

[10 BCE-50 CE, Egypt]

The priest must be free from all bodily defect for he is to represent the perfection of the soul and the order of the universe.

Question

Is “perfection” a spiritual ideal or does it risk becoming a physical standard imposed on human beings?

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook

[1865-1935, Israel]

The external form awakens the inner imagination, but the soul itself is beyond all blemish. The disqualification is only in the realm of action, not in essence.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

[1903-1993, United States]

Halachah distinguishes between the dignity of the person and fitness for a role. Not every exclusion is a denial of human worth.

Avina Zornberg

[1944-, Israel]

The text creates a painful dissonance: those closest to holiness are also those most vulnerable to exclusion. The priestly body becomes a site of anxiety about imperfection.

Question

Can a system claim to preserve dignity while simultaneously excluding people from its most sacred spaces?

Rabbi Elliot Kukla

[21st Century, United States]

These verses have often been experienced as wounding by people with disabilities. They reflect an ancient worldview that equates physical difference with spiritual deficiency, a view we must actively challenge.

Judith Plaskow

[1947-, United States]

Any system that locates holiness in perfection risks marginalizing those whose bodies or lives do not conform. Feminist theology insists that the margins themselves are sites of revelation.

Rabbi Julia Watts Belser

[21st Century, United States]

Disability is not a barrier to holiness but a generative space of theological insight. The exclusion in Leviticus invites not acceptance but reinterpretation.

Question

What would it look like to build a vision of holiness that begins not with perfection but with human variation?