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Dvar Torah for Parshat Emor

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Disability in the Mikdash: Desecration or Holiness?

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The *beit hamikdash* - the biblical Temple - exists on the fringe of society. Although the entire book of Vayikra (and more) is dedicated to this building's details, people in ancient Israel rarely entered its domain. And even so, pilgrims were only permitted in the peripheries of the sanctuary. The building's regular denizens – a small group of [cohanim](#) and [leviim](#) – often worked behind the veil of holiness, invisible to all but God, briefly interacting with pilgrims on the [shalosh regalim](#) holidays or during infrequent sacrifices of thanksgiving and sin. The Talmud in Masechet Eiduyot describes how even the priestly dormitories and passageways were sealed off from the outside world in an ongoing battle to keep *tumah*, ritual impurity, outside.

Instead, lay people would most often interact with *cohanim* in their respective towns where local *cohanim* received regular tithes of fruit and bread. They may

have functioned as religious authorities much like local rabbis today, teaching *shiurim* and educating children.

This extreme separation of the temple enabled the space to embody a unique level of *kedusha* (holiness, but literally “separateness”). Yet by virtue of being sanctified, it also has the potential of being a place of *chillul hashem*, religious desecration. As when a person wears a *kippa*, their virtues reflect well on the Jewish people, but their shameful actions alternatively cause *chillul*, *kiddush hashem* is only possible when we have the equal and opposite possibility of *chillul*.

Parshat Emor is about the tension between *kiddush* and *chillul*. With each commandment of a sacrifice or priestly position, opens the possibility of desecration. The parsha itself seems to straddle this tension between *kiddush* and *chillul*. In it, the Torah displays uncommon sensitivity to animal life with commandments against slaughtering a mother and child animal on the same day, and requiring offspring to be weaned before sacrifice. These laws are stated in technical detail, but the moral sensibilities they entail still reverberate today. In fact, it is on the basis of these laws that the great pre-war Lithuanian commentator, [R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk](#), in his *Meshech Chochma*, argues that “the entire Torah and all its commandments teach compassion, mercy, and *chesed*.” And yet our parsha includes the categorical exclusion of a *cohen baal mum* – a disabled or disfigured priest – from serving in the *mikdash*.

“No one at all who has a defect shall be qualified [to be a priest]: no man who is blind, 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 has a growth in his eye, or who has a boidl-scar, or scurvy, or crushed testes.” ([Vayikrah 21:18-20](#))

Within a few verses the Torah displays intense sensitivity and seeming callousness. Like *cohanim*, we are disconcerted by this mixture of *kiddush* and *chillul*, unsure how to approach God’s love and God’s disgust.

It's hard to imagine that the same God who is venerated by the Psalmist as "the father of orphans, the champion of widows" would reject the ritual service of a *cohen baal mum*. Indeed, Moshe is referred to as *aral sefataim*, which the *midrash*, or ancient commentary, explains is a physical disability that made it difficult for him to speak. Yet Moshe served God with unparalleled intimacy and the Talmud records that God initially desired that he be *cohen gadol*.

Perhaps we can approach this tension by examining a parallel law with respect to animal sacrifice. In *Vayikra 22* the Torah forbids sacrifices of disabled or disfigured animals, *baalei mum*:

"And when a man offers from the herd or the flock a sacrifice to the Lord... it must be without blemish, there must be no defect in it. Anything blind, injured, maimed, or with a wen, boil-scar or scurvy – these you shall not offer to the Lord." ([Vayikrah 22:21-22](#))

The Torah fears that people will view sacrifice as a means of ridding themselves of a burdensome beast. Left to market forces alone, people would bring sacrifices from old cows that cannot produce milk or injured goats that cannot be sold at market.

Similarly the Torah is concerned that without a clear place in society, people may relegate the disabled to the *mikdash*. *Baalei mumim* were an unsettling enigma to ancient (and even modern) eyes. We can imagine the desire to remove them from the community and hide them away in the *mikdash*, assuaging our lingering guilt with the thought that their tasks are sanctified.

There is a sinister comfort in a society without visible disability. Yet the Torah warns that such separation of *baalei mum* creates a *chillul*. It is a separation that stems from human weakness, not a desire to sanctify life or the Creator of life.

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Instead, the Torah requires us to embrace the disabled into society. By specifically permitting a *cohen baal mum* to partake of the tithes and other offerings made in Jewish towns across Israel, the Torah indicates that these *cohanim* must dwell in the heart of the community. They are to serve the everyday religious needs of the people, instead of being shunned to the obscure recesses of the *mikdash*.

In *halacha*, Jewish law, a non-priest who performs ritual work in the Temple is killed. An impure *cohen* who serves is also killed. Yet a *baal mum* who serves, is not punished at all. The prohibition against his service in the *mikdash* entails no personal responsibility. Instead, it is the responsibility of his family and community to ensure he doesn't have to serve. That he has a place in a society, a job to be proud of, and a life to sanctify.



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