

**Emor: (Dis)ability to Serve  
Ilana Gimpelevich, Class of 2026**

---

A few weeks ago in the desert of southern Israel, an unusual birth defect was observed in a mountain gazelle: an extra pair of legs. The changed appearance was enough to be noticed by an amateur who then alerted the scientists. The male gazelle appeared to be healthy and exhibited normal gazelle behaviors, despite its strange appearance.

*Parshat* Emor enumerates the various ways in which *kohanim* (priests) are expected to separate themselves from the rest of the people and to conduct themselves in a model way. One of the requirements listed, among the prerequisites to conducting the *avodah*, the Temple service, is to not have any blemish or noticeable defect:

*Kol ish asher bo mum mizerah aharon hakohen lo yigash l'hakriv et ishi hashem mum bo eit lechem elohim lo yigash l'hakriv*

Any man of the seed of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall not come near to offer the offerings of Hashem made by fire. Since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God (Leviticus 21:21).

This detailed enumeration of disfigurements is followed in the next chapter with a similar list of blemishes in animals that disqualify them from being offered as a *korban* (sacrifice):

*Kol asher bo mum lo takrivu ki lo l'ratzon ihiyeh lachem*

But whatever has a blemish, that you shall not offer, for it shall not be acceptable for you (Lev. 22:20).

These passages seem to mirror each other: just as the *kohanim* who are offering sacrifices should appear to be perfect, so should the animals offered be as well. The perfection is underscored by the repeated word: מום, or defect. Anything with a defect is not fit to be part of the ritual.

A question beckons: what about the *kohanim* who were born with a disqualifying defect? Are they consigned to spend their lives as second-class citizens, yearning to serve yet absolutely precluded from participation? Do they have no function in the world of the *Beit HaMikdash*? The word מום has an alternative spelling, used later in the *Tanakh*<sup>1</sup>: מַאֻם. With the addition of the letter א, the word מום gains an additional meaning: *nothing*. Perhaps this alternative spelling holds the key to understanding מום.

When one has a noticeable disability, sometimes one is only aware of it to the extent that certain aspects of daily life are more difficult in a disabled body. For others, disability can feel

---

<sup>1</sup> איוב ל"א:ד', דניאל א':ד'

like a source of pain or exclusion and they may come or be taught to resent *Hashem* for the way they were born. Such a person could be thought of as a *ba'al mum*, a person whose consciousness is suffused with the idea that they are broken. Perhaps such a perspective is antithetical to the *avodah* that requires a laser-like focus on both serving Hashem and facilitating the *korbanot* for the community. A *kohen* who cannot let go of a belief that they are broken might be unable to turn outward and facilitate the relationship between the Jew bringing the *korban* and Hashem. Perhaps this is why such an individual is disqualified from service. This still leaves, however, the disabled *kohen* who is at peace with his identity, but still excluded. For such a *kohen*, who is disabled, but does not see himself as broken or defective, things are very different. For such *kohanim*, their *mum* is מום, a *not-thing* or *nothing* that interferes with their relationship with God.

I wonder if we could imagine a world where the inability to participate in the *avodah* is experienced by both the individual *kohen* and all those around him as nothing. The *kohen* can still partake of the holy offerings and remain a part of the Temple service. Perhaps he hones his teaching skills. Perhaps he performs other tasks which are less public. Maybe he becomes a great administrator, managing the logistics of the *Beit Hamikdash*. His *avodah* is just as intensive as bringing *korbanot* and both he and the entire community fully believe that. This status of service allows the *kohen* to eat the bread of the offerings and share in the natural rhythms of *Beit HaMikdash* with the rest of the *kohanim*. For all practical purposes, his sense of his disability as a מום, a blemish, becomes מום, nothing.

The unusual gazelle with the extra pair of legs, while drawing the interest of humans, seemed to function as a regular male. It circled the area where the females were grazing, hoping to gain favor and be accepted as part of the pack. The extra legs were a mere curiosity, to be filed away into the scientific annals. Meanwhile, there were basic life functions to be performed: grass to be eaten, mating to be initiated, a herd to belong to, and full gazelle life to be lived. When you and those around you all know that you belong, what seemed like a *mum* can turn out to be nothing.

---

*Ilana Gimpelevich is a lifelong learner and educator, always open to new fields of knowledge. Originally from Kishinev, Moldova, she holds a BA in Biochemistry (YU) and a Masters in Structural Biology (NYU). She is a founding member of New Toco Shul in Atlanta, GA. Currently residing in Richmond, VA, Ilana is involved in adult programming at Keneseth Beth Israel. She started an innovative multigenerational program, Oreg, which combines her two passions of hands-on craftsmanship with Torah learning.*