

Parshat Emor
The “Perfect” Kohen
Susan Hornstein - Class of 2025

There was a little boy in my childrens’ preschool; we’ll call him Charlie. Charlie was the most beautiful child you had ever seen. His blond curls tumbled down to his shoulders, his smile could light up a room. Everyone agreed: he looked like a cherub. A cherub, those angels whose representation sat upon the *aron*, the ark in the Holy of Holies. This was all good for those of us who had only to admire Charlie’s beauty, and did not have to deal with his diapers, his nighttime fevers, his afternoon tantrums, the things that make a toddler a human, not an angel.

So it was with the Kohanim who served in the Beit HaMikdash. Our parasha tells us:

דַּבֵּר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר אִישׁ מִזְרַעֲךָ לְדֹרֹתֶם אֲשֶׁר יְהִי בוֹ מוּם לֹא יִקְרַב לְהִקְרִיב לֶחֶם אֱלֹהֵינוּ:

Speak to Aaron and say: No man of your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the food of his God. (Vayikra 21:17)

The Torah goes on to enumerate the defects that disqualify the Kohen. Each blemish is external: limbs that were uneven in length, skin conditions, even weird eyebrows. Unlike the blemishes that make an animal non-Kosher, these are not life-threatening conditions. A Kohen could have a heart defect, asthma, or even a fever, as long as he had no external differences. How unusual this must have been! In a pre-modern society, without prenatal care or modern medicines, surely nearly everyone had something! Moreover, it is exactly these types of characteristics that distinguish us from one another. The angle of the eyes, the distinctive gait, these are the ways we recognize each other. The Kohen who was qualified to bring sacrifices didn’t even look like himself. He wasn’t there for us to look at and see ourselves in him. He looked like no one in particular, like a template of a human being, like an angel.

The Kohanim had many jobs. During their twice-yearly shifts in the Beit HaMikdash, the Kohanim lit the Menorah, carried the wood, swept the ashes from the altar, and performed other vital tasks around the facility. The rest of the year they were teachers, advisors, diagnosers of *tzara’at*, experts in all manner of Torah law. It was only the small subset of Kohanim who performed the actual sacrificial service who were held to this superhuman standard of external “perfection.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his essay on our Parsha, “Eternity and Mortality,” in his collection *Covenant and Conversation*, explains that the Mishkan and later the Beit HaMikdash were the point of contact between God, the Eternal One, and mankind, mortals. He defines this interface as *Kedusha*, holiness. He theorizes that the many restrictions associated with the sacrificial service are in place to protect this potentially dangerous interface:

God’s eternity stands in the sharpest possible contrast to our mortality. All that lives will one day die. All that is physical will one day erode and cease to be. Even the sun, and the universe itself, will eventually become extinct. Hence the extreme delicacy and danger of the Tabernacle or Temple, the point at which That-which-is-beyond-time-and-space enters time and space. Like matter and anti-matter, the combination of the purely spiritual and the unmistakably physical is explosive and must be guarded against. Just as a highly sensitive experiment has to be conducted without the

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slightest contamination, so the holy space had to be kept free of conditions that bespoke mortality.

And so, while we are all mortal, and all Kohanim are mortal, the Kohanim who could perform the sacrifices needed to be free of conditions that would remind us of that mortality. Things we could see. They were more a template of a human than a human itself. At that moment, they were liminal - not quite human and not quite God - much like the angels.

And the service they performed was also on that cusp. God is the Only One who is the Master of life and death. But the Kohen slaughtered a live animal and placed its body parts on the altar. The animals, too, had to be angelic, free from external blemishes. Then the Kohen inflicts the ultimate blemish, the knife stroke that slaughters. The perfect looking Kohen is splattered with blood, and the illusion of immortality is broken. All are mortal there in the Beit Hamikdash, the Kohen who took control of the life of the animal, and the animal itself. The contrast between the external perfection and the mortality all around could not have been greater.

Our lives are imbued with this contrast. Our bodies are mortal. We are all vaguely asymmetrical. We walk a little differently. We recognize each other by these "imperfections." These are the things that make us individuals. And inside each one of us is the breath of the Immortal. The Image of God. At the exact time of the interface between man and God, the moment of the sacrificial service, it was important to remove all this individuality and, for a split second, have a Kohen who was seemingly immortal. But in our everyday lives, it is the alchemy between our mortal selves and the breath of the Immortal that makes us special. How each one of us takes our talents, our challenges, our individuality and combines it with the Image of God that resides in us - that's what makes life here on earth interesting, vital, and mortal.



Susan Hornstein is an educator and a change-maker. Susan holds a BA from Brandeis University and a PhD in Cognitive Psychology from Brown University. She grew up in Boca Raton, Florida, where her family was instrumental in founding the Jewish community. Her parents saw a need and used their talents to fill it; this example has been very influential throughout Susan's life.

Susan completed a long career in User Experience, designing computer systems and websites with the people who use them in mind. Susan has also spent many years as a Jewish educator. A passionate student of Jewish text and Hebrew language, she has learned at Hebrew University, Michlelet Bruria and Yeshivat Har Etzion, and has taught in Hebrew Schools, synagogues, and groups around Central New Jersey. She has tutored several dozen Bar and Bat Mitzvah students, some of whom have gone on to tutor students of their own. Susan is a founder and gabbait of the Women's Tefillah Group of

Raritan Valley, where she works on education and inclusiveness. She serves on the board of her Modern Orthodox synagogue.

Susan is also a musician, and is the conductor of the Central Jersey chapter of HaZamir, The International Jewish Teen Choir. She lives in Highland Park, New Jersey with her husband, and has three grown children, one in the Washington area, and two in Israel, all working in Jewish education.