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## Parshat Emor: The Importance of Imperfection

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The word "mum," meaning blemish or defect, appears 10 times in the book of *Vayikrah*, all of them in this week's *parsha*, *parshat Emor*. In an effort to demarcate just who can participate in the heights of holiness, and how, the early chapters of the Torah portion call unambiguously for one thing: perfection. There is no room at the top for imperfections of any kind, it seems.

Consider these restrictions on the *kohanim*, the priests:

16 The Lord spoke further to Moses: 17 Speak to Aaron and say: No man of your offspring throughout the ages who has a **defect** shall come near to offer the food of his God. 18 No one at all who has a **defect** shall come near: no man who is blind, or lame, or has a limb too short or too long; 19 no man who has a broken leg or a broken arm; 20 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. 21 No man among the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a **defect** shall come near to offer the Lord's offering by fire; having a **defect**, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. 22 He may eat of the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy; 23 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 the Lord have sanctified them. (Vayikrah 21: 16-23)

טז וַיִּדְבֹר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: יז דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן  
לֵאמֹר אִישׁ מִזֶּרְעֶךָ לְדֹרֹתֶם אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בוֹ מוּם לֹא  
יִקְרַב לְהַקְרִיב לַחֶם אֱלֹהִים: יח כִּי כָל־אִישׁ  
אֲשֶׁר־בוֹ מוּם לֹא יִקְרַב אִישׁ עֹר אוֹ פֶסֶח אוֹ חָרָם  
אוֹ שְׂרוּעַ: יט אוֹ אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־יְהִי בוֹ שִׁבְרַת רֶגֶל אוֹ  
שִׁבְרַת יָד: כ אוֹ־גִבֵן אוֹ־דֶק אוֹ תִבְלַל בְּעֵינָיו אוֹ גָרַב  
אוֹ יִלְפַת אוֹ מְרוּחַ אֲשֶׁר: כא כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־בוֹ מוּם  
מִזֶּרַע אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן לֹא יִגֹּשׁ לְהַקְרִיב אֶת־אֲשֵׁי ה'  
מוּם בוֹ אֶת לֶחֶם אֱלֹהִים לֹא יִגֹּשׁ לְהַקְרִיב: כב לַחֶם  
אֱלֹהִים מִקְדָּשֵׁי הַקֹּדְשִׁים וּמִן־הַקֹּדְשִׁים יֹאכַל: כג  
אך אֶל־הַפְּרֻכָּת לֹא יָבֹא וְאֶל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא יִגֹּשׁ  
כִּי־מוּם בוֹ וְלֹא יַחֲלִל אֶת־מִקְדָּשֵׁי כִּי אֲנִי ה'  
מִקְדָּשָׁם: (ויקרא כא:טז-כג)

The Kohanic class (or at least those in active service) is to be a pristine segment of the chosen, the elect within the elect. With bodies completely intact, functional, and symmetrical, they are to present a face of human perfection before the perfection of God. Moreover, not only are the priests to be blemish-free, but so are their offerings. (See Leviticus 22:17-25.) Perfect people are to bring perfect animals before the perfect God. If these conditions are all upheld, then "ונקדשתי בתוך בני ישראל," then God will be "sanctified in the midst of the Israelite people" (Lev. 22:32).

What a hard, exclusionary, and elitist picture of *kedusha* these texts present. What a painful, deflating, demeaning barometer of holiness they envision. Where is there room for difference, defect, just-plain-human imperfection? How could a compassionate God act so cruelly? Why marginalize those who might already feel marginalized?

Rabbi Avraham Dov of Avritch (1765-1840), a student of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, offers a surprising suggestion in his book, *Bat Ayin*. He writes:

The verse states "[one who] has a defect shall not come near to offer..." (Lev. 21:17). The *gematria* (numerical equivalent) of the word "*mum*" (defect) is "*Elokim*" [the name of God that signifies God's judgement]. [Both equal 86.] This means that any priest who has a defect actually has within him the aspect of *Elokim*, of *din* (judgement), of smallness, of divine hiddenness. [The repetition of the phrase] "Shall not come near" indicates that this kind of priest cannot *bring himself* close to God. His service is not complete until he can cleave to the [other] divine attribute of *chesed* (lovingkindness). (*Sefer Bat Ayin*, Emor)

זהו שאמר הכתוב (ויקרא כא:יז) אשר יהיה בו מום לא יקרב להקריב וגו' מום גימטריא אלקים. פירוש כל כהן שיש בו מום בחינת אלהים בחינת דין בחינת קטנות בחינת הסתר פנים כנ"ל, לא יקרב, פירוש זה הכהן לא יוכל להקריב לה', כי אינו בשלמות העבודה עד שידבק את עצמו במדת החסד כנ"ל: (ספר בת עין על פרשת אמור)

In other words, rather than viewing our verses above as an objective litany of physical defects that render a person unfit to serve God, see them as an array of human conditions that, subjectively, make "coming close" ("*lo yikrav*") to God hard--hard because suffering human beings become consumed with *din*, with 'why me?', with the (in)justice of the world, and the unfairness of their/our bodies. If a "*mum*" is not an anathema to God, but is rather an aspect of God (*Elokim*), then the Torah is not saying to the imperfect among us, "Stay away because you are unworthy." Rather, "Take time until you can come to know the fullness of God, that mysterious interplay between *din* and *chesed*." Exclusion from the heights of the holy is not a prescription, but a description of an inner state of alienation.

On this view, isolation of the blemished is not a cruel act, but a kind one. The God of perfection grants us permission to wrestle honestly with our imperfections, to own them and all of their spiritual weight. Do not pretend to come close when you cannot, intimate the verses. Do not step into a role that you cannot possibly inhabit authentically. Do not take on the mantle of divine intimacy when you are in the shadow of divine distance.

Echoing the harsh *pshat* of our verses, toward the end of the Torah itself, we find the following condemnation:

They have acted corruptly toward Him, they are not His children because of their defect; But are a perverse and crooked generation. (Deuteronomy 32:5) שחת לו לא בניו מומם דור עקש ופתלתל: (דברים לב:ה)

The Jewish people as a whole, not only priests, are summarily dismissed on account of their blemishes, it seems. And yet, the *midrash*, in the name of Rabbi Meir, refuses this read.

Even though they are full of imperfections, they are still God's children. As the verse says [parsed differently] "Have they destroyed Him? No. His children are imperfect." These are the words of Rabbi Meir. (Sifri, Haazinu, 3) שחת לו לא בניו מומם. (קידושין לו) אע"פ שהם מלאים מומי קרוי בנים שנא' שחת לו לא בניו מומם דברי ר' מאיר (ספרי, האזינו פרשה ג).

Rabbi Meir insisted, much like the *Bat Ayin* later would, that the apex of holiness cannot be characterized by exclusion, but must be consumed with tenacious love. No matter how imperfect we are, we are the children of God. No matter how defective we might feel, we can overcome divine distance. But *parshat Emor* subtly reminds us that we ought not leap over the process; that we ought to sit with our imperfections, feel permission to experience spiritual alienation, and maybe find a way in and through our defects toward balance and toward holiness.



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