

The Problem with Perfection

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Shabbat shalom

It is a pleasure to be here at Darkhei Noam and to share this Shabbat with all of you.

My Netanel who is 8 years old informed me a number of months ago that he is a member of a persecuted minority. He is left-handed. Discrimination is rampant, according to Netanel. In addition to the obvious, scissors, golf clubs, spiral notebooks, the gas and brake pedals (which he doesn't know about yet), Netanel has noticed something that had escaped the notice of his left-handed mother, his left-handed father, and his left-handed older brother. Netanel claims that picture books more often have the pictures on the right hand page than on the left hand page. In Netanel's opinion, publishers, authors and illustrators of children's books should be focusing on a more equitable distribution of pictures, dividing them evenly on the left hand and right hand sides of the pages, so that left-handed children do not feel bad. You go, boy! A feminist's child taking the battle one step further!

Now this is no trivial battle. For Netanel is not only blessedly different in his left-handedness, he is a child with other differences as well. He is different than his classmates because he is an observant Jew. And he is different than the other 8 year old boys in our community because he does not attend the local yeshiva day school but instead spends almost 3 hours on the bus everyday to attend a wonderful special ed. school on the East Side of Manhattan. Netanel is keenly aware of these differences and quite sensitive to their implications.

I often wish I could live in Netanel's ideal world. It is a world governed by a fine sense of right and wrong; a world in which no one is the underdog, presidents are elected because of their kindness and their care for the environment, and where the good guys win not by dint of their muscles and weaponry but because they are on the side of that which is good and just. It is a world governed by the maxim *ואהבתם את הגר כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים* – And you shall love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Our world, the real world, where my sons need to learn to manage is often very different. When I look at our world through my sons' eyes I think of the left-handed kohen. Now this southpaw kohen does not make an appearance in our Torah portion, but according to Tractate Bekhorot he is lurking nearby.

Our parsha this morning, Parshat Emor, is a struggle for me year after year but now, given my sons' challenges, with even greater poignancy. Let us grant, and as a feminist it is really hard for me to grant this, that as the Torah was speaking to a patriarchal society, it is not all that surprising that the priesthood is hereditary and passed from Aharon only to his sons and grandsons after him; daughters are never

בנות כהנים only כהנים. I might even accept that there would be particular strictures placed upon those who were called לשרת בקדש – to serve in God's sanctuary necessitating greater distancing from death and its ensuing state of טומאה.

After all, the Torah uses the root קדש 7 times at the beginning of our parsha to capture the special status of the כהן.

We are told:

וקדשתו כי את לחם אלקיך הוא מקריב, קדש יהיה לך, כי קדוש, אני ה' מקדשכם
And you shall sanctify him for he brings close the food of your God, he shall be holy to you, for I, God, who sanctify you am holy.

What I cannot understand is how this increased need for קדושה translates into a rejection of those male descendents of Aharon whose physical, often superficial differences make them stand out.

(טז) וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר: (יז) דבר אל אהרן לאמר איש מזרעך לדרתם אשר יהיה בו מום לא יקרב להקריב לחם אלקיו:

And God spoke to Moshe saying. Speak to Aharon saying: A man from among your seed for all generations who has a מום, usually translated as a blemish, may not approach to offer the food of his God.

(כא) כל איש אשר בו מום מזרע אהרן הכהן לא יגש להקריב את אשי ה' מום בו את לחם אלקיו לא יגש להקריב:

Any man that has a מום from the seed of Aharon the priest may not approach to offer the fire offerings of God, there is a מום in him, God's bread he may not approach to offer.

And again:

(כג) אך אל הפרכת לא יבא ואל המזבח לא יגש כי מום בו ולא יחלל את מקדשי כי אני ה' מקדשם:
He may not come to the פרכת and he may not approach the altar for there is a מום in him so that he not desecrate my sanctuary for I am God who has sanctified them.

In המקדש, the Rambam lists 142 separate categories of מומין. There are מומין that disqualify both kohanim from serving and animals from being brought as sacrifices – there are 50 of those; מומין that disqualify kohanim alone – there are 90 of these, and two additional ones which do not invalidate the service done by a kohen possessing one of them but they don't look good. The vast majority of these מומין concern physical appearance. And oh yes, lefties need not apply. As the braitta in Bekhorot 45b states:

ת"ר איטר בין ביד בין ברגל פסול. השולט בשתי ידיו רבי פוסל וחכמים מכשירין.
Our Rabbis taught – one who is left-handed or left-footed is invalid to do the service. One who is ambidextrous, Rabbi invalidated but the Sages declared him fit.

Why is the lefty invalid?

Rashi explains:

איטר ברגל - שכשמהלך עוקר רגל השמאל תחלה מה שאין דרך בני אדם.

Left-footed? When he walks he lifts up his left leg first which is not the normal manner of people.

So what's wrong with lefties? Simply, most people are righties so lefties deviate from the norm. That's it. And this is sufficient to invalidate a kohen from doing the service!

It's not that I don't understand this at all; I do. There is a great deal of pomp and circumstance in the משכן. Back at the end of ספר שמות we were told of the large quantities of gold used to construct the holy vessels of this structure. The משכן itself, built of wooden boards was covered by brocaded curtains so that only the curtains and the silver sockets underneath were visible.

Kohanim too are vessels; in many ways no different than the menorah or the שלחן or the מזבח. And like the structure of the משכן and the כלים inside, these living vessels demand symmetry, evenly matched kohanim, indistinguishable, like the 6 arms of the menorah or the 12 trays of the שלחן. But this aesthetic, when it comes to the human כלי קדש is pricey; it requires rejection.

As we read through the list of מומין disqualifying kohanim from the עבודה and the list of מומין disqualifying animals from being brought as sacrifices, we are struck by the overwhelming similarity of these lists but there is an important difference I want to focus on. There is a term that appears a number of times in the section of animal blemishes but does not appear in the kohen's list. We are told that the animal needs to be תמים, usually translated as perfect, both in verse 19 and again in verse 21.

Here in verse 21, the Torah states:

(בא) ואיש כי יקריב זבח שלמים לה' לפלא נדר או לנדבה בבקר או בצאן תמים יהיה לרצון כל מום לא יהיה בו:

And if a man brings a peace-offering to God to fulfill a vow or donation, from cattle or sheep, it shall be perfect to be accepted, it may not have any blemish in it.

The word תמים is absent from the section dealing with human מומים; only the sacrificial animal is described as תמים. With all the emphasis on the disqualifying מומין the kohen is still not mandated to be תמים. I would like to argue that תמים does not mean to be without מום and then when it comes to human beings and our service of God, we are asked to be תמים but תמים means something different.

Where else does the Torah use the term תמים?

The Torah uses תמים aside from animal sacrifices in 3 different places.

1. Noah is described as נח את האלקים התהלך נח. Noah was a righteous man, תמים in his ways, Noah walked with God.

2. God says to Avram right before God changes Avram's and Sarai's names and commands Avraham to circumcise himself and the males of his household:

(א) ויהי אברם בן תשעים שנה ותשע שנים וירא ה' אל אברם ויאמר אליו אני קל שקי התהלך לפני והיה תמים

And Avram was 99 years old and God appeared to Avram and said to him: I am the Lord Sha-d-d-ai, walk before me and be תמים.

3. After prohibiting us from consulting the various soothsayers and practitioners of witchcraft, we are told in the 18th chapter of the book of Devarim: 'תמים תהיה עם ה' אלקיך: Be תמים with the Lord your God.

So what does it mean to be תמים in one's devotion or service to God?

Ramban, connecting the passage in Devarim to God's command to Avraham tells us that it means to believe in God alone as Omnipotent.

I would emphasize a little differently here - to believe in God's perfection and God's alone. We humans are not perfect beings, we have our flaws, the things that we cannot do as well as the potentials that each one of us contains. We are to seek perfection in God alone.

In our communal life, in our schools, in our shuls, we are to be Godlike, not in a vain pursuit of perfection but in imitating God's qualities: 'כי האדם יראה לעיניו וה' יראה ללבב Humans see to the eyes, God sees the heart. We need to see beyond what our eyes sees and to see into the heart, the preciousness of each soul. When we look at each other we need to remember חביב אדם שנברא בצלם – how precious is the human being who has been created in the image of God.

Our service of God and our life as a community is enriched when we embrace all of our varieties. Perfection and flawlessness is for animals being brought upon the מזבח. We need to serve God in all our particulars and only then can we form a community that can do God's will בלבב שלם with a whole heart.

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