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The Blemished Kohen

Rabbi Alex Hecht

In enumerating the detailed laws and restrictions of the kohanim, the Torah warns that kohanim with certain physical abnormalities may not perform the priestly service: “The food of his G-d from the most holy and from the holy he may eat. But he shall not come to the Curtain, and he shall not approach the Altar, for he has a blemish; and he shall not desecrate my sacred offerings.” (Vayikra 21:22-23, Artscroll tr.)

Why should a kohen, who may possess outstanding personal qualities, be prevented from serving because he has certain physical blemishes? Is this law not offensive to individuals whose physical flaws are congenital or born of illness or injury, as well as to a Torah which emphasizes looking beyond the physical (Samuel I 16:7)? What motivates the search for physical perfection in a kohen?

Spiritual Perfection

Rabbi Ephraim Luntschitz suggests that a kohen’s physical blemish may be reflective of a spiritual deficiency. He notes that the Torah says, “a blemish **in him**,” indicating that the blemish the Torah is **primarily** concerned about is internal. (Kli Yakar to Vayikra 21:17)

Respect for G-d

Rashi (Vayikra 21:18) comments that just as it is disrespectful to bring a blemished animal as an offering to G-d, it is similarly inappropriate for a person with a physical blemish to present an offering. He cites G-d’s displeasure expressed by the prophet Malachi: “And when you present a

lame or sick [animal], is nothing wrong? Present it, if you please, to your governor: Would he be pleased with you or show you favour?” (Malachi 1:8, Artscroll tr.) In this understanding, all elements of the sacrificial service, including the one performing it, must be aesthetically pleasing in order to properly honour G-d.

Respect for the Kohen

Sefer haChinuch (Mitzvah 275) understands this prohibition as not necessarily relating to the honour of G-d, nor to spiritual shortcomings, but to the perceptions of other people. Since it is human nature to be drawn to people and things that are aesthetically pleasing, it is necessary that the messenger of the people upon whom **their** atonement depends earns **their** favour and appreciation. Conversely, if the messenger of the people is of unusual appearance, people are likely to have less reverence for the service and position.

Respect for the Sanctuary

Rambam notes that since most people are unable to estimate man by his true [internal] essence, it is necessary for the external aspects of the service - the building, the kohanim, and their garments - to be attractive, so that people will have proper awe. (Moreh Nevuchim 3:45)

While these explanations help to understand the Torah’s exclusion of kohanim with physical flaws, the latter three seem quite superficial. Can we accurately judge a person’s character based on his external appearance? While offering an animal with a blemish

may reflect apathy, a blemish in a person does not demonstrate a lack of devotion! Should the sight of an unusual looking person really compromise our awe of the service in the Beit haMikdash?

Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Bloch explains that the reason a blemished kohen is barred from performing the service is not because he is undesirable to G-d in any way. Rather, the Torah’s law reflects the reality of human nature. Unfortunately, people are superficial, and tend to judge negatively, or be distracted by, those who look different. Even though this outlook is not ideal, the Torah does not command us to deny our emotions and pretend that they do not exist. (Peninei Da’at al haTorah, Vol. II, pp. 45-47)

Therefore, the Torah instructs us to give the service in the Beit haMikdash proper reverence from **our** perspective. Indeed, korbanot more broadly are understood to be primarily about influencing **us**, as opposed to giving anything to G-d, who lacks nothing. The Sefer haChinuch (Mitzvah 95) notes that korbanot are meant to be experiential and evoke feelings of regret, repentance or gratitude, which a person may not always reach on his own. Consequently, we are required to ensure that this experience is achieved on both an internal and external level.

[For other perspectives on this topic, see [Our Blemished Selves \(Emor 5771\)](#); [The Blemished Kohen \(Emor 5773\)](#); [Do We Believe in Inclusion? \(Emor 5775\)](#); [Only G-d is Unblemished \(Emor 5776\)](#).]

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Summary

This chapter is the final one in the Gideon saga. In the aftermath of the miraculous battle from the previous chapter, the people of Ephraim are angry with Gideon for not calling them into the fight with Midian (he had instead fought with only 300 select soldiers, as G-d instructed). Gideon responds by extolling the greatness of Ephraim's soldiers and noting that G-d had given the Midianite commanders Ze'ev and Orev over to Ephraim's hands.

After this Gideon crosses the Jordan in pursuit of Zevach and Tzalmuna, the kings of Midian. With his troops exhausted, he stops in the Israelite city of Sukkot to ask for provisions. The people in Sukkot doubt his chances of victory, and refuse to help. Gideon promises the people of Sukkot that once G-d has helped him defeat Midian, he will thresh their flesh with thorns and thistles. Gideon tries again in the city of Penuel, receiving the same response. This time Gideon promises to destroy the tower of Penuel.

Gideon and this army then track down the Midianite army, which is quickly defeated. Zevach and Tzalmuna are

captured. Gideon carries out his promise to elders of Sukkot, and then destroys the tower of Penuel and kills the inhabitants of the city. This is followed by the execution of Zevach and Tzalmuna themselves.

Once the war is over the Israelites ask Gideon to become their king and have his descendants rule over them. Gideon refuses, stating that only G-d will rule over the Jews. He then makes a golden garment from the nose rings of all the Midianite soldiers, and he features it in his home town of Ophrah. The garment is a testament to the sheer number of Midianite soldiers who had been defeated. (Rashi) The land is quiet for many years. After Gideon's death, the Jews return to the idolatrous service of Ba'al and do great disservice to Gideon's family, as the following chapter will make clear.

Insight

The consistent refrain in this chapter is the inability of the people interacting with Gideon to understand that G-d is the One who is saving them. The people of Ephraim are angry that they were not invited to fight in the war; Gideon responds that it was G-d who subdued the Midianites. The people of

Sukkot and Penuel cannot see how Gideon and his army could possibly prevail against Midian, to the point that they feared helping their fellow Jews for fear of Midianite retribution. Gideon responds that G-d will help to defeat Midian. After the war, the Jews view the victory as owing to Gideon's strength and ask him to become king. Once again, Gideon must repeat that the war was won by G-d and therefore He is the ruler.

This issue is never resolved. After Gideon's death, the Jews go straight back to idol worship. They never get the message that G-d and Gideon were telling them.

This raises a question in our own lives. Are there times when G-d's providence is staring us in the face and we cannot or do not want to recognize it?

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Law of the Land: Racism?**Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner**

In the early years of the State of Israel, there was much discussion among the political leadership about enabling the aliyah of Ethiopians who claimed Jewish heritage. In 1953, the Jewish Agency began sending rabbis to Ethiopia to teach Jewish tradition and practice, opening special schools to prepare the anticipated *olim*. However, in 1957 the Jewish Agency closed the schools, and the initiative for aliyah came to an abrupt halt.

One reason for the change in policy was a ruling by Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yitzchak haLevi Herzog (later published in *Techumin* 8), calling into serious question the Jewish status of the Ethiopians. A second reason was government concern for the country's ability to support needy *olim*. (Dr. Avi Pickar, *The Beginning of Selective Aliyah in the 1950's*) A third issue involved political concern surrounding Israel's relationship with the Ethiopian government. However, beyond these factors, it was alleged that a major obstacle to Ethiopian aliyah was racism. (Meital Regev, *From Policy of Suspend to Policy of Immigration: The Israeli Policy towards the Ethiopian Jews 1948-1984*, <http://bit.ly/2E749wU>) Allegations of institutional racism have surfaced over the years since then regarding government policy toward Ethiopian *olim*, and in recent years regarding would-be refugees from Sudan.

From a halachic perspective, racism can never be a basis for government policy. Halachah does draw distinctions between Jewish and non-Jewish populations, and between non-Jews who accept the Noachide laws and those who don't. However, this is based on a religious relationship with G-d, and not on ethnicity. To quote Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, "It must be

conceded that the Torah recognizes a distinction between a Jew and a non-Jew. This distinction, however, is not based upon race, origin, or color, but rather upon *k'dushah*, the holiness endowed by having been given and having accepted the Torah. Furthermore, the distinction between Jew and non-Jew does not involve any concept of inferiority but is based primarily upon the unique and special burdens that are incumbent upon the Jews." (*Civil Rights and the Dignity of Man*, Logic of the Heart, Logic of the Mind) Similarly, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein wrote in a published letter, "And I was very pained to hear that there are such people in Israel who refrain from drawing near [the Ethiopians] in spiritual matters, causing them – G-d forbid – to be lost from Judaism. It appears to me that they do this only because their skin is black. It is obvious that one must draw them close, not only because they are no worse than other Jews and there is no legal distinction due to their blackness..."

This perspective was echoed in a 1972 article by Rabbi J. David Bleich regarding Ethiopians and "Black Jews". He wrote, "Judaism is color blind; skin pigmentation is unknown as a halachic concept. The problem of determining the status of the various communities of Black Jews is totally unrelated to color. The sole issue is that of Jewish identity." (*Black Jews: A Halachic Perspective*, Tradition 15) In a fully functioning halachic state – or any Jewish organization – race may never be permitted to determine policy.

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Biography
Rabbi Baruch HaLevi
Epstein
Rabbi Dovid Zirkind

Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein (1860-1941) was raised in the city of Novarodok where his father, Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, author of the Aruch HaShulchan, served as Rabbi. After his marriage, Rabbi Epstein moved to Pinsk, a small city in the southern region of Belarus, where he spent most of his life. He was known for his photographic memory, and he studied in the Volozhin Yeshiva under his uncle Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (The Netziv).

During the First World War the city of Pinsk suffered tremendous financial challenges, and Rabbi Epstein used that time to focus on authoring his memoirs. The product of that labour was his epic *Mekor Baruch*, four volumes of over two thousand pages. The work focuses on a candid portrait of his own life and the life of his illustrious family.

While living in Pinsk, Rabbi Epstein was not involved in the Rabbinate; he worked as a bookkeeper by profession. He did, however, make one trip to the United States, from 1923-1926, where he searched unsuccessfully for a rabbinic position. During that trip he served as the first Director of Ezras Torah, a charitable organization founded primarily to assist European Orthodox Jewry during the war. He was succeeded by Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, who headed the organization until 1973.

In addition to his memoirs and a number of other books, Rabbi Epstein's magnum opus was his *Torah Temimah*. Literally meaning "Complete Torah", Rabbi Epstein compiled in this work selections of the oral tradition of rabbinic literature in conjunction with their sources in Chumash, allowing the reader to look simultaneously at a given verse and the messages drawn from it. Moreover, Rabbi Epstein added his own notes to those traditions, highlighting the connections to the verses and adding his own insights to the already illuminating statements of our sages.

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Torah and Translation
Biblical Rounding
R' Baruch haLevi Epstein, Torah Temimah to Vayikra 23:16
Translated by Ezer Diena

ובתוס' מנחות סה: "כתוב" טרוחו הרבה בטעם הדבר שאנו סופרים רק מ"ט יום, וכתבו דפי' הכתוב עד ממחרת השבת שהוא יום החמשים תספרו, אי נמי "חמשים יום" א"ו הקרבתם" דבתר הכי קאי, יעוי"ש, ותמה אני שלא הביאו דרשה זו מתו"כ.

ועיין ברא"ש סוף פסחים סי' מ' כתב טעם על שאנו סופרים רק מ"ט יום אע"פ שבפסוק כתיב "חמשים יום", משום דדרך הכתוב כשמגיע המנין לסכום עשיריות פחות אחת מונה אותו במספר עשיריות ואינו משגיח על חסרון האחד, וכן הכא אע"פ דאינם רק מ"ט כדכתיב "שבעה שבועות" בכ"ז תפס הכתוב מספר שלם חמשים, וכן "ארבעים יכנו" שבמלקות אע"פ שאינם רק ל"ט, וכיוצא בזה הפסוק (פי' ויגש) "כל הנפש לבית יעקב הבאה מצרימה שבעים", אע"פ שבפרטם הם רק ס"ט, עכ"ל.

ויש להעיר בדבריו, שהרי בב"ב קכג: ביארו דהמספר שבעים נפש הוא מצומצם ממש, יעוי"ש, [והעיר על זה בק"נ]. וכן יש להעיר בעיקר כללו זה מתענית כט. שדרשו הפ' דפ' שלח "וישובו מתור הארץ מקץ ארבעים יום", ופריך "הני ארבעים נכי חד הוויין", ולמה דכילל הרא"ש הלא לא קשה מידי, שתפס הכתוב מספר שלם בעשיריות, וכן בקדושין לח. עה"פ "את המן אכלו ארבעים שנה", ופריך והלא ארבעים שנה חסר שלשים יום אכלו, ומאי קושיא... וצ"ע.

rounded to tens! So too, in Kiddushin 38a, on the verse, "And they ate the manna for forty years," and they ask, "But it was forty years minus thirty days that they ate!" And what would be the question [according to the Rosh]?... This requires study.

[Rabbi Epstein is commenting on a midrash (Torat Kohanim to Vayikra 23:16), which explains that based on the conflict of two passages describing the counting of the omer as "7 full weeks" (Vayikra 23:15) and "50 days" (ibid. 23:16), we learn that we count 49 days and sanctify the 50th.]

Tosafot (Menachot 65b, s.v. *katuv*) toiled to find a reason why we count only 49 days [if the verse states 50], and they wrote that the verse should be explained as "until the morrow [of the 7th full week], which is the 50th day, one should count [the omer]." (Vayikra 13:16) Alternatively, [they explain that] the 50th day refers to bringing [the offering], which [is brought on the day] after [the counting of the omer is completed], see there. I am astounded that they did not bring the explanation from Torat Kohanim.

See Rabbeinu Asher (Rosh, Pesachim 10:40), who wrote that the reason that we count only 49 days when the verse explicitly states 50 days is because it is the way of the Torah that when it reaches a count which is close to a multiple of tens, but one below, it counts it as the [round number], and does not account for the lacking one. So here, even though there are only 49 days [that we count], as it is written, "seven weeks" (Vayikra 23:15), nevertheless, the verse chose the round number of 50. [This is also the case] with "40 shall he be hit" (Devarim 25:3) in regards to lashes, even though there are only 39, and similarly, the verse, "all of the souls of Yaakov's family which came to Egypt were 70" (Bereishit 46:27), even though there were only 69 if counted exactly.

It should be noted on his words, that in Bava Batra 123b, [the Sages] explained that this number 70 is exact; see there, and the Korban Netanel (to Rosh Pesachim 10:40, note 3) already noted this. It should also be noted in general about this rule from Taanit 29a, which expounded upon the verse, "And they returned from exploring the land at the end of forty days" (Bamidbar 13:25), and the Talmud asks, "But there were truly 39!" However, according to the conclusion of the Rosh, it should not be a question at all, as the verse simply used the number

Judaism's parent-child relationship is not a one-way street; parents are obligated to look after the welfare of their children in a variety of ways, including, "to circumcise him, redeem him, teach him Torah, marry him off and teach him a trade. Some add: to teach him to swim." (Kiddushin 29a) [Some of these apply only for fathers and sons.] All of these duties may involve hiring professionals to accomplish these tasks. Separately, a father is obligated to provide financial support for his children up to the normal age of independence. (Ketuvot 65b)

However, these obligations are framed not as parental fulfillment of the child's rights, but as personal religious

obligations of the parents as part of their relationship with G-d. In one example of this, Jewish law obligates a father to train his son in the mitzvah of tefillin, which includes purchasing tefillin for the son who matures to the point of learning how to don them. (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 37:3) However, a son cannot sue his father in beit din for tefillin; if the son reaches adulthood, such that he is now obligated to don tefillin, and the father has not purchased a set, then the son is obligated to purchase his own. (Biur Halachah ibid.) The father's duty was to G-d, not to the child.

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Weekly Highlights: May 18 – May 24 / 13 Iyar – 19 Iyar

Time	Speaker	Topic	Location	Special Notes
Shabbat May 17-18				
10:30 AM	R' Alex Hecht	Post-Hashkamah Parshah	Clanton Park	
Before Avot	Ezer Diena	Daf Yomi	BAYT	Rabbi's Classroom
After minchah	R' Mordechai Torczyner	Gemara Avodah Zarah	BAYT	Simcha Suite
Sun. May 19				
9:15 AM Breakfast 9:40 AM Learning 10:30 AM Shiur	R' Mordechai Torczyner	Victoria Day Weekend Yarchei Kallah Civil Marriage in Halachah	Yeshivat Or Chaim	Please RSVP at www.torontotorah.com/yk or info@torontotorah.com
Tue. May 21				
1:30 PM	R' Mordechai Torczyner	Yeshayah: Chapters 18-19	Shaarei Shomayim	
7:30 PM	R' Mordechai Torczyner	The Book of Shoftim	129 Theodore Pl.	Men
Wed. May 22				
6:00/8:20 AM	Ezer Diena	Daf Yomi	BAYT	Rabbi's Classroom
10:00 AM	R' Mordechai Torczyner	Leading Anti-Semites 3: Empress Maria Theresa	Beth Emeth	Fee; register at torontotorah.com/anti
12:30 PM	R' Mordechai Torczyner	The Ethical Challenge 2: Amazon HQ2 & Tax Breaks	Zeifmans LLP 201 Bridgeland Ave.	Lunch served; RSVP rk@zeifmans.ca
7:30 PM	Ezer Diena	Leisure in Halachah 2: Music: Sefirah and All Year	BAYT	Rabbi's Classroom
7:30 PM	R' Alex Hecht	Non-Jews in Jewish Law	Shaarei Tefillah	
Thu. May 23				
1:30 PM	R' Mordechai Torczyner	Shemuel: Chapter 10	49 Michael Ct.	Women
8:30 PM	Ezer Diena	Gemara Beitzah	ediena@torontotorah.com	Men, Advanced
Fri. May 24				
8:00 AM Shacharit Breakfast, Program	"Some Strings Attached" Father-Son Breakfast and Learning Program For Middle School Boys at Netivot haTorah's North Campus			
10:30 AM	R' Elihu Abbe	Kiddushin	Yeshivat Or Chaim	Advanced
<p><u>For University Men, at Yeshivat Or Chaim</u> 9:30 AM Sunday, R' Aaron Greenberg, Gemara Shabbat—Note special time this week 11:00 AM Sunday, Beit Midrash Rotation: Contemporary Halachah: Not this week 8:30 AM Tuesday, Ezer Diena, Stories and She'eilot—Note special day this week 8:30 AM Friday, R' Mordechai Torczyner, Parshah</p>				
<p><u>WOMEN'S BEIT MIDRASH for University and Adult Women, at Ulpanat Orot, with Mrs. Eliana Abbe</u> 9:30 AM Tuesdays: Sefer Devarim, 9:30 AM Thursdays: Tefillah</p>				
<p><u>Seder Boker for Adult Men</u> 10:00 AM to Noon, Monday/Wednesday - R' Moshe Yeres: Masechet Megilah and Eim haBanim Semeichah 10:00 AM to Noon, Tuesday/Thursday - R' Moshe Yeres: Parshanut on Parshah and Pninei Halachah</p>				