

Here are the laws that bar the disabled from the priesthood:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר אִישׁ מִזֶּרְעֶךָ לְדֹרֹתָם  
אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בּוֹ מוֹם לֹא יִקְרַב לְהִקְרִיב לֶחֶם אֱלֹהֵיוּ... וְלֹא יַחֲלִל אֶת  
מִקְדָּשִׁי כִּי אֲנִי ה' מִקְדָּשִׁם. וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל בָּנָיו וְאֶל כָּל בְּנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל. (ויקרא כא:טז-כד)

*The LORD spoke further to Moses: Speak to Aaron and say: No man of your offspring throughout the generations who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the food of his God. No one at all who has a defect shall be qualified: no man who is blind, or lame, or has a limb too short or too long; no man who has a broken leg or a broken arm; 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. No man among the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the LORD's offering by fire; having a defect, he shall not be qualified to offer the food of his God. He may eat of the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy; 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. Thus Moses spoke to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites. (Lev. 21:16-24)*

Modern readers of the Bible are justifiably troubled by this passage. The unequivocal banning of anyone with a physical disability from serving as a priest offends our moral sensibility. During the last half century, accessibility for the disabled has entered the public consciousness resulting in the passing of the landmark **Americans with Disabilities Act** (1990). More on that below. One strategy for interpreting the biblical laws is to put them in their

context, an era which perceived the integrity of the body, (the male body, to be sure) its wholeness, health, and perfect functionality, as a pre-requisite for admission into the holiest zones. Jacob Milgrom writes that this was normal in the ancient Near East: *One should not be*

*surprised to find that the ancients took pains to compose detailed lists of the blemishes that disqualified their priests and all others (e.g., Mesopotamian diviner) who claimed to have access to the gods. After all, they also required physical perfection for royal attendants<sup>1</sup> and leaders.<sup>2</sup>*

Another interpretive strategy is to read these rules in the context of the sacrificial culture of biblical Israel. Mary Douglas notes that this list of priestly blemishes corresponds with the list of **banned blemished behemot** (animals) (Lev. 22:21-24). She writes: *Only the perfect body is*

*fit to be consecrated, no animal with a blemish may be sacrificed, no priest with a blemished body shall approach the altar.*<sup>3</sup> Each society in antiquity had its own list of banned blemishes. If you traveled deep into Mesopotamia you would discover that other temple cults disqualified priests *who were cross-eyed, had a chipped tooth, a mutilated finger, rashes, freckles, and pimples*. We can accept the view that these rules were part of a cultural context in which the body of a priest had to be "perfect", and that the gods (or God!) needed to be surrounded by perfect, beautiful human specimens. And yet it is possible to give a subversive reading to this text as well. After all, almost everyone has some physical defect or another. How could any community sustain a priesthood based on these laws? Sooner or later, they would run out of people who were eligible to be priests! This issue underlies some of the oldest rabbinic rulings on the subject:

*Rav Huna said: A priest whose eyes are constantly tearing up may not lift his hands to recite the Priestly Benediction. The Gemara asks: Wasn't there a certain priest with this condition in the neighborhood of Rav Huna, who would spread his hands, and recite the Priestly Benediction? The Gemara answers: That priest was a familiar figure in his town. Since the other residents were accustomed to seeing him, he would not draw their attention during the Priestly Benediction. This is also taught in a baraita (a ruling of the Mishnaic era, not included in the Mishna): One whose eyes tear up excessively should not lift his hands to recite the Priestly Benediction, but if he is a familiar figure in his town, he is permitted to do so. Rabbi Yohanan said: One who is blind in one eye may not lift his hands to recite the Priestly Benediction because people will gaze at him. The Gemara asks: Wasn't there a certain priest who was blind in one eye in the neighborhood of Rabbi Yohanan, and he would lift his hands and recite the Priestly Benediction? The Gemara answers: That priest was a familiar figure in his town, and therefore he would not attract attention during the Priestly Benediction. This is also taught in a baraita: One who is blind in one eye may not lift his hands and recite the Priestly Benediction, but if he is a familiar figure in his town, he is permitted to do so. We learned in the mishna that Rabbi Yehuda said: One whose hands are spotted should not lift his hands to recite the Priestly Benediction. It was taught in a baraita: If most of the townspeople are engaged in this occupation, dyeing (which causes stains on the hands), he is permitted to recite the Priestly Benediction, as the congregation will not pay attention to his spotted hands. (Megillah 24b:9-14)*



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<sup>1</sup> Daniel was eligible to serve in the court of Nebuchadnezzar because he was a youth **without blemish, handsome, proficient in all wisdom, knowledgeable and intelligent** (Dan. 1:4). Absalom is similarly described: **No one in all Israel was so admired for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head he was without blemish.** (2 Sam. 14:25).

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Milgrom, **Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics**, Continental Commentary, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004. p. 261.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Douglas, **Leviticus as Literature**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. p. 46.

*For six days, you are to serve, and are to make all your work, but the seventh day is Sabbath for the Lord your God: you are not to make any work, you, and your son, and your daughter, **your slave, and your maid**, and your beast, and your sojourner who is within your gates.*  
(Exod. 20:9-10)

*You are to bear in mind that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, but the Lord your God took you out from there with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commands you to observe the day of the Sabbath. (Deut. 5:15).*

*Likewise, the laws baning blemishes subvert the idea of the priestly "perfect body".* For example: 1. By saying **לְדֹרֹתָם**-*throughout their generations* as opposed to **לְעוֹלָם**-*for eternity* (curiously omitted here) the text opens up the possibility for these laws can be applied differently in different generations. 2. When the law says **מוֹם**-*blemish* it automatically raises the question, what constitutes a **מוֹם**? Are we limited to this list? 3. Other ritual laws in the Torah have consequences if they are violated. Why are there no consequences listed here for violating these laws? 4. Many laws in the Torah conclude with the divine signature, **אֲנִי ה' -I am the Lord**. But here these laws end with **כִּי אֲנִי ה' -for I the Lord have sanctified them**. A subtlety to be sure, but there is a difference in saying, *These are the rules! Signed, God*, and *These are the rules of being holy because I, God, am the one who makes you holy*.

**בצלמנו-נעשה אדם-Let us make humankind, in our image?**

Which brings us back to the ADA. After the end of

Recently an extraordinary music video was released showing people who were wounded on or after October 7th. It is entitled: ***BASOF ANI MAGEN DAVID - Ultimately I am a Shield of David.*** We see each of them in scenes of rehabilitation, with and without their prosthetics, trying to engage in regular activity, carpentry, farming, basketball, and swimming. With pain and struggle, the beauty of their humanity shines through. They truly redefine our idea of what is beautiful and who is holy.

**This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by the  
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