

## Parshas Emor (Reprinted) – Bernhard Bergman

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### Appearances Count!

Parshas Emor contains laws that, at first sight, appear to sit somewhat uncomfortably alongside contemporary views of political correctness. In an era in which lawmakers bend over backwards to ensure – sometimes to the point of the ridiculous – that people are not discriminated against on almost any ground, our Parsha comes along and tells us that a Kohein with a blemish, including those arising as a result of a deformity or disability, is disqualified from performing the Avodah (the Sacrificial Service).

Of course, we all have an intuitive understanding and appreciation that a man with a broken leg would be ineligible for a national football side (admittedly, certain teams close to home may not notice the difference!) and a man with poor vision is not best suited to open the batting for his country. But a Kohein with a blemish – what did he do wrong? Why shouldn't he be allowed to perform the Avodah?

Rabbi Shimshon Rephoel Hirsch in his commentary on the Chumash<sup>1</sup> addresses this issue. Amongst the reasons he gives is that the Kohein is the intermediary who endeavours to elevate the person bringing the offering to a level of spiritual perfection and G-dliness as represented by the requisite physical perfection demanded of the korban (offering) that is being brought. Just as the korban must be without blemish, so too must be the officiating Kohein. Furthermore, the physical wholeness and completeness of both the korban and the Kohein represent the completeness of the surrender to G-d of the person bringing the offering and the fullness of the life he aspires to gain by drawing near to G-d. The altar exists primarily for life in its completeness, strength and vitality to be consecrated, rather than being a place of refuge for the troubled and less fortunate to beseech consolation and miracles.

The Chinuch (Mitzvoh 275) takes a somewhat different tack. He explains that people will base their assessment of the importance of a person's actions on the extent to which they are impressed by the person performing the act. Consequently, in order for the Avodah to be respected appropriately, the officiating Kohein has to be of beautiful form and deed. Conversely, were the Avodah to be performed by one with less than perfect physical appearance, its esteem would be diminished in the eye of the beholder.

Building on this theme, Rabbi Yissocher Frand (senior lecturer at Yeshivas Ner Yisroel in Baltimore), quoting Rav Elya Meir Bloch (1894-1955, Telshe Rosh Yeshivah) says that, far from the Al-mighty discriminating against people with disabilities, the problem is with us. People, being human, are influenced by their physical surroundings. When one wishes to influence someone, one hires the finest lawyer or lobbyist, impeccably turned out and well-spoken. One does not get any old "schlepper" to argue his case. So too with the Avodah. Hashem says that a Kohein with a blemish should not conduct the Avodah, not because He has anything against such a Kohein, but rather because of the effect it will inevitably have on the onlookers, leading to the denigration of the Avodah. People are influenced by the physical. That which ought not to be a factor – the physical appearance of a human being – inevitably ends up being an influencing factor.

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<sup>1</sup> As translated by D Haberman (Feldheim Publishers).