

Gleaning from Imperfections: Harvesting Community Strength

A Benediction for CBI's 2022 Annual General Meeting

By R. Jess Kerman

This week's Torah's portion is *Emor*, or *say* in Hebrew, and indeed this portion has a lot to say on a wide variety of topics, it's quite eclectic. But it begins by laying out some of the many restrictions and requirements of the *Kohanim*, the priests in the Tabernacle

One of the main tasks for any priest serving in the Tabernacle or Temple is to offer up sacrifices on behalf of individuals and the nation. These sacrifices must be inspected for purity, and if it is an animal, they must be unblemished, seemingly perfect, before they can be offered up to God. Like the sacrifices they oversee, this week's parasha tells us that the priests themselves must also be unblemished in order to perform their priestly duties. Any physical defect disqualifies them from offering up sacrifices to God. Amongst other examples, it specifies that no man who is blind or lame may perform a sacrifice. This exclusion is striking because we read just last week, just one Torah portion away, that we must not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.

So why then does this Torah portion Insist on insulting and placing stumbling blocks?

Why does the portion insist the priests must be unblemished in order to deem our sacrifices unblemished?

Must someone be perfect in order to function as a mediator between human and divine?

While the priests being described in this Torah portion are serving the Israelites in the desert, modern scholars teach us that this section of Torah is most likely written by the priests while exiled in Babylon. Aaron and his sons, the priests in *Emor*, have a monopoly on the temple-cult needs of Israelites in the desert, but the priests of the 5th and 6th century are competing with other temple cults, vying for power. Their authority is in question, so their perfection is emphasized to command control and power.

But this perfection isn't real. The priests of the Temple had to struggle with the illusion of perfection, and the reality of their blemishes.

Just before we receive the 10 commandments and the rest of the words of the Torah, we are commanded to be a nation of priests. I might be the rabbi, but we all are priests, and we all have the responsibility and the blessing of mediating between human and divine.

But if I look at the world around me, if I look at the people, the planet, our nation, our community, I cannot find something that is unblemished. I think the closer that we look, the

more imperfections we can find. As Rabbi Shefa Gold teaches in her book, Torah Journeys, “everything and everyone is in process. We're all searching for balance in a world that is in flux. We're all flawed...This is the paradox of *Emor*: I and everything that I offer is likewise flawed, marked with the limitations of my particular perspective and prejudice.” (124)

Over these past two years, I think we can feel that flux more than ever. We're all in the process of figuring out the new normal, and all the flaws in our systems have been tripping us up. Nevertheless, we as a community have risen and will continue to rise to the challenge. We thrive as a community not despite our imperfections, but because of them.

I hope that you'll join me in sharing appreciation and deriving inspiration from the folks who dedicate themselves to making Jewish life happen in Charlottesville.

Later in the parasha, God tells Moses to instruct the Israelites about several of our sacred occasions. We receive instruction about Shabbat, Yom Kippur, and what we know as Rosh HaShanah. We're taught about Pesach and the required *omer*, the first harvest of our grain crops. We're told about the *bikkurim*, the first fruits we are to offer with Shavuot, And the *p'ri eitz hadar*, the beautiful fruit, branches, and boughs we are to assemble for Sukkot.

Like our Torah portion this week, this evening we are going to outline the gleanings of what we have planted over the last year and celebrate all that we have harvested together as a community. This is our chance to honor those who have nourished us, give thanks to the paradoxical flux that has pushed us to process and grow, and dream about what crops we'd like to plant for next year.

I'd like to conclude by inviting you to join me in reciting the *shehecheyanu*, a prayer that we recite when doing something for the first time in a year and to acknowledge our gratefulness for having arrived at this time. Let us bless the efforts that have allowed us to flourish this year and continue to gather as a vibrant, caring, and holy community.

Barukh Ata Adonay, Eloheinu Melech Ha-olam Shehecheyanu, v'kiymanu, v'higiyanu la-zman ha-zeh.