



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



FINDING A MODEL OF INCLUSION IN THE TALMUD

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I. Introduction

- A. There are a number of text studies available from the Ruderman Synagogue Inclusion Project designed to teach us about Jewish approaches to disability in general as well as Jewish approaches to particular disabilities.
- B. This advanced study is a modified version of a popular workshop offered by Capitalizability, LLC. It is a little different because allows us to explore a Talmudic justification and roots for the idea of inclusion that both Capitalizability and RSIP use to guide their efforts to increase participation of people with disabilities.
- C. The basic concept of universal inclusion is that, if we prepare our communities to welcome people who have barriers to being welcome, we are thus able to allow and to benefit from – their full participation in our world. Importantly, it doesn't really matter if these barriers are recognized as being disability-related or not. The point is that we have the ability to include.
- D. The point of this lesson is to explore the idea that this Talmudic passage actually makes this point, bound up as it is in the worldview of the time and a group that felt constrained to meet requirements and to get things done. Obviously, there are different interpretations of this well-known text, and you should feel free to discuss those together.
- E. This entire text study is built around part of a single page of Gemara, Bavli Megilla 24b, of which we will skip part that is not directly relevant to our discussion.

II. Goals

- A. Understand the rabbinic concerns about inclusion.
- B. Understand the standards that they set up to get around those concerns.
- C. Discern an imperative for our own community in those standards.



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III. A stage is set by a prohibition

A. Mishnah:

“A priest whose hands are deformed should not lift up his hands [to say the priestly blessing]. R. Judah says: also one whose hands are discolored with woad should not lift up his hands, because [this makes] the congregation look at him.”

Gemara:

“A Tanna stated: The deformities which were laid down [as disqualifying] are on the face, the hands, and the feet. R. Joshua b. Levi said: If his hands are spotted, he should not lift up his hands. It has been taught similarly: ‘If his hands are spotted, he should not lift up his hands. If they are curved inwards or bent sideways, he should not lift up his hands.’”

B. Unpacking the source

1. This is a reference to the priestly benediction. As you may know, when this benediction is delivered, it is delivered by the Kohanim, the priestly class, who raise their hands above the congregation.
2. Traditionally, one does not look at the Kohanim. There seems to be a worry that if there was a Kohen or priest whose hands were different, this might cause people to look and distract them from whatever their intent should be during this blessing.
3. Preliminarily, we can see that this issue is not limited to those things that would be classified as disabilities. It includes someone who, for professional reasons, had hands spotted with woad, a type of dye.

C. Questions

1. What do we think about the fact that this provision is based on distraction?
2. It's not an inclusive way of looking at the world, but wasn't distraction a real concern, especially in the rabbinic world where intent was paramount?

¹ With grateful acknowledgment to Bonnie L. Gracer, MA, MSW, whose article, “What the Rabbis Heard: Deafness in the Mishnah”, published in the spring 2003 volume of *Disability Studies Quarterly*, was invaluable in the identification of these sources. The article can be found at <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/423/593>, and is available there free of charge as of June 27, 2017.



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3. What do we think about the fact that the exact same standard is applied to a person whose hands are stained with dye as those who have, as the text put it, “deformities”?
4. Should we be making distinctions? Why or why not?
5. What does your answer to the previous question tell you about your attitude toward disability?
6. Is disability value neutral? Are stained hands value neutral?
7. Could we perhaps be more inclusive if we focus on the intrinsic good of enabling participation for more people rather than whether certain populations are more less deserving? What do you think?
8. How do we feel about the universal inclusion proposition that says that we seek to include any who experience barriers that we can overcome, rather than to classify them by disability?
9. Does that broad-stroke approach at least seem to work with this section?
10. Here’s something to think about: if a person needs transportation because of a disability that precludes them from driving and another person needs transportation because their car broke down, do we privilege one over the other? Should we?

IV. What makes a difference, different or distracting

A. *“R. Assi said: A priest from Haifa or Beth Shean should not lift up his hands. It has been taught to the same effect: ‘We do not allow to pass before the ark either men from Beth Shean or from Haifa or from Tib’onim, because they pronounce ‘alif’ as ‘ayin’ and ‘ayin as ‘alif’.”*

B. Unpacking the source

1. First, an aside: there’s a lot of fun stuff to learn about here that has nothing to do with inclusion. For anyone that likes Hebrew linguistic games, I encourage you to take some time to think about what happens if you swap alephs for ayins, but that’s not really our topic for today.



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2. The bigger point is this people are being excluded from all the public leadership because they sound funny. Much like someone from the deep South might sound very different from someone from New England, it seems like people from these three cities sound very different from the ways people sound wherever the authors were writing.

C. Questions

1. What do we think about the fact that the rabbis concluded there might be legitimate word confusion? Do we think there's a place for making sure that the public is not confused by their prayer?
2. Bigger question, do we think that "men from Beth Shean or from Haifa or from Tib'onim" sound funny to people that live in those cities? Wouldn't, in fact, someone that came from another city be the person that sounded confusing in that case?
3. Is it really a matter of not being confused by the familiar?

V. The exceptions start to roll

A. *"R. Huna said: A man whose eyes run should not lift up his hands. But was there not one in the neighborhood of R. Huna who used to spread forth his hands? — The townspeople had become accustomed to him. It has been taught to the same effect: 'A man whose eyes run should not lift up his hands, but if the townspeople are accustomed to him, he is permitted'. R. Johanan said: A man blind in one eye should not lift up his hands. But was not there one in the neighborhood of R. Johanan who used to lift up his hands? — The townspeople were accustomed to him. It has been taught to the same effect: 'A man blind in one eye should not lift up his hands, but if the townspeople are accustomed to him, he is permitted.'"*

B. Unpacking the source

1. Here, "running eyes" refers to some sort of distracting disability of the eyes which the rabbis of the Talmud felt disqualified someone from making the priestly benediction.
2. But wait! As soon as they make the rule, they start talking about anecdotal exceptions were the townspeople had become accustomed an individual who was then allowed to proceed.



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3. Then, they give us another blanket rule for people who are blind in one eye, and then immediately create an exception for people to whom the townspeople are accustomed.

C. Questions

1. What do you think they mean by “accustomed”?
2. Is it possible that, if a community has become accustomed, then they will not be distracted, because the familiarity is not distracting?
3. Can we begin to differentiate between the condition and the distraction?
4. Might we even be inching toward a rule that says that it is distracting people that are prohibited, rather than a particular classifiable group?

VI. A closer look at “accustomed”: Can “accustomed” be on the societal rather than individual level?

- A. R. Judah says: A man whose hands are discolored should not lift up his hands. A Tanna stated: If most of the men of the town follow the same occupation, it is permitted.
- B. Unpacking the source
 1. This passage starts with the restatement of our original Mishnah. Think back to our discussion earlier of the idea that someone whose hands are discolored should also not give the benediction, which we used to inform our equating of barriers from disability with barriers from other sources
 2. But then we learned that an unnamed Sage (a Tanna) has told us that this prohibition does not hold in a town where the profession that caused the spotted hands is widely held.
- C. Questions
 1. Why might spotted hands not disqualify you if your profession widely held? Is it perhaps that you are not distracted if the sight of it is commonplace? Are there other reasons?
 2. Now that we know that the creation of a societal norm around a particular difference removes the prohibition, how does this inform our behavior? Might we think about trying to add a broad array of disabilities and differences into our communal standards so that people are not distracted?



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3. Given that the rabbis prioritize allowing Jewish people to fulfill their Jewish privileges and obligations, don't you think they would've wanted us to utilize the method that they gave us to remove the barrier posed by difference? Isn't that really what we're doing when we say we become accustomed?
4. Is this a better the way described in the example from the previous section, in which you have to become accustomed to individual people?
5. What happens to an individual while they are waiting for the community become accustomed? Do you think they'll stick around?
6. Who loses out?