



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



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A D'VAR TORAH ON PARASHAT EMOR: Healing from Mental Illness, a Personal Story

יז דַּבֵּר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן, לֵאמֹר: אִישׁ מִזֶּרְעֶךָ לְדֹרֹתָם, אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בוֹ מוֹם--לֹא יִקְרַב, לְהִקְרִיב לֶחֶם אֱלֹהֵינוּ.

יח כִּי כָל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-בוֹ מוֹם, לֹא יִקְרַב: אִישׁ עֵוֶר אוֹ פֶּסֶחַ, אוֹ תֶרֶם אוֹ שָׂרוּעַ.

יט אוֹ אִישׁ, אֲשֶׁר-יִהְיֶה בוֹ שֶׁבֶר רֶגֶל, אוֹ, שֶׁבֶר יָד.

כ אוֹ-גִבֵּן אוֹ-דֵק, אוֹ תִבְלֵל בְּעֵינָיו, אוֹ גֵרֵב אוֹ יִלְפָת, אוֹ מְרוּחַ אֲשָׁף.

כא כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-בוֹ מוֹם, מִזֶּרַע אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן--לֹא יִגַּשׁ, לְהִקְרִיב אֶת-אֲשֵׁי יְהוָה: מוֹם בוֹ--אֶת לֶחֶם אֱלֹהֵינוּ, לֹא יִגַּשׁ לְהִקְרִיב.

כב לֶחֶם אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מִקְדָּשֵׁי הַקְּדוּשִׁים, וּמִן-הַקְּדוּשִׁים, יֹאכַל.

כג אֲךָ אֶל-הַפְּרֻכָּת לֹא יָבֹא, וְאֶל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא יִגַּשׁ--כִּי-מוֹם בוֹ; וְלֹא יַחְלִיל אֶת-מִקְדָּשֵׁי, כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה מְקַדְּשָׁם.

The Lord said further to Moshe, no man of your offspring throughout the ages 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 who is a hunchback, 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 [high priests] who has a defect shall be qualified to offer God's offerings by fire; having a defect shall not be qualified to offer the food of God. He may eat of the food of his God [from sacrifices] 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, God, have sanctified them. Leviticus 21: 16-23

As they say, there are no coincidences. For instance, my Bat Mitzvah portion was...Emor. And at my daughter's pre-Bat Mitzvah Torah Retreat, I chanted the Haftorah for Parashat Emor. Unfortunately, on neither occasion did I read these verses. Soon you will understand the third coincidence.

In this week's parasha we learn that a Kohen "baal moom" (a high priest who was blind, lame, had mismatched legs, a sunken nose, or other physical "blemishes") was barred from "drawing near to God" at the Holy of Holies, and was only permitted to enter the outer area of the courtyard of the Mikdash and to perform peripheral tasks.



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What are we to make of this? How do we understand a restriction that precludes priests with physical disabilities from entering the most holy of places? Can we interpret these exclusions through a contemporary lens? Or do we dismiss them as a part of Torah that may have made sense at the time, but are not relevant today?

When researching for this *D'var* I came across many explanations, but most were unsatisfying. William Herlands, in a *D'var Torah* for the Bronfman Fellowship website, offers a compelling perspective on this question:

In ancient Israel, people rarely entered the Temple domain. Pilgrims were only permitted at the periphery of the sanctuary, while High Priests worked behind a “veil of Holiness,” invisible to all but God. They briefly interacted with pilgrims only on holidays, and when sacrifices were brought. *Kohanim*, in general, interacted with lay people in the towns where they received regular tithes of fruit and bread, taught lessons, and educated children. Herlands suggests that by restricting the activities of *Kohanim B'aal mum*, Torah establishes the expectation that they will dwell in the heart of the community. They are to serve the everyday religious needs of the people instead of being sequestered in the obscure recesses of the *mikdash*. In this way, the Torah teaches us that meaningful inclusion of people with disabilities is intrinsic to communal life.

We are taught that we are created *bTzelem Elohim* — in the image of God. And yet, every one of us is imperfect. To be whole Jews, we must connect with others in community. Indeed, it is through connection that we become holy.

Everyone has strengths. We also each have skills in which we feel less confident. Our individual human needs and abilities are unique, personal, particular, and distinctive. We are all able to be independent in some things. We may need support to accomplish others. Everyone has the same right to have their needs acknowledged and responded to in a caring and sensitive way.

As I see it, inclusion is not about being magnanimous; being inclusive does not imply compensating for lack, limit, loss, or “otherness.” It is not fixing someone considered broken or making them “whole.” It is not about making all things equal. I believe it begins with acknowledgement; it requires that we pay attention to the ways we are each different from others, and to the aspects of our humanness that we have in common. It presumes empathy. It presumes respect, generosity, ownership, and outreach. It requires that we adjust our perspective about what it means to welcome and to belong. It requires action, but does



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not simply mean performing good deeds. It is an imperative; we create an inclusive community because we must and because we can.

I believe that inclusion is intrinsically Jewish and that *Torah*, Jewish learning, and participation in Jewish community should be accessible to everyone whether you navigate on legs, use a wheelchair or a cane. Whether you see and hear with or without augmentation, regardless of how you learn and speak. Sadly, participation in Jewish life has not been available to everyone. Physical and social barriers, lack of awareness, and stigma have gotten in the way. This is changing, and many people who could only dream of attending services, benefiting from Jewish education programs, or attending social events can now do so to the fullest extent of their abilities and interests.

Beth El has come a long way in our efforts to become a more inclusive community. While we celebrate our progress, we look ahead to the next phase of our inclusion efforts. Plans are in place to support the individual learning needs of students in our education program. This year, Beth El, along with synagogues around the country, is also engaging in a conversation about how mental health issues impact our congregations.

To be fully inclusive, synagogues must provide a place where people who have difficulty socially and emotionally can feel safe and welcome — where congregants who are going through a traumatic experience, struggling with symptoms of mental illness, addiction, eating disorders, and other so-called “invisible disabilities” — can feel supported and not marginalized.

I come to this conversation from personal experience. On Thanksgiving Day, when I was 15, and he was 43, my father — my lovely, brilliant, funny father, who had survived the Holocaust to become an aerospace engineer, husband, and father of four — killed himself. I say that the Nazi's killed him by PTSD, but I know that his manic-depressive illness had a lot to do with his pre-mature death. When I was 18, I began to have symptoms of severe anxiety and depression. By the time I was my dad's age at his suicide, I had experienced numerous episodes of cycling depression, crippling anxiety, panic attacks, disruptions in my school, social, and work life, and time in the hospital. Some of you might remember my struggle with debilitating symptoms during my early years at Beth El. I am grateful to everyone who reached out to me.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as many as 50% of us will experience mental illness, or know someone who does, in our lifetimes.



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The Jewish community is not immune from addiction, depression, dementia, eating disorders, or brain injuries. Mental illness is part of our community fabric. [Research](#) has shown that [people often turn first to their faith communities](#) for guidance when faced with a mental health crisis.

When synagogues raise consciousness, provide education, and change the culture around these issues, people who live with mental illness, and our families, can feel safe to be open and honest about our experience, and get the recognition, acceptance, and support we need. A sense of belonging helps to preserve mental health and maintain mental wellness.

We need to talk about mental illness until we feel comfortable talking about mental illness. One of the best ways to do this is to reach out to members of our congregation with lived or family experience of depression, anxiety, addiction, ADHD, suicide, obsessive-compulsive disorder, PTSD, and eating disorders. We are here at Beth El — children, teens, adults, and seniors — but we may be afraid to make ourselves known. When we start to talk openly about mental illness, we can raise awareness and reduce the stigma attached to it. Finally, we can be sure that Beth El is a welcoming environment — a place where everyone can speak about our lives, seek help when needed, and find comfort in our spiritual community.

I think this poem expresses it well:

A Blessing for Mental Health By Devon Spier

*Come in as you are.
You do not have to shine yourself up,
Or polish off your grit.*

*Make your brokenness a blessing.
Never using it to harm,
Or as a hardened defense.*

*Come in to honor life.
To learn
And to teach.*

*Transparency opens us.
Whereas hiding closes us.*



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*Pretending reveals nothing,
Whereas the truth reveals everything.*

Welcome.

Come in with all that you have.

This year the Ruderman Foundation, of which Beth El is a Congregational Partner, is focusing its inclusion efforts on mental health and mental illness. Beth El is privileged to join them in this holy work. This year the Foundation's annual dinner, entitled "Celebrating Inclusion," featured Kitty and Michael Dukakis in a conversation about supporting people with mental illness.

We each become whole when we reach out and ignite holiness in each other. May our hearts empower us to extend our hands, and remind others that amidst the darkness, light endures. May we find the courage to share our struggles. May we remind each other that we are not alone.

—Roberta Unger, Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury River Valley