

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Emor

I believe it was Friedrich Nietzsche who said, "What doesn't kill me only makes me stronger." We are who we are because of how we faced all that comes our way over the course of our lives. Now, Nietzsche was a little pessimistic in how he approached this. I know he thought only about the challenges we face along the way, but in truth, even our moments of celebration can do us harm, if we are not paying attention. Still and all, that we survive through all we do (and all that is done to ... and for us) is the basis upon which our character builds. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us, it is the content of our character that matters most. It is with both of these realities in mind that I approached a very difficult portion of this week's Torah reading. In Chapter 21 of Leviticus we read of the rules for the priesthood. Included are the lists of "can and cannots." In this list we read that one may be from the appropriate clan for priesthood, but if he possesses some physical defect, he fails to qualify for any priestly service. And we are not talking about just major defects. Certainly one who is blind or lame, who has a limb uneven with another or one that is broken, who has a hunchback, or who is a dwarf ... none of these qualify to serve. The text goes on to disqualify those with boils or uneven eyebrows. These people may eat with the priests, but not serve in a priestly role.

So much for Dr. King's teaching, right? And of course, Nietzsche's theory goes out the window, as well. If we take the text literally, who you are has nothing to do with your qualifications, it is all about what you look like. And yet, we take offense to the notion that one can tell a Jew by his appearance. There are many difficult texts to swallow, but this one ... Or maybe not. Our United States Supreme Court has ruled that some discriminations are permissible, where they directly affect the performance of the job or task. Perhaps we should look at the job of the priest to see if this standard might help us. As the text teaches us, the job of the priest is to accept people's offerings at the altar, to perform ritual vicariously on behalf of others, and to judge the populous and their belongings *tamae* or *tahor* - ritually pure or impure.

The text seems to disqualify every human from this service. Face it, we all have some physical defect, especially if the standard is as pedantic as the length of one's eyebrows or the recurrence of an ingrown hair follicle. Essentially the text tells us that no one is fit for this service. Why would it be necessary to disqualify all people from this service? Well, maybe only God is qualified to make those types of judgments about people; maybe God is the only one qualified to accept the offerings of prayer. Maybe no one is qualified to "do" our spiritual journey on our behalf; each of us must engage this work for ourselves. As I read the text, its authors are invalidating the ritual sacrificial service at the altar. Literally, the text says, "No man of your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the food of his God ... 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." No person with a defect is allowed to stand in judgment over another or claim to have greater access to God. Hence, no individual can do these things.

So why address the sacrifice at all? In every generation there are those who claim to have more power than all others around. Often this power, they proclaim, is ordained by God. Governments, schools, businesses ... even houses of worship have all been guilty of proclaiming that their authority is rooted in divinity. And yet, the literal text of Torah disqualifies any person from being able to make any such statement. How many profess to hold the Torah to be the literal truth, word of God, and yet ignore this most precious commandment? Maimonides teaches us, "Truth does not become more true by virtue of the fact that the entire world agrees with it, nor less so even if the whole world disagrees with it." Deciding that there is truth to any superiority we might claim over each other may be fashionable, but ... it cannot be truth. I once told a group that chosenness in the Bible had nothing to do with Judaism, for

there were no Jews in the Torah; the word never appears. They asked me how I could possibly deny that we were God's chosen. I asked in response, "Which of your children do you love most?" "The response was quick, "What a horrible question to ask a parent!" I then asked, "Then how can you ask it of God?"

We are not judged by the relative length of our limbs or the measure of our brow. We stand before God as equals, whether in a wheel chair, with a hearing aid, or even with acne. What will separate us in this world can never be tied to a master race or majority ideology. Rather, we can only be judged on the heart we bring to our work and the integrity we offer on the altar of loyalty to our call to heal the world. This is never a matter of how much someone brings, only the quality of the spirit that brings it. Elsewhere, this text calls us "Mamleket Kohanim -- a Kingdom of Priests." We are equal in status and equal in our responsibilities to each other, and ... that makes a whole lot more sense to me. Amen! Shabbat Shalom.