



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## VAYIKRA > Emor

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May 3, 2014

Emor

**The Perfect Specimen**



# Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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## ABSTRACT

Do you have any flaws? If yes, is that a good thing? If not, are you delusional?

No matter what your good old Jewish mother told you, nobody's perfect. We all have deficiencies, imperfections, blemishes – we all have things we can refine and make better. We aren't perfect angels; we are perfect human beings. And perfect human beings have many, many imperfections.

But the Torah demands that the holy priests serving in the Temple be perfect physical specimens, without blemish or flaw? Is this not superficial? Not to mention highly insensitive to handicapped people?

Understanding the internal meaning of this demand for external perfection will teach us an invaluable lesson regarding how to recognize true spirituality. We will also learn how overcome our imperfections, how to turn our weaknesses into strengths, and how to transform our defective parts into effective parts.

In addition, the Chassidic story of the crippled groom will teach us how to never be crippled by life but always turn any crippling situations into a union of eternal perfection.

This sermon will also lend insight into the Torah's sensitive and revolutionary understanding of Special Needs Children.

## THE PERFECT SPECIMEN: WHAT TO DO ABOUT OUR FLAWS

### 1. Well Suited (Joke)

A man tries on a made-to-order suit and says to the tailor, "I need this sleeve taken in! It's two inches too long!"

The tailor says, "No, just bend your elbow like this. See, it pulls up the sleeve."

The man says, "Well, okay, but now look at the collar! When I bend my elbow, the collar goes halfway up the back of my head."

The tailor says, "So? Push your head back. Perfect."

The man says, "But now the left shoulder is three inches lower than the right one!"

The tailor says, "No problem. Bend at the waist way over to the left and it evens out."

The man leaves the store wearing the suit, his right elbow cocked and sticking out, his head back, all the while leaning down to the left.

The only way he can walk is with a herky-jerky spastic gait.

Just then two passersby notice him.

Says the first, "Look at that poor cripple. My heart goes out to him. He can barely even walk!"

Says the second, "Yeah, but his tailor must be a genius! That suit fits him perfectly!"

### 2. Shortcomings & Goings

Nobody is perfect. Sure, we may wear magnificent suits and we may even have an excellent cosmetic surgeon on retainer, but not one of us in this world has achieved perfection.

We all have parts of us that are misaligned. Sometimes these are physical parts, sometimes psychological, sometimes emotional, and sometimes spiritual.

We all have a body part (or two) that we would like to enhance, or a psychological pattern that we would like to refine. All of us would like to be a little more self-confident or a little more humble; a little more assertive or a little less arrogant; a little wiser or a little kinder. Some of us would rather have blonde hair, some of us dark hair, some of us just plain old hair, no matter what color.

Some of us wish our noses were shorter, some wish our debts were shorter, some may even wish that my sermons were shorter. (Yes, it's true – a rabbi's greatest *shortcoming* is the *long* sermon.)

But in short (no pun intended), no matter what your nice Jewish mother told you, you are not perfect.

Okay, now that I have succeeded in alienating most of the people sitting here today on this peaceful and very unblemished Shabbat, what's my point?

My point is the subject of this week's Torah reading – which is flaws, deformities and blemishes.

### 3. Parshat Emor

In this week's reading, Parshat Emor, the Torah shares with us something that, at first glance, might seem rather insensitive:

*And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and say: 'Any man among your offspring throughout the generations who has a defect shall not come near to present up his God's food offering. For any man who has a defect should not approach – a blind man or a lame one, or one with a sunken nose or with mismatching limbs...'"*<sup>1</sup>

What's this all about?

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 21:16-18.

The Torah here is discussing the appropriate conduct and high-level of spiritual awareness expected of Aaron's children and grandchildren, the priestly class of the Kohanim who served in the Sanctuary and later in the Temple. One of the requirements, says the Torah – which seemingly has no relation to spirituality at all – is that the Kohanim had to be perfect physical specimens, with no blemishes, defects or deformities.

And, just in case we should miss the point, the Torah goes on to say that not only should a person with a blemish not serve in the Temple, but that he may not even come close:

*Any man among Aaron the Kohen's offspring who has a defect shall not draw near to offer up the Lord's fire offerings. If there is a defect in him, he shall not draw near to present his God's food offering [although] he may eat the food offerings of His God, both from the Holy of Holies and from the Holy. But he shall not come to the dividing curtain, nor shall he draw near to the altar, for he has a defect, and he shall not desecrate My holy things, for I am the Lord Who sanctifies them.<sup>2</sup>*

If you notice, the Torah does throw the blemished Kohen a bone – although he may not draw near or serve in the Temple, he may eat from the consecrated foods. But otherwise he is banned if he has a defect – something called a *mum*.

#### 4. Mum's the Word

Just to share with you what comes under the category of *mum* or *mumim* in the plural. And the list is loooong. The Written Torah itself lists a few *mumim*, but from the Oral Torah we know of many more.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the great 12th century Jewish philosopher Maimonides, who took upon himself to compile a list, came up with 140 (!) different defects that disqualify a Kohen.

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 21:21-23.

<sup>3</sup> See Kritut 43a and Hilochot Bait Hamikdash Chs. 6-8.

These include: broken or deformed limbs, a nose that's too large or crooked, a bald head, a blind eye, bad breath, bad body odor, an egg-shaped head, bowed legs, teary eyes, small ears, a swollen belly, a hunched back, excessive height, dwarfism etc.

And it doesn't stop there: Maimonides also lists psychological issues, ones which (in this therapist-crazy era) we know so well, such as: intellectual or emotional instability or severe depression.

If you think about it, you'll see that this list, and all that it implies, seems to disqualify every single human being on the planet today. And I don't mean to go out on a limb here, but doesn't this beg many obvious questions?

- Firstly, we know that every human being is created in the Divine image.<sup>4</sup> Cosmetic surgery notwithstanding, God and God alone decides how a person should look, how handsome or not, how tall or how short a person should be. Indeed, there is a famous story in the Talmud<sup>5</sup> where an ugly man responds to a taunt with these famous words: *Go to the craftsman who made me and say to him: How ugly is the vessel which you have made!* Why then would the Creator of the Universe, the Celestial Craftsman Himself, command that any priest with a defect not come to the Temple? If God does not like defects let God not create defects!
- Secondly, should not the Torah, God's book of divine wisdom, be focusing on the spiritual essence and internal holiness of a person, especially a priest, and not on his material facade or external superficialities?
- Thirdly, why does the Torah enumerate that both *performing* the priestly service and even *drawing near* to the Temple's holy parameters is forbidden?
- Fourthly, if a physical blemish is so bad (or unattractive to God) why does God allow the blemished one to consume the consecrated food?

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:26-27.

<sup>5</sup> Taanit 20a-b.

- Fifthly, why the highly detailed description of all the different types of blemishes and deficiencies, from tiny ears to teary eyes? Why the humiliating detail? It's bad enough to have a long nose or a receding hairline, do we really need the Torah to rub it in?
- And, finally, the most important question of all: What does all of this teach us today, in our present-day lives? We have no physical Temple, most of us are not priests anyway, and almost all of us have one blemish or another, so what is the relevant lesson for us? Is it really important for us to focus on our flaws? How does that help us lead productive lives and serve our Creator?

## 5. Flaw & Order<sup>6</sup>

The world in which we live is very flawed. Everywhere you look you see deficiencies, defects, and handicaps.

This, my friends, is not a wholesome or perfect world. This is a world very much crippled by hate, selfishness, and war.

Just this week, the mayor of Kharkov, Ukraine's second largest city – who is also a Jew – was shot while riding his bike and is in critical condition. And 22 people were killed in Central African Republic, at a hospital – a place of healing no less. Syria continues to be at war. And Iraq and Afghanistan are hardly stable.

The world is indeed a blemished body – and the blemishes unfortunately surpass by a mile the 140 listed by Maimonides.

Yet, this flawed reality is balanced with our confident belief that, at the world's core, there is a unifying nucleus and universal soul that binds and connects all things. This core is a reflection of the Creator of the Universe, Who is *b'shlaimut* – whole, complete, peaceful.

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<sup>6</sup> The following explanation is based on Derech Mitzvotcha from the Tzemach Tzedek, Avodat Kohen Baal Mum, pp. 31a-33a. This is a very complex and esoteric discourse. We have tried to stay true to its spirit, but have taken some (surely flawed) liberties in order to adapt to the sermon format. See also Zohar Vayeishev 181a, upon which the discourse is based.

Without getting into the complexities of how it is that a perfect, unflawed, unblemished, unlimited God created a very imperfect, flawed, limited universe, let us just say this – the end result was a very dichotomous state of existence, where everything has two sides: internal/external, matter/spirit, body/soul, essential/superficial.

## 6. The Perfect Temple

But this is where the Holy Temple came into play.

The Temple was perfect, complete, whole and wholesome. The Temple was a perfect specimen, the quintessential physical manifestation of God's eternal and spiritual perfection. The Temple was perfect both internally and, even more so, externally.

When you were in vicinity of the Temple you saw Divinity with your physical, external eyes!<sup>7</sup>

In such a perfect space, only people who also reflected an inner and outer complete perfection could serve. Because the whole point of the Temple was to be perfect (not only internally but also externally), the holy priests who served there had to be perfect.

The Sefer HaChinuch<sup>8</sup> states that it is one of the foundational mitzvahs to glorify and beautify the Holy Temple, and it was thus forbidden for a blemished individual to come there. Because the Temple was a place of *shlemiut* (completion, perfection, holistic wholesomeness and peace), it would not be lawful for any person with any weakness or deficiency to stand there.

Perhaps we may understand this profound – and nuanced – idea by way of metaphor:

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<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 9:23-24.

<sup>8</sup> Mitzvah 277.



Take yourself. On a regular Tuesday, you wake up, get dressed, and go to work. You wear clothing that is appropriate for work but it doesn't have to be perfect. In fact, often times you are rushing and get dressed in one minute flat. Big deal if there is a small smudge on your shirtsleeve or a few wrinkles in your pant leg. It's just another day.

Now compare this to your wedding day. On your wedding day, you don't just get dressed wearing the same thing you wear every day. The tux has to be perfect, the shirt ironed, the bowtie knotted a hundred and three times before you get it exactly right, your shoes polished to a blinding glare.

Why, what's the difference between a regular day and your wedding day? Why don't you dress every day as if it were your wedding day? Or, why don't you dress on your wedding day as if it were a regular day?

A regular day requires regular clothing, but a special day demands special clothing. A wedding day is the day you will become one with your beloved and it is a royal day of perfection, without blemish, deficiency, or shortcoming. Every other day is full of them, and we try to do our best to navigate the ups and down, trials and tribulations of those days. If a wedding day has the same rhythm as a regular day, there is something very wrong.

And yet, every day *after* your wedding, you are still married, still one with the one you love, so why don't you dress in a tux every day? For that matter, why don't you hire a hall and caterer every day to celebrate your marriage?

Because every day the marriage is internal, but on your wedding day (and your wedding day alone) the marriage is allowed to be external.

This is the difference between the world at large and the Temple. Every day in the Temple was like a wedding day, where God's unity, perfection, and matrimony with the world was shown externally (in addition to being there internally) for all to see.

And this is why the priests that served in such an environment had to reflect this as well.

## 7. Perfect Answers

This answers most, but not all, of our questions:

- Why the Torah focuses on the outer façade and not the inner core of the Kohen? Because the entire purpose of the Temple, and the Kohen's role in its service, was for the inner core to reflect to the *outer* world, and for this both the Temple and the Kohen had to be perfect inside and *out*.
- Why both the service and even being in the Temple's environs were prohibited? Because a major part of external effectiveness is the environment. If the Kohen was not perfect while standing in the Temple's vicinity, then the Temple's perfection itself was compromised.
- Why then was the Kohen allowed to eat the consecrated food? Because food consumption is a purely internal experience, not external, and therefore does not require external perfection.
- Why the detailed lists of imperfections? Because lists are part and parcel of any wedding. If you have ever made a wedding you know – there are lists of guests and seating charts, of flower arrangements, of the musical numbers the band will play, etc.

So now we know. But that still leaves us with two of the most important questions unanswered: 1) If God wanted only perfect specimens to serve in His Temple, why did God not create only perfect specimens – why are we flawed and why do we have shortcomings? And 2) What does this Torah passage teach us in our personal lives today?

## 8. Special Needs Children

In finding the answer to these questions, we find Torah's hidden See Torah Ohr, Shemot pp. 51dff; Derech Mitzvotekahe ibidsensitivity, its great respect for the sanctity of all life, and its revolutionary approach to all seemingly defective or deficient physical attributes. And we learn how the Torah understands Special Needs Children, who have special needs because indeed they are special!

Usually the world associates ability and power with physical things – the smarter, the better looking, the stronger, the wealthier, the more charismatic a person is, the greater that person's upside. The Torah teaches that the exact opposite is true: it is the spiritual, internal, essential, and soulful aspects of a person in which his or her power is sourced.

But here's the key: the greater a person's infinite soul is the more difficult it is for a finite body to contain and relate to it. Moses, we know, had a scarred mouth and a speech impediment,<sup>9</sup> yet he was the only whom the Divine Presence chose in order to speak through his mouth. Moses, the man with the speech defect was the mouthpiece of God!

The reason Moses had difficulty speaking is not because he had nothing to say but because he had *everything and more* to say. We might say that it is like the difference between trying to describe the color of your car and the essence of your soul. Because the color of your car is external and superficial, it takes absolutely no effort to articulate (hey, it's metallic blue); but just try articulating your very essence! It's no easy feat because your soul is your innate, innermost, infinite self and that is not easy to put into finite words.<sup>10</sup>

In biblical times, the Temple was the place where an internal infinite essence could be perceived in an external finite way, and the Kohanim were part of that. Today, however, the deepest spiritual revelations are the most difficult to articulate.

Thus, the Torah teaches<sup>11</sup> that when we see a physical defect or shortcoming or blemish in ourselves or others, it is not because we (or others) are less, it is because we (or others) are more.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 4:10, 4:11-12.

<sup>10</sup> Compare this with Elijah, who the Book of Kings (II, ch. 2) tells us, never passed away but ascended to heaven complete and whole both in soul and body. Elijah is the only perfect physical specimen to ever live. Why? Whereas Moses was completely internal and introverted, Elijah was external and expressive, thus reflecting in his external body as well. See Derech Mitzvotcha *ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> See Derech Mitzvotcha *ibid*.

This is how the Torah views people with special needs: Because their souls are so flooded with energy it is difficult for their bodies to keep up ... because they can speak so profoundly, their mouths find it challenging to translate ... because they are so spiritually advanced, their material beings have a hard time catching up.<sup>12</sup>

## 9. Body and Soul

Now we are ready to answer our outstanding questions:

God created perfect *spiritual* creatures, and sometimes the physical manifestation has difficulty catching up with that soulful perfection and therefore the body manifests as imperfect. The challenge, teaches the Torah, is not to focus on our bodies but on our souls.

The relevant lesson for us today is to know that each and every one of us has, yes, a very flawed and limited side called our bodies. None of us can walk or speak for the first year or two, and when we age, our bodies begin to lose their vigor. But then there is another side to us – our inner temples and holy of holies, which are completely wholesome and integrated. It is to our inner sanctuary that we may not come with a blemish or defect.

We are flawed creatures with an unflawed divine core, charged with the mission to transcend our flaws, repair them, harness them and transform them into channels of divine flawlessness.

The ultimate goal is for our inner, perfect, peaceful, wholesome temple to also influence our external and expressive lives. And we do this when we approach our temples without blemish, neurosis, or insecurity.

Today, we may not physically see how our lofty spiritual origins manifest in physical ways – and we may even see the opposite.

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<sup>12</sup> See Torah Ohr, Shemot pp. 51dff; Derech Mitzvotekahe ibid

But, through our work, our Torah and its mitzvahs, the Ultimate Redemption will come with the building of the Third and Eternal Temple, and then every blemish will be removed and our essential light will shine both inside and out.

May it happen speedily in our days. Amen.

[The sermon could be ended here; three optional sections follow.]

## 10. An Unblemished Story (Optional)

In 1810, Rabbi Yehoshua Heshel of Komarna – the eldest son of Rabbi Baruch Teumim Frenkel, the author of *Baruch Ta'am* – traveled to the city of Tarnigrod on business. After concluding his fiscal duties, he went to the local yeshiva to study. There he came upon a seventeen-year-old youth who was grappling with a Talmudic problem in intense concentration. The traveler entered into a scholarly discussion with him and realized that he was dealing with a young man of extraordinary gifts. He asked the young man who he was, and when the latter replied by giving his name, Chaim Halberstam, his father's name and other details of his lineage, Yehoshua Heshel decided then and there to broach the subject of a possible match with his sister, Rachel Feigeh.

The young Chaim expressed his willingness to consider such a match.

Yehoshua Heshel went immediately to his lodging place and dispatched an urgent letter to his father, Rabbi Baruch, announcing that he had found a suitable match for his sister, and that the prospective bridegroom was a paragon of Torah scholarship and religiosity.

This letter included all the details of the youth's identity and lineage. However, the writer held back one detail from his father: he gave no hint that the young man was physically handicapped, he had terribly mangled leg.

Providentially, Chaim's father, Rabbi Aryeh-Leibush, was on a business trip in the vicinity and visiting Rabbi Baruch's house, when Yehoshua Heshel's letter arrived.

The two fathers agreed the match was made in heaven! Both signed the *tenaim* (the engagement contract) and the wedding date was set.

Before long, however, the matter of the young prodigy's physical handicap became known. The information reached the ears of Rachel Feigeh, the bride-to-be, and she rushed to her father with the distressing news.

When he heard her out, Rabbi Baruch expressed his anger to his son, who had held back this information. But what was to be done now? To cancel the wedding was impossible, for undoubtedly the bridegroom's father would be unwilling to abandon their contractual agreement.

Yehoshua Heshel, who bore the main responsibility for this distressing state of affairs, proposed that the prospective bridegroom be invited to their home. He was certain that once his father had seen the young prodigy with his own eyes and had tested his knowledge and character, he would be happy with him, and then he would see the physical handicap as an insignificant detail. Moreover, Yehoshua Heshel was equally sure that his sister Rachel Feigeh would be pleased to marry such a great genius and such a refined young man.

Meanwhile, the whole city was in an uproar. This is the right match for their grand rabbi's daughter? – A cripple?!

In the house of the Rabbi Baruch too, turmoil reigned. The bride-to-be wept bitter tears while her father attempted to console her. He promised her that if she still did not want the young man after having seen him, he would not force her into the marriage.

The day came that the young scholar arrived and immediately learned that his designated bride did not wish to go through with the marriage because of his physical defect. His reaction was that he wished to speak a few words with the girl in private.

After a short meeting, Rachel Feigeh and Chaim walked out of the private room and she told her father, with tears of joy, that she would be honored to marry Chaim.

No one knew what occurred when they spoke, but legend has it that this is what happened:

When they were alone, Chaim asked the young woman to look in the mirror. When she did, her face turned white and she almost fainted: in the reflection of herself that she saw, she was the cripple and he was a tall, handsome, beautiful man!

Chaim explained to her: “The truth is that, before we were born, when the Heavenly Voice called out that so-and-so would marry so-and-so, I looked at you, my soul-mate, and saw that you were destined to be born into this world with a horrible defect. I did not want the other half of my soul, you, to go through life with such a hardship and pain. I asked of the Heavenly Court if they could please switch our physical attributes, so that I would take the deformity and you would be beautiful.”

Rabbi Chaim Halberstam and Rebbetzin Rachel Feigh built a beautiful home and eternal edifice together. Rabbi Chaim came to be known as the Divrei Chaim, the saintly Tzanzer Rav, one of the scions of Chassidom.

But the story doesn’t end there. In fact, the story doesn’t end period but still goes on. You see, two of the best known Chassidic dynasties today – Bobov and of Tzans-Klauzenbergare – are directly descendent of that divine, truly unblemished union.

The lesson is clear. When we do not allow a physical deficiency to get in our way, the outcomes and offspring of such a divine perspective is infinite and holy.

The father of the bride, Rabbi Baruch, was most publicly joyful after the wedding. Whether or not he knew what had been said between the young couple, of one thing he was certain, as he declared: “It is true that the leg of my son-in-law is crooked, but his brain is straight.”<sup>13</sup>

Every time you are faced with a challenge, a so-called handicap, a defect, a weakness, imagine if you were to look that weakness as an actual strength, a reflection of your selfless souls carrying the burdens of others. The result would be astounding – eternally, internally and externally.

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<sup>13</sup> Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from (mainly) The Sanzer Rav and his Dynasty by Rabbi Yitzchak Bromberg and translated by Shlomo Fox-Ashrei and from A Match Made In Heaven by Yitta Halberstam, a great-great granddaughter from this match.



## 11. For Bald Rabbis Only

One of the defects that the Torah lists is baldness. I'd like to conclude with a bald lesson.

Male-pattern-baldness, the clinical terms for a receding hairline, which in itself is a euphemism for no hairline altogether, runs in my family.

To combat our insecurity, we become philosophical about the whole thing, as if being bald contained the secrets to the universe.

These are two of the lines we often throw around:

1. Grass doesn't grow on busy streets.
2. God created a few perfect heads – and the rest He covered with hair.

For one thing we know – as Rabbi Baruch said – what resides *in* our heads is much more important than what resides *atop* it.

## 12. Conclusion (Optional)

Our shortcomings are only physical and external; our strengths are spiritual and internal. The goal is to use our spiritual strengths and lengths to influence our external shortcomings.

Perhaps we may never know why God gives some of us such difficult challenges ... why the Creator of the Universe creates babies with special needs and adults with weaknesses and blemishes. But we do know that these are all physical and material – never, ever, ever spiritual and essential. In fact, we know that the weaker our outer facades may seem, the stronger our inner resolve and spiritual soul is.

The Torah's list of *mumim*, deficiencies and defects, is long and diverse. A shortcoming may be something as superficial as a bald head or an elongated nose, or something as painful as a distorted limb or broken spine.



The fact that all of these fall under the same category teaches us that, with regard to our essential soulful selves, any physical weakness is inconsequential to our higher purpose and innate perfection.

By focusing on our divine strengths and perfections, we make that sure that our external blemishes can become refined and healed.

And may this happen on a cosmic level speedily in our days. May the internal unifying core of the Creator of the Universe be revealed also in an external way, for all the world to see, with the coming of the Redemption and the building of the Third and Eternal Temple.

May we celebrate the rest of Shabbat in this holy abode, with the perfect specimen of Aaron's children, the Kohanim, performing the divine service in all their handsome glory!

Shabbat Shalom – for this is a wholesome, complete, and peaceful Shabbat, both physically and spiritually!