

Emor, 5777

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Leviticus 21:1-24:23

There's much to ponder in this *parashah*. Whether it's the outlining of the festivals or the responsibilities one has when damaging another's property; whether it's the outlining of the priestly duties, or the suitability of animals for donations or sacrifices, there's much to sift through.

I'm going to focus on a few relations here, starting with chapter 22, verse 23. "As for an ox or sheep that has mismatching limbs or uncloven hooves you may make it into a donation, but as a vow, it will not be accepted."

There's much to learn from this, and I feel it's the crux of this *parashah* and a good tip for managing one's life.

We're looking at two different uses for the same animal under different circumstances.

The first is any ox or sheep in optimal condition: no blemishes, with matching limbs, and no problematic quirks, being used as a vow or a donation. This is an animal that can be used as a sacrifice offering or a vow.

The second is that an ox or sheep with physical problems can be used as a donation, something to help a synagogue or family, but not to fulfill a vow or as a sacrifice.

Let's talk about vows in Torah. Vows go beyond promises. A promise in Torah is not taken lightly, a vow is even stricter. We go so far as to have prayers during *Kol Nidre* to ask for absolution from broken vows. Some people add "*b'li neder*" to their promises to remove any insinuation that it might be a vow, rather than a promise.

Our vows are held to a standard even higher than our promises.

Let's look at this again: a sacrificial animal with physical deformities which do not detract from its healthfulness can be used as a donation, but not to fulfill a vow. Only the animals most desirable can be used to fulfill the oaths held higher than promises.

What does this mean? *We are not allowed to shortchange or skirt around our oaths.*

Furthermore, I believe this is why the *Kohanim* have so many stipulations. They are the ones who are allowed to mediate the tasks between Israel and Hashem that have been prescribed. They are the human vow of action to Hashem.

Let's look at this today. We can see times when leaders make promises and give leftovers. Whether it's promising to bolster education with a tax increase, and instead using that revenue to pay for contractors, or promising to support minorities and instead oppressing them: it's endemic.

I get produce every other week or so from a group that rescues produce which is slated to be thrown away. Sometimes what they put out is moldy, slimy, and otherwise inedible. Sometimes it is perfectly glorious, crisp and fresh. They take the minimal cost for each box of produce and give it to various causes – which is good. Their inconsistency is not good.

Is there any wonder we have so much cynicism toward charities, leaders, and even each other? It seems that we live in a time when our word is taken lightly and the people brokering transactional promises are beneath the quality of our neighbors. I'm not accusing any of these being bottom of the barrel, but simply not as good as what we know we deserve. Again, I make no specific assertions of a leader being the worst ever, I am just stating that we deserve better.

Whether it's cancer foundations cutting funds for companies that screen for their particular type of cancer, hate groups disguised as social movements, or companies looking to exploit

both their workers and tax code, we have been made aware of long-standing traditions of deceitful promises.

Are we at an impasse? Are we, as decent humans, as those who want to help each other up and bolster our communities, silly for expecting our representatives to be better than us? I don't want to be the smartest person in a room. I don't want to be the most successful person in a group. I don't want to be the best fencer on the strip.

I want to learn. I want to be better. I want to have someone to look up to.

This is why business coaches have business coaches. Vocal teachers have vocal teachers. Peer groups support and nurture each other with each member's individual strengths.

That was the point of the *kohanim*. They were a group of priests who were there not only to broker our vows. They built up our religion through service. Service of ideas debated. Service of promises kept. Service of oaths and vows respected. They were to be looked up to, though we are not to be subservient to them.

What do I want to learn from this *parashah*? It's not the minutiae of what we can eat, what we can offer, or who can take what. That's a different lesson for a different day. Today, I want to learn that we not only can, but should, expect to see what we wish to be in those who represent us.

We were made in G-d's image. Each of us is a tiny reflective iota of her being. Just as we put our best face forward in daily life to try and inspire ourselves to live up to our own desires, should we not do the same with those we delegate power to? Should we not demand our leaders be the icons we wish to, ourselves, be?

My prayer this Shabbat is that we find the wherewithal as a people to support our own potential by not shortcutting our

vows to ourselves, our community, and our planet. My prayer is to bring people into our fold who not only inspire us, they kindle growth. There is an idiom: be the change you want to see in this world. Why don't we not only embody that change, but demand it from the people we give the honor of representing us? Shabbat shalom.