

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted February 12, 2004 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED SWIMSUIT MODELS AND THE PRIESTS IN THE TEMPLE

© Judith Z. Abrams, 2004

It seems likely that each society and each culture has their own definition of perfect specimens of human and animal life forms. In our culture, the models of the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit issue are the epitome of pulchritude. In the Torah, the person who is the most physically flawless is the priest.

The priest mediates between heaven and earth; between holy and profane. To survive in such a dangerous position, the priest had to be fit for the company of angels: blemishless, pure of lineage and untouched by the taint of death (i.e., ritually pure).

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron, saying, A man of your lineage, for [all] their generations, who has a blemish shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. For any man who has a blemish shall not come near: [whether he] is a blind man or a lame man or [has] a flat nose or any extra [limb or growth] or a man who has a broken leg or a broken hand or a crooked back or [is] a dwarf or has obscured sight in [even one] eye have scurvy or scabs or have crushed testicles. Any man of Aaron's lineage who has a blemish shall not draw nigh to offer the fire [offerings] of God. He has a blemish and the bread of his God come near to offer the offerings of the Lord made by fire: he has a blemish and he should not draw nigh to offer the bread of his God. He shall eat the bread of his God, [both] of the most holy, and of the holy. But he may not go [in]to the veil [before the ark], nor come near to the altar, because he has a blemish. Let him not profane My holy [places]: for I the Lord [Myself] sanctify [these places]. And Moses spoke [these words] to Aaron and to his sons and to all the children of Israel. (Leviticus 21:16-24)

The emphasis in this passage is on visible defects. Deafness, mental illness and mental disability are not mentioned, perhaps because they were not considered readily visible disabilities. In the most perfect of places, i.e., the Temple, in the presence of the most perfect entity, i.e., God, only the most perfect of persons, i.e., someone of unblemished priestly lineage and perfect physical form, may offer up sacrifices (which must also be unblemished).

The list of blemishes, which disqualify sacrificial animals, is, like those for the priest, twelve in number:

And a man who offers a peace offering to God, to fulfill a vow or whosoever brings a sacrifice of peace-offerings unto the Lord in fulfillment of a vow or for a free-will offering, of the herd or of the flock, it [must] be perfect to be accepted; it may have no blemish. Blind or broken[-limbed], or maimed or having a wen or scabbed or scurvy; do not sacrifice [such as] these to God nor make a fire [offering] to God of them on the altar for God. Either a bullock or a lamb that has any thing too long or too short, that may offer for a freewill-offering; but for a vow it shall not be accepted. That which has its testicles bruised, or crushed, or torn or cut you must not offer to God, nor may you perform [castrations] in your land. (Leviticus 22:21-24)

Rabbinic literature goes even further in defining disqualifying features in priests and sacrificial animals:

These blemishes [which disqualify animals as sacrifices], whether permanent or temporary, [also] disqualify a person [i.e., a priest from Temple service]. There are more [disqualifications] for a person [than these, namely] a wedge-shaped head or a turnip-shaped head or a mallet shaped head or a sunken head or [the head] flat behind, or a hunch-back. Rabbi Yehudah declares [the humpbacked priest] qualified, but the Sages disqualify [him]. (M. Bekorot 7:1)

The deformations of the head mentioned here reflect the current concepts of head-development where there has been a premature fusion of the skull's sutures, resulting in differently shaped heads.

The most important thing to know about these passages is that they applied only to priests and sacrificial animals. The average Israelite was not excluded because from society because of such physical disabilities and, indeed, could offer up sacrifices via the priests just as any other Israelite could do.

Discussion Questions:

1. The priests, operating in a liminal realm where heaven and earth, life and death, meet needed the protection of a "full body suit" (no Achilles' tendon here!) to survive in this lethal zone. Likewise, the animals had to be perfect or they would mar the symmetry between heaven and earth and disrupt the "uplink", so to speak. It may seem surprising that God's presence is considered lethal and that bodily perfection was a protection in this situation. How would you explain it in today's language? What analogy might you use?
2. A very educational lesson can be learned by looking at the covers of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issues from the first one in 1964 to the present day (in the November 11, 2003 issue). The women in the earlier covers actually look like normal women in bathing suits in which one could actually swim. By the time the covers reach the 1990's the women are incredibly thin and yet well endowed. What do these sorts of standards say to our young women? Would it be possible to say to them, "This is what models look like. Healthy young women are physically fit and have normal weight."? That is, would we be able to equate the SI cover girls with the priests' perfection and normal, healthy women and girls with the average Israelite who did not have to conform to such high standards?
3. How do these texts and ideas influence your interpretation of the story of the binding of Isaac?